

Once Upon a Classic

THE GENERATION OF MOVIE FANS RAISED ON VIDEO AND THE INTERNET IS BRINGING A NEW VISION TO WHAT CONSTITUTES A SCREEN MASTERPIECE. AS FOR THE CLASSIC FILMS, THEY'RE HISTORY.

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by Ty Burr



Of course we'll stay up late tonight to see which movie wins the Academy Award for Best Picture of 2002. In the end, though, it won't matter which one takes the prize—the one about the three women, or the one about the gangs, or the big Broadway musical, or the Polanski comeback, or even the one with all the hobbits.

“Best picture” is a decidedly short-term bet, the provenance of fashion and passion and hype. Who remembers 1933's *Cavalcade*, a multigenerational family saga derived from a Noel Coward stage play? Or 1952's winner, the bloated all-star circus melodrama *The Greatest Show on Earth*? The movies that are really built to last fall into a different category entirely, the inarguable canon of “great films” agreed upon by scholar, critic, and fan alike. Oscar may have overlooked them, but time has sifted them out: the Jean Renoir films, the Preston Sturges farces, the classics of film noir. Those are the films that are forever. Or so we thought.

The canon has been changing over the last decade, and what makes a classic of cinema is now drastically different to discerning young moviegoers than it has been to their teachers or to the critics or to Leonard Maltin. The implications of the new canon are vast, much bigger than the specific films themselves, and they speak to the ways in which a new generation perceives history, reality, and even perception itself.

Not that the arbiters of cinematic taste would or could admit any of this. A useful benchmark of what films belong in the official pantheon is the once-a-decade critics' poll of Top 10 films administered by the British film magazine *Sight & Sound*. The first poll was held in 1952 and reads like a laundry list of celluloid monuments: Vittorio De Sica's *The Bicycle Thief* is number one, followed by Chaplin's *City Lights* and *The Gold Rush*, Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*, D. W. Griffith's *Intolerance*, and so forth. In the following decades, Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* would sit securely at the top of the Sight & Sound list, but there came to be room for Bergman, Antonioni, Kurosawa, even a genre genius like Hitchcock or a Stanley-come-lately like Kubrick.

***Sight & Sound* critics' poll—2002**

1. **Citizen Kane** (dir. Orson Welles, 1941)
2. **Vertigo** (dir. Alfred Hitchcock, 1958)
3. **The Rules of the Game** (dir. Jean Renoir, 1939)
4. **The Godfather/The Godfather Part II** (dir. Francis Ford Coppola, 1972, 1974)
5. **Tokyo Story** (dir. Yasujiro Ozu, 1953)
6. **2001: A Space Odyssey** (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1968)
7. **Battleship Potemkin** (dir. Sergei Eisenstein, 1925)
8. **Sunrise** (dir. F.W. Murnau, 1927)
9. **8 1/2** (dir. Federico Fellini, 1963)
10. **Singin' in the Rain** (dir. Stanley Donen, 1952)

With the recent publication of the 2002 critics' poll, things look much the same: *Kane* ascendant and the usual suspects in the lower rungs—Hitchcock (*Vertigo*), Kubrick (*2001*), Renoir, Ozu, Eisenstein, Fellini, *Singin' in the Rain*. The only concessions to movies of the last 30 years are the first two *Godfather* films.

It's a solid, doughty list, and who's going to argue with it? Well, anyone under the age of 30 who loves film, obsesses over it, analyzes it, and/or wants to make a movie. The films that matter to the post-MTV generation—that are setting personal standards of what to watch and what to imitate—are much too rude to land in the *Sight & Sound* poll or one of the American Film Institute's annual lists, and they're not nearly tasteful or sedate enough for an Oscar. Even the critics don't like them. This, in part, is why they are loved.

I initially came by this information anecdotally, in conversations over the past few years with cinephiles in their 20s. In response to the question “What's a great movie to you?,” the same titles kept arising with weird regularity. Recently, in an unscientific attempt to quantify what I was hearing, I set about asking film students for their own lists of top 10 movies.

I received dozens of lists, with and without commentary, from students in ad hoc movie clubs and in filmmaking and cinema studies departments at New York University, Harvard, MIT, Wesleyan, and the University of Southern California. I chose film majors rather than a general pool of students, because I wanted respondents who cared passionately about the medium; if that goes hand-in-hand with a certain celluloid elitism—you won't find Adam Sandler or even *The Lord of the Rings* here—well, that matches them up with the film snobs of yore (yours truly included). Everyone took the assignment quite seriously, and why not? If you love movies, isn't a personal top 10 in a very real sense a definition of you?

Time and again, a certain group of modern films studded the lists, the same disreputable new classics I'd been hearing about. True, the official canon still holds considerable sway: *Citizen Kane* popped up on many a list (if not at the top), as did *Casablanca*, Fellini's *8 1/2*, Fritz Lang's sci-fi silent *Metropolis*, and plenty of Kubrick. There was a pronounced tendency, too, to stake a claim for the offshore and relatively esoteric: Iranian movies, the Hong Kong art films of Wong Kar-wai, Krzysztof Kieslowski's astringent moral fables. They're the antithesis of Hollywood pap, yes, and sometimes it's just easy to love a film when it's your secret.

But then there were those other, newer movies, caustic, commercial, resolutely un-classic.

You'd get one or two titles per list, never a straight flush, and if a desire for balance has something to do with that, so does shyness in the face of the seemingly indefensible. Imagine, then, that I've sifted 10 of these movies out from the others and arranged them in general order of their number of mentions. The roughneck new canon runs something like this:

1. *Pulp Fiction* (1994). Quentin Tarantino's fractured, unholy fusion of Hong Kong action, French New Wave cool, and American indie-brat daring. Made for \$8 million, it saw worldwide grosses of \$213 million. The revolution starts here—or the beginning of the end, depending on your viewpoint.

2. *The Godfather* (1972). Old-school, yes, but many of the list makers consider Francis Ford Coppola's classic gangster saga a key blueprint for the new age: the cinematic godfather that stands Janus-faced between the older studio era and our modern whiz-kid nihilism. Its influence cannot be overestimated.

3. *Fight Club* (1999). One of the most controversial movies of the past decade, David Fincher's adaptation of the Chuck Palahniuk novel about American manhood at the bleeding edge of the millennium is for many young viewers an undeniable masterpiece that speaks directly to the ironic neuroses of our times. A modern Graduate, if you like, and if that scares the hell out of you, it's meant to.

4. *Run Lola Run* (1998). Life as a video game—if you die, just hit “restart.” The techno soundtrack and the punkette heroine of German director Tom Tykwer's groundbreaking film helped turn it into a hit, but it's all those rebootable realities that make it resonate with the PlayStation Generation.

5. *Amelie* (2001). Audrey Tautou presides over a whimsical fairy tale Paris in which imagination, at 24 frames per second, makes all things possible.

6. *12 Monkeys* (1995) and *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1998). Two paranoid, acid-freakout dystopias from the mind of former Monty Python animator Terry Gilliam. *Monkeys* updates a beautiful, obscure French film called *La Jetee* into an anxious tale of future rot, while *Fear and Loathing*—unanimously reviled by critics, pundits, and anyone else who matters—is frighteningly faithful to the Hunter S. Thompson book. Both films enlist Big Hollywood Stars (Bruce Willis and Johnny Depp, respectively) to subversive ends.

7. *The Big Lebowski* (1998). Of all the Coen brothers films out there—including the double-Oscar-winning *Fargo*—why is this shaggy-dog comic mystery about an aging hippie (Jeff Bridges), White Russians, and Orthodox Jewish bowlers the one that crops up on all the lists?

8. *Memento* (2000). In which time runs backward through the past of a man (Guy Pearce) with no short-term memory. A fiendishly constructed thriller and a nifty metaphor for the plight of modern man if you've got a Philosophy 101 term paper to write.

9. *Boogie Nights* (1997) and *Magnolia* (1999). The second and third films from maverick writer-director Paul Thomas Anderson are rich experiences indeed: dozens of characters, multiple story lines, unexpected lightning bolts of grace. Imagine all 500 channels playing at once with a pitiless sense of forgiveness.

10. *The Matrix* (1999). The most blatantly commercial modern movie to show up on the student lists, but how do you ignore it? In casting, pacing, and special effects, it's a perfectly realized screen translation of the goth empowerment fantasy fueling so much of pop culture's

music and comic books. It's also the ultimate adolescent nightmare that says your world is an illusion created by soulless machines (a.k.a. mom and dad).

Let me stress, once again, that no matter how dear to individual viewers these individual films may be—as well as similar movies that peppered the lists, like Darren Aronofsky's *Requiem for a Dream*, Baz Luhrmann's *Moulin Rouge*, Todd Solondz's *Happiness*, Dogma films like Lars von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* and Thomas Vinterberg's *The Celebration*, even the lowbrow, Dilbertesque comedy *Office Space*—it is as an overall group that they're emblematic. They're also notable for the canonical films they're beginning to replace and the bygone world those films represent.

In short, *Casablanca* and *Citizen Kane* don't matter so much anymore, even if you think they should. Those two films may be, respectively, the peak product of the Hollywood dream machine and the first true indie flick; they may be historical necessities, transporting movie experiences, and, in the case of *Kane*, a brilliantly realized essay on American success, ego, and disaster. But their pertinence to audiences is a thing of the past. “We really haven't had to deal with a war that didn't look like a video game or last about as long,” says Phoebe Shackeroff, 26, a second-year graduate film student at USC, on why *Casablanca* has little emotional impact on her peers. “So we haven't personally had to deal with the loss and the sacrifice. I'm not sure if we have heroes in the classical sense of the word.”

In a way, these films are victims of their own legends: so completely has *Casablanca* been absorbed into the bones of every adventure-romance that has come after, so inextricably has Kane's rise and fall—and Welles's, too—become part of our moviegoing DNA, that you almost don't have to see the films to have seen them. And when you do, isn't there a slight sense of disappointment? They are, after all, only movies, just as *Rosebud* is only a [REDACTED].

Much of this is a simple matter of the passing of time and fashion. When I was a newly minted teenage film geek back in 1971, *Citizen Kane* was 30 years old. Now it's over 60, and another 30-year-old film, *The Godfather*, has replaced it as the crucial starting line of modernity on many of the student 10-best lists. The Coppola film is in color, it stars actors who still walk among us, the violence is oddly, comfortingly familiar. By contrast, notes David Fincher, the director of *Fight Club*, “*Casablanca* now feels like a stage play. It's beautifully, classically made, but in terms of the language of cinema, it's almost irrelevant.”

And yet, there's much more than just a generational shift going on here. To cinephiles of the 1960s and '70s, the films of old Hollywood came from a vastly different world, the world of their parents. Those films, in fact, were one of the very few aspects of their parents' culture that they chose to exalt and celebrate. The trench-coat cult of Bogart was a creation of counterculture college campuses, as was the craze for the vaudeville anarchy of the Marx Brothers, who had nose-thumbed *The Man* three decades ahead of schedule.

For younger audiences of today, the comparable hits of mom and dad's heyday aren't nearly as compelling; again, the dour, determinist Kubrick is the telling exception. The groundbreaking films of the 1960s and 1970s—*Midnight Cowboy*, *The Graduate*, *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Easy Rider*—have visually dated: black and white may be forever, but a color film from 1969 now just looks like a red, grainy washout. Worse, what was terribly nouveau back then now often appears to be terribly normal. Says *Run Lola Run* director Tykwer: “It's not sensational anymore to see a couple that has an equal relationship with each other, like in Godard's

Breathless. Back then, films were poking wounds, but those wounds don't bleed anymore. The issues have just changed.”

Now, wait a minute. Wasn't VHS supposed to save us all? “The entire history of cinema is available over the video-store counter, and yet the awareness seems to be less than when it wasn't as available,” says Todd McCarthy, chief film critic for *Variety* and author of a biography of Golden Age director Howard Hawks. “The typical USC student in 1968 would have had a deeper knowledge of film history.”

McCarthy has a right to be perplexed: The emergence of the rental-tape market in the early 1980s freed the great films of Hollywood and international cinema from the ghettos of late-night TV, urban revival house, and college film society—but no one really noticed. It doesn't stand to reason: Why wouldn't, say, a 17-year-old girl in Brockton take home a copy of *All About Eve* for the weekend, if it's sitting right there in the store?

The obvious answer—because she'd much rather rent *Bring It On* or *Scream 3* or *A Beautiful Mind* or, if she's an adventurous 17-year-old girl, *Amélie*—is true enough, but it only skims the surface. Video has revolutionized how we and our children consume movies, but not in the ways early proponents expected.

True, in the beginning, pigging out was the rule. “I remember getting my first VCR and renting all the Cary Grant movies I'd never seen,” says Tom Karsch, general manager of the Turner Classic Movies cable channel, one of the few remaining shrines to older films. “Now it's just another way of seeing movies,” he sighs.

Just so: With the rise of Blockbuster and the consolidation of the video-rental market—and with Hollywood realizing that new movies often make more money on tape than in theaters—older movies went back to being a smaller piece of the puzzle. By then, home video and its cousin, cable TV, had already killed off the few remaining outlets for classic movies, primarily the big-city revival theaters.

With them went a wonderfully privileged mode of discovery. “I remember the first time I saw *Rear Window*,” says Fincher. “It was in Sausalito with eight people in the audience. Or to see *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, you had to drive to Berkeley and sit in a theater with sofas and cockroaches. And I saw it six times.”

Personally speaking, I must have seen Cary Grant and Katharine Hepburn in *Bringing Up Baby* more than 10 times at the Coolidge Corner Theater or the old Park Square Cinema downtown, double-billed with *Holiday* or *The Philadelphia Story* or *Sylvia Scarlett* (Hepburn in drag—take note, ye modern gender-benders). The theaters smelled funky, the prints were tattered, and the sparse audience was made up of old ladies smelling of mothballs, Hepburn wannabes of both sexes, and pale old-movie acolytes of all ages. You had a sense you were peering into a forgotten world, one that was bigger, simpler, and silvered with strange assurance.

Video destroyed that world by exiling old movies to the small screen and fatally compromising their impact. “I don't think there's any film I've seen for the first time on video that is my favorite film,” says McCarthy.

And while the revival theater offered a community of dreamers, with video you're more likely home alone. “It used to be exciting to go see a wide variety of movies that today would be considered fringe,” says Curtis Hanson, director of *L.A. Confidential*, a neoclassic 1997

crime thriller that appears on many of the students' lists of favorites. "In the '70s, cool people were doing it. Women were doing it. It spoke much more to the culture of the times. Whereas to sit at home and watch them on DVD, well, that almost makes you kind of a loser."

Finally, there's the sheer, overwhelming mass of choices involved in picking out a Friday night rental. That choice was made for you when you went to a revival house or a film society screening: Even if you knew zilch about cinema, you could trust (or hope) that the people picking the movie did. At Blockbuster, you're on your own. Anyone who knows the brain fog that kicks in once you've looked over a shelf of video boxes knows, too, the impulse to reach for the familiar. "What do you rent?" asks Fincher rhetorically. "*Bonnie and Clyde* or *The Terminator*—or something that came out four months ago?"

Still, if there's one thing a kid in 2003 knows about, it's navigating a universe of images: Our children have grown up in a world more purely mediated than most of us can even begin to grasp. It's not just the video store but 500 channels coming through the wall and DVDs with additional footage, alternate endings, and director's commentary and a million Web sites and pirate video and audio streaming down the wires from Kazaa and 37 instant messages pinging madly on your teenager's cellphone. Says Tom Tykwer: "This is the first generation to be surrounded by moving images literally from birth. Of course I grew up with TV, but when I was a kid [in Wuppertal, Germany] we had two channels. Now there are so many films you can consume and channels to choose from, and TV treats them differently. *Casablanca* comes on at 9:30 a.m., because it's for older people. You're at school, so you're not meant to see it; it's not being made important by the media. What's being made important is *The Matrix*."

How do you ride this endless fractal wave of media? There are a number of coping strategies, and most of them involve disassociation: maintaining shallow-range focus, withholding emotional involvement, indulging in brief self-conscious passions, fluidly shifting tonal gears, using irony as both a shield and a weapon, juggling multiple frames of reference. A professor might call this quintessentially postmodern behavior. You call it channel-surfing.

For anyone younger than 30—in other words, for those Americans who became culturally conscious only after the launch of MTV in 1981—this is the natural state of affairs. And for more aware members of the population—the kind of kids who 30 years ago would have been grooving on Bogart and Antonioni—an overriding mistrust of the image is also business as usual. Why should it be trusted when the entertainment economy decrees that every frame of film and snippet of sound come with a price tag? Who wouldn't resist being sold to on a 24/7 basis?

That mistrust can be cynical or it can be nihilistic, but more often it's just extraordinarily clear-eyed. "When I was young," says Martin C. Martin, an MIT postdoctoral student who sent me his top-10 list, "I used to think that movies would tell you about the nominal topic of the movie—that a cop film would communicate what it's like to be a cop in real life. After I grew up a little, I realized this wasn't true, that they changed things to be more 'dramatic.' So then I became disillusioned with films. But at some point I realized: Films aren't about their nominal topic. They're about the audience."

It's completely natural, then, that shattered media and the suspect image play so integral a part in the 10 movies outlined above: They acknowledge the ahistorical, asynchronous Eternal Now that an aware audience already takes for granted. Films like *Pulp Fiction* and *12 Monkeys*

scramble time's continuum, placing later scenes before scenes from the beginning. Tykwer's *Run Lola Run* rewinds the action thrice, just to see how the same sequence of events will evolve in different directions. *Memento* requires even more agility to follow, as one strand of the narrative plays out, scene by scene, in reverse, even as a second story line, shot in black and white, unfolds in the proper forward direction. Older audiences might find it a chore to keep up. To a kid, it's just another day in the modern media bazaar.

It's his or her reality, in other words, and because that reality is filtered through so many layers of hype and uncertainty, the only way to engage is to disengage: to view the image as a mutable game at best and a cynical trick at worst. Fincher's *Fight Club* pulls a major fast one toward the end of its narrative—let's just say that Brad Pitt's character is not who he seems—but those who love the movie find the twist to be confirmation of the film's (and their own) chic angry-lad paranoia. *The Matrix* and *Memento* both mock reliance on quotidian perception and forthrightly insist that you cannot believe your eyes or your memories. *Magnolia*, *Run Lola Run*, and *Amélie*, by contrast, are documents of faith, holding out the possibility of human connection amid a battering onrush of images and narratives. The only other choice is not to care at all: *The Big Lebowski* is a stoner's laugh at the idea of plot, while *Pulp Fiction* obliterates meaning with bullets of cold cleverness.

These are all director's films, personal statements of belief and dismay, and about as far as you can get from the plastic commercial verities of *Sweet Home Alabama* or even the literate, Oscar-bound craftwork of *The Hours*. They represent the triumph of paranoid formalism over a more measured, long-take realism. They are the children of Orson Welles and Stanley Kubrick.

It's completely natural, if mildly terrifying, that young, ambitious audiences see these movies and want to make more like them. “Nothing has a larger effect on a future filmmaker than the films that surround him,” says NYU film major Jared Frank. “As Altman is to P. T. Anderson, Anderson will one day be to a filmmaker of my generation.”

Those future directors are already different in crucial respects from the Fords and Spielbergs and even Finchers who have preceded them, according to one who would know. Jed Dannenbaum is a professor of filmmaking at the University of Southern California—George Lucas's alma mater. Of his current students, he says: “These are kids who have been thinking about being filmmakers since they were 7 or 8, who've been making films with family camcorders. They're wired to take things in much faster and more easily than older audiences, and they get impatient with very traditional storytelling. They want to break frames and skip around in time, and they're used to films doing that.”

In this, his students are much like the young directors they hope to emulate. The difference is that their heroes were ahead of the curve: indiscriminate film junkies at a time when that was decidedly fringe behavior. Every movie freak worth his or her salt knows the tale of Quentin Tarantino's apprenticeship as a video-store clerk, gorging on Hong Kong action films and drive-in junk classics as well as the requisite Bergman. For Tykwer, it was a job as a projectionist that sucked him in: “I fell in love with movies on the level where I admired any kind of film as long as it was involving to me. Later I found out why it was involving, and it had nothing to do with the genre or budget. That's why on my list you have *Halloween* next to *Rashomon*.”

David Fincher, who grew up in a movie-loving community north of San Francisco, most closely prefigures the young wannabes of today. “I took film appreciation classes in grade school,” he laughs. “Lucas lived down the street. [Director Michael] Ritchie lived down the street. *The Godfather* movies were being made there. In Marin County, if you weren't seeing *Dr. Strangelove*, you were a dummy.”

So how many kids today are seeing *Fight Club* but have never heard of *Dr. Strangelove*? Enough to be cause for alarm in some quarters. Curtis Hanson, who, to be sure, has directed Eminem in *8 Mile* but is also a Los Angeles-reared film classicist active in raising money and awareness for film preservation, recalls a time when “the people I knew who loved movies, some of whom aspired to make them, loved them seriously. And to not know the so-called classics would have been unthinkable. How could you love literature and not know Mark Twain or Shakespeare? That's the difference between Tarantino and the people who want to be Tarantino. Quentin Tarantino was grounded in the past, but many of the people who aspire to his success know only him and Fincher.”

Perhaps. And perhaps, in absorbing Tarantino, they're swallowing all his influences, too. Perhaps film history is becoming less deep but more broad—less concerned with the past and more enraptured by the endless stream of images emanating from the infinite distribution points of the media machine. With the proliferation of digital video cameras, home editing software, and peer-to-peer Internet networks, it will only become more so.

“We're surrounded by a different music of pictures,” says Tom Tykwer simply. “The music of images has changed.” Like the cultural quantum shifts that produced jazz, Elvis, punk rock, and hip-hop, that music increasingly has little use for yesterday, or for yesterday's listeners. It is, instead, the soundtrack to tomorrow's real best pictures.