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6 Cinematic Masterpieces

As a Media & Cinema Studies major, I hold the history of cinema and process of filmmaking extremely close to my heart. I often think about the lasting legacy of cinema and what it means. Hundreds of years after we are all buried and gone, and robots have taken over society, replacing humans, or aliens have finally descended upon earth, far after we've been wiped out, like dinosaur fossils, what can the new species roaming Earth watch to learn about the one who came before it? As the aliens or robots sift through the shattered debris of human history, what art can they pull from that encapsulates our society? I know this is an impossible task, so I am limiting myself to cinema produced in the 20th and 21st century to make this exploration, and I will analyze each film in the order in which they were released.

2001: A Space Odyssey

Hypnotic, atmospheric, and transcendent. *2001: A Space Odyssey*, directed by filmmaking genius Stanley Kubrick, was released in 1968 and was the inspiration for many Sci-Fi movies to follow, such as *Star Wars*, *Alien*, *Interstellar*, *Arrival*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. Technical brilliance aside, the themes of *2001* range from life and death, human existence, evolution, artificial intelligence, to time and space. After discovering a mysterious relic, a Monolith, buried underneath the planet's surface, a team of astronauts is sent on a bizarre mission to uncover its origins. However, among the team is a supercomputer named HAL 9000, which watches over the astronauts like the eyes of God until the astronauts sense HAL is

untrustworthy. The film poses more questions than it does answers. Most significantly, what is the Monolith, and what is its purpose? I prefer to view the Monolith as a symbol that gives society the tools and knowledge to make it to our next stage of evolution or development. As exhibited in the first sequence of the film “The Dawn of Man,” the Monolith appears, and soon after its arrival, the primates inhabiting the area learn to use bones as a mechanism for violence. This turn of events presupposes that primates evolved into humans when they discovered violence. The film's second sequence explores a group of scientists on a moon base who seek to discover what they call “the first sign of extraterrestrial life,” which turns out to be the Monolith. The third and final sequence of the film is the most enigmatic as it portrays the protagonist entering a psychedelic journey through space where time is not linear. After my second viewing of the film, the extreme close-up of the eyes drifting through dimensions gives me a new perspective on life: life is precious and each moment should be cherished. Like the protagonist, you blink once, and you are lying on your deathbed. *2001* is a visual film that transcends language barriers and is the epitome of the existence of the human species. It is a cinematic artifact that aliens can learn from.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest (1975) is a dark drama that dives into themes of institutionalism, mental illness, and authority while also exposing the harsh reality of the mental health profession. Within the film's first few minutes, the audience is introduced to the philosophical confrontation of civility vs. recklessness and the juxtaposition of nature and institutionalism. The opening shot of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is significant because it provides the audience with a contradiction between the protagonist and the world he is about to

enter. The viewer sees Oregon's natural beauty as reflected in the mountains and vegetation of the outdoors juxtaposed with the cold corridors of the hospital. The scene shows the peaceful landscape where the protagonist, R.P. McMurphy comes from; he is a man from nature who does not play by the rules in the confinement of the ward. The first frame is full of light, open and boundless, directly opposite of the drab institution, which is closed off and controlled. While a careful viewer of *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* may see the film as a story of mental illness and liberation, on a deeper level, the film's subconscious message is an indictment of a flawed mental health system and the treatment of psychiatric disorders. The film beautifully asks what it means to be “crazy” in a world like this by highlighting what it means to be human. In perhaps my favorite scene of the film, McMurphy learns that many of the friends he makes during his time in the institution are, in fact, voluntary admissions, unlike McMurphy, to which he responds:

Jesus, I mean, you guys do nothing but complain about how you can't stand it in this place here and you don't have the guts just to walk out? What do you think you are, for Chrissake, crazy or somethin'? Well you're not! You're not! You're no crazier than the average asshole out walkin' around on the streets and that's it.

His response is heartbreaking if it were not true. For the remainder of the film, besides attempting to break out of the institution, McMurphy shows the other patients what it is like to be free from their accustomed captivity. He steals a bus to take them fishing across the big blue sea exhibiting how to take control over their lives that are so tightly controlled for them. He teaches the patients basketball and even mimics the announcement of the World Series because he wants them to feel what it is like to be at a sports stadium—far from the shackles of what society deems as crazy. Even within the locked gates of the ward, McMurphy is the embodiment of freedom. He is like a caged bird whose only true destiny is to fly out and roam free—which is directly mirrored in the film's title. *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is more than a film exposing the

cold and isolating world of mental illness, but an exploration of our humanity and what it takes to regain our freedom and finally be liberated.

Do the Right Thing

There is no better film to exemplify the racialized tension in the United States over the last 50 years than the 1989 Spike Lee classic *Do The Right Thing*. If I were teaching a college course on the most important films of all time, *Do the Right Thing* would be on my list, and I would argue that the film should be seen by everyone. This film acts as a boiling pot of water with its themes of racism and police brutality at the center, and when the film reaches its climax, it culminates into a fire. *Do the Right Thing* follows the story of Mookie, a young black man who delivers pizzas on the hottest day of the year in the backdrop of 1980s Brooklyn. But the temperature reaches a boiling point when a cop kills an unarmed black man, which results in the town erupting in violence, clashing with police and setting fire to the pizza shop, as the characters sit in the ruins of a neighborhood that once was, and contemplate how to move forward. The phrase “Wake-up” is a motif seen and heard in many of Spike Lee’s films such as *School Daze*, *Blackkklansman*, *Da 5 Bloods*, and *Do the Right Thing* is no exception to the repetition of this phrase by local radio DJ Mister Señor Love Daddy, as he wakes up the neighborhood in the morning. Lee uses this phrase as a calling to America to finally wake up to what everyone sees but is too afraid to comment on: the systematic racism that is deeply embedded within the American fabric. From the film’s eruption in dramatic tension, the stylish aesthetic, the use of colors to portray mood, to the high and low angles, and dolly zooms that feel like you are watching live paintings, the film is a masterwork in race relations in the United States and is a necessary cinema.

The Truman Show

The 1998 drama *The Truman Show* is a perfect film from beginning to end, which is a nearly impossible task to accomplish. For example, the film opens and closes with the same lines, with the protagonist speaking directly to the camera: “In case I don’t see you, good morning... good afternoon... and goodnight,” a poetic bookend that provides closure to the audience and serves as the protagonist’s catchphrase. The film’s premise follows an insurance salesman who discovers that his entire life is a reality TV show which emphasizes themes of mass media, consumption, reality vs illusion, and celebrity worship. More specifically, *The Truman Show* explores the manipulation of reality by media corporations, highlighting how the media shapes and sells an alternate reality for entertainment and profit. Since our contemporary society is so obsessed with media, I thought *The Truman Show* would be a fitting depiction of our culture. Comedic actor Jim Carrey does a brilliant job taking the audience through an odyssey of self-discovery, introspection, and finally, self-acceptance alongside our protagonist, Truman Burbank. Throughout the film, Truman uncovers the mysterious secrets of his life and begins to suspect that his life has been, in some way, staged, altered, and manipulated. The film is genius in many ways. First, as audience members, we discover the fictional aspects of Truman’s perceived reality along with him. Second, the direction and unconventional camera angles are meticulously chosen to hint at something being amiss in his world, thus adding a sense of paranoia. Third, the film embeds advertising sequences within dramatic scenes to give the impression that the products we see on-screen are being sold off-screen. All these factors and more culminate to create an unnerving, deceptive, and vulnerable film that tackles truth in an age of misinformation

and media manipulation. Every time I watch *The Truman Show*, I pick up on new details that make me question my own reality and the media I have been consuming throughout my life.

Her

Her is a beautiful and convincing summation of human society during the 21st century when technological intervention has nearly taken over our lives, and we lie on our beds wondering if we've forgotten how to connect with people. *Her*, released in 2013, is a film I chose to explore due to its representation of the human spirit, love, and longing. *Her* tackles many topics, but at the heart of the film is a relationship between a human, Theo, and an AI, named Samantha, and its ability to mimic human emotions and feelings and experience life alongside the protagonist. *Her* allows the audience to dive into the feelings of our protagonist and discover new ways of being human. *What is love and what is loss* are questions that are asked throughout the film. *Her* takes us back to the first time we fell in love or felt an instantaneous human connection. Like a flame to a match, love is a spark that ignites your soul and does not quite let go. It should be noted that just as Theo installs his AI program for the first time, the camera starts tracking away from the protagonist, isolating him in the foreground of his empty home signifying that he is perhaps looking for connection in the wrong place. Misguided and lost, Theo reflects human beings in his quest for love to fill the dark void in his heart. However, unconventionally, he turns to a personalized operating system that he thinks will help cure his loneliness. Instead, meeting his AI is just another chance to get swept into a relationship, only to discover that your personalized operating system has been simultaneously speaking with 8,316 other people just like you. *Her* also takes us to a time when we fell out of love, where that connection is severed, and a solid pit forms in our stomachs. The sunlight is blocked from our eyes, and we are bathed in heartbreak. *Her* helps us heal and learn, and it is a film that will be ingrained in our collective

memories for the time being, or until the robot or aliens come and forget it all. Once the ashes of our society have been cleared out, *Her* is a film robots can see to mimic being in love.

Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)

2014's Best Picture Winner *Birdman* is arguably the most important film of the last decade. Without discussing the brilliant technicality of the direction and cinematography, this film is a masterpiece. Within the context of our culture, *Birdman* exhibits where humans' priorities lie: consumption, popularity, celebrity worship, and believing our lives are meaningful despite our minimal existence in the universe. It also displays social media's influence on our lives, manipulating our time, and controlling our emotions, tastes, and attention. The film comments and critiques our culture, where a society equates social media prowess with legitimate power. Everything is a performance. *Birdman's* stylistic choice to make the film seem as if it is one continuous shot is mesmerizing. The camera follows and tracks the characters, carrying a flow and continuity never seen on the silver screen in this way before. Its filmmaking aesthetic, beautifully choreographed by director Alejandro González Iñárritu sparked many one-take films that came after like *1917*, *The Revenant*, and even the episode "Charlie Work" from *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*.

The film immerses the audience in New York City with the backdrop of Times Square, the soundtrack of classical music, but more frequently the drumming of a street performer—acting as the pounding heart of the film. *Birdman* comments on art and asks questions such as: What makes good art? What is a tortured artist? Do the opinions of art critics matter? What is the human cost of making art that lasts? The final frame of Emma Stone's character, Sam, glaring up at the sky with her big blue eyes, depicts what it is like to be born,

rejuvenated, and appreciated. What Stone is staring at is left ambiguous, an ending that, on one viewing, might confuse the audience, but on another viewing, may give you a whole new perspective on life. That is what a great film should do. Each time you watch it, you gain a new and unforgettable experience that changes you as a person.

Even if the rest of cinematic history has been washed away or lost in translation, by watching *2001: A Space Odyssey*, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*, *Do the Right Thing*, *The Truman Show*, *Her*, and *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)*, you will begin to alter your perception of the world, gain new empathy, question your mortality, but most importantly, allow you to learn something about yourself that you had not known before. That is the beauty of cinema. In the words of filmmaking legend Martin Scorsese, “You go to movies to be involved in the picture, to get a sense of you losing yourself up in that screen for a few hours, and know what it’s like to be human.”