

Book Case

Professor Peter Watson considers some movies to enjoy.

Editor's Note – I have not included details for any particular format or price etc given the large number of download and viewing options available in 2019.

I was delighted to be asked by the editor to contribute to this section. He asked if I could write about six books that inspired, informed and entertained and that I could recommend to the readership when they are feeling jaded and exhausted. He said that it didn't necessarily have to be about books and mentioned Tony Tham's fascinating article in the January 2018 edition listing his favourite music festivals and bands. It got me thinking about films. In contrast to reading a book which is a solitary activity, films are usually a shared experience in the cinema or at home with family and friends. This makes them a highly memorable experience-you can remember when and where you saw the film, who you were with and how it affected you and others. Often a quote from a good film dropped into conversation triggers a whole excited shared experience.

LOCAL HERO

My very favourite film that I have seen several times is *Local Hero*. I was delighted to learn recently that this is also Barry Kelly's favourite film. It was made in 1983, quite a long time ago, but remembered with great affection by me and Barry. What makes it so good? It is a relatively low-key tale of an oil baron in Houston, Texas, who wants to purchase a picturesque Scottish coastal village with a view to building an oil refinery on site. It is the classic confrontation of big money offering to make everyone rich but at the cost of losing their way of life and environment. It is a gentle comedy contrasting the modern world and its values with the villagers' slow pace of life and infinitely greater quality of life. The film is enhanced by the superb music of Mark Knopfler, whose title track of *Going Home* brings memories of the film

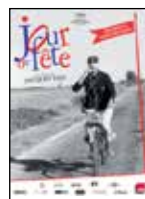


flooding back. The oil baron is played by an aging Burt Lancaster, who is the “bad guy” but he is not all bad – his real passion is astronomy and in his huge office he has constructed a planetarium. He selects a young thrusting executive called McIntyre (Mac), because his name sounds Scottish, to go to the village to negotiate the deal. Of course, he is beguiled by life there, he explores rock pools and spends time in the village pub. This film predates mobile phones and the internet, so communication is by phone from a red telephone box at the harbour and is the iconic image used in promotional posters for the film. At one point on an evening call to Houston, Mac tells Burt Lancaster that there are lots of fantastic colours in the sky. Burt Lancaster says “Tell me what you see McIntyre, you are my eyes and ears there”. He describes reds turning to green and shimmering movements of the light. Burt says “That’s the Aurora Borealis, the Northern lights, you are a very lucky man McIntyre”

For me the film succeeds wonderfully well in creating the experiential journey associated with a good holiday spent in Donegal or some other remote seaside retreat. You arrive full of concerns about recent events at work, enhanced by the rush to tidy things up to get away. You look around and think: how can I spend two weeks in this place where nothing is going on and there is one shop? Over the course of a week you slip into a slower pace of life, one about looking for shells, walking to the shop for groceries and spending an hour there in conversation. Time slips away very easily and you feel so much better. In the film, by the time the village ceillidh comes around we now know all the characters and their idiosyncracies and enjoy seeing how they interact. It is so clearly an inclusive community event and the viewer is part of it.

JOUR DU FETE

Another great film character is Jacques Tati who created a number of superb French silent films after the second world war. He is perhaps best remembered for *Mr Hulot's Holiday* (1953) shot in black and white at Saint Nazaire on the French western seaboard,



where there is a statue of Jacques Tati as Mr Hulot and you can visit the hotel on the beach where the action took place. His films are silent in terms of dialogue but there is background sound and music sound track featuring French accordion. Tati is an artist in the tradition of French mime and circus clowning. Undoubtedly this film must have been the inspiration for Rowan Atkinson's *Mr Bean's Holiday* (2007) that also largely takes place in France. I first saw *Mr Hulot's Holiday* as a schoolboy at the Queen's Film Theatre when my father took me to see it, but my favourite Jacques Tati film is *Jour du Fete* released in 1949. It is set in a rural French village and immediately conjures up the idyll of the French countryside. It is again shot in black and white, but some versions have been “re-mastered” to colour the French flags and bunting. I first saw it in a small Paris cinema.

Jacques Tati is in the role of a rather hapless and “goofy” postman who does his rounds on an old bicycle which has a bell that is loose and makes a gentle metallic rattling sound as he goes along. Sound is very important in Tati films- in this film he often uses the sound of the babble of distant children playing to set the atmosphere. He was ahead of his time because it is now recognised that such sounds apparently trigger our ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response) and create a pleasant mood. Other such sounds that are promoted by internet bloggers for this purpose are the sound of the sea, scrunching paper and scraping toast. In *Jour du Fete* we first see Tati the postman from afar moving along a country lane. His progress is erratic and punctuated by rapid changes of direction and flailing at the air. Workers in the fields who have heard his bell have looked up and are amused by his antics. We sense that this is not the first time that they have seen him behaving strangely. The scene then moves to close up and there is the sound of a buzzing insect. It is evident that he is trying to fend off the insect and hence the flailing arms and rapid changes in direction. At other times when showing scenes in the village the background French accordion music is wonderfully evocative of place and timelessness. Like *Local Hero* it is another film that takes us on holiday.



THE CASTLE

My third film is highly related to place and is culturally significant. It is *The Castle* (1997) referring to “an English man’s house is his castle”. It is pure Aussie and is about an Australian family, the Kerrigans who live on the boundary of Tullamarine airport in Melbourne and are served with a compulsory eviction order so that the airport can expand and increase its business. It is the typical Aussie story of the little man against authority, of Aussie spirit and the notion of no social class divisions in Australian society, which Australians like to believe but is probably not strictly true. I first saw it in the basement of a friend’s house in Melbourne on a visit there in 2007. We watched it with about a dozen Australians who all knew the script by heart. They were keen to share this piece of Australian culture with us. The film was so popular at that time that it was very common to have fancy dress parties themed on the film. The Kerrigan business was buying and selling things. From time to time during the film one of the sons would take a phone call from someone who wished to sell something, on one occasion a pair of jousting sticks, on another a pulpit. The father asked the son to ask the seller how much they wanted for the sale. When the price came back he invariably said “Tell him, he’s dreaming”. This expression has passed into common language, so much so that if you use it to express your incredulity about something, it is instantly recognised by Australians and when used by a non-Australian is greeted by great surprise and amusement. It is a bit like attempting to speak French in France-you are paying homage to your host country and it is greatly appreciated.



various incidents along the way. Jim Carrey as an individual is a remarkable comedy character on and off stage with his prominent front teeth and fringe haircut. The comedy can be bizarre and could be described as “toilet” humour at times with for example a chase scene during which Carrey badly needs to pass urine but they can’t stop so he ends up by filling several empty beer bottles. We don’t see the bottles but the sound effects of bottles filling and the urgency to switch to an another empty one in sequence is hilarious, as is Carrey’s expression of relief. The fun keeps going when they are stopped by a police officer for speeding. He spots the opened beer bottles and suspecting them of drinking and driving insists on checking the contents by sampling it himself! I think that the genius of Carrey is that he is able to uncannily get into the mind of a teenager. Although he is clearly an adult his world is firmly teenage and it makes for great comedy. I was reminded of this recently when my daughter, who was then age 18 arranged a fund-raising evening for her friends at a small private cinema in Comber. She chose to show *Dumb and Dumber*, which none of her friends had seen because they were too young when it had first come out. It was a hugely successful evening. Many of the young people agreed with me that it is a masterpiece of comedy. Perhaps the message is: if you are going to enjoy this you need to think like a teenager.

BILLY ELLIOTT

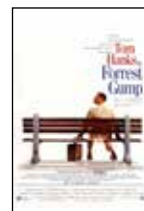
Billy Elliott (2000) is on my list as another great story that you can get thoroughly immersed in. The story of the boy who loves ballet, who lives in a tough coal mining community in the North East of England at the time of the miners’ strike in 1984-5. He lives with his coal mining father and older brother and frail grandmother. We learn that his mother has sadly previously died. In so many ways it is a tough commentary on the lives of miners at that time and the dilemma they faced about continuing a strike that resulted in them having no income for over a year. The film also challenges gender stereotypes, bringing



into stark contrast Billy’s love for ballet versus the belief by his brother and father that dancing is for “poofs”. Billy has a friend who likes dressing up in his mother’s clothes and ultimately proves to be gay but it is clear throughout that Billy is not gay. Julie Walters is the chain-smoking dance teacher who helps Billy to realise his dreams. As ever she gives a superb performance, this time as a disappointed woman with her own life but big enough to recognise Billy’s talents and to help him to progress. One of the key moments is when Billy attends an audition at the Royal Ballet School with his father who is by this stage determined to support Billy, even to the extent of breaking the strike and becoming a “scab”. Billy does not appear to be getting on very well at the audition, but when asked by the panel how he feels when he dances he replies hesitantly that it is like “electricity”. I admit I shed a tear.

FOREST GUMP

A very well-known film and probably on everyone’s list is *Forest Gump* (1994), winner of 6 Academy Awards including Best Picture and Best Actor. Its success is in no small measure due to Tom Hanks, who plays Forest Gump, a rather slow witted, pedantic and innocent character. Tom Hanks is undoubtedly one of the greatest living actors. Every time I see him in a new role I have to refocus-it is sometimes hard to believe that he can so wonderfully transform into so many different parts. *Forest Gump* uses the technique of telling modern American history from a personal perspective. It is quirky and unbelievable that one person could be present at so many iconic moments, but his unsophisticated persona works very well in an entertaining and moving way. As his mother says “life is like a box of chocolates, you don’t know what you are going to get” It moves from Elvis Presley, through the Vietnam war, its casualties and abandonment, the Civil Rights movement, Watergate, drug taking, HIV and AIDS to the commercial success of Apple and the societal trend for individuality and celebrity as



DUMB AND DUMBER

My next film is *Dumb and Dumber* starring Jim Carrey (1994). It is one of the funniest films I have ever seen but has never really been critically acclaimed. It is essentially a road trip film with



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exemplified by long distance running . It is clever, entertaining and at times very moving.

AND FINALLY...

My last two picks are homages to great novel writing, great acting and great film making: *Sense and Sensibility* (2008) by Jane Austen, scripted by Emma Thompson for which she won an Academy Award, with Emma in the lead role, and *Brooklyn* (2015) by Colm Toibin with Saoirse Ronan in the lead role. Both of these films are totally engaging. Jane Austen was a master of portraying human emotion and in the climactic scene where Emma Thompson meets again the man who she loves and who she believes to be now married and unobtainable, is a masterpiece of restrained turbulent emotion in a situation of polite society.

When it becomes apparent during the conversation that he is not married and he clearly has affection for her, Emma Thompson actually sobs with emotional release. Her mother and sisters who are aware of the situation are similarly affected and I expect also the majority of people who watch the film. In *Brooklyn* Saoirse Ronan plays a young and innocent Irish girl who has to emigrate to America to seek work. As an actress she succeeds wonderfully well in portraying her vulnerability and the dilemma thrown up by meeting and secretly marrying a young Italian-American man but not long afterwards has to return to Ireland unexpectedly when her sister dies. In Ireland everything has changed-she can now get a good job, her mother wants her to come home and she receives a proposal of marriage from an eligible

young man with good prospects. What should she do-should she stay or should she go back to America?

In considering these films I have enjoyed what they mean to me. In the main they are “feel good “, often humorous, always with a good story sometimes leading to a happy outcome, but not invariably. In every case it is the quality of the production that is so engaging. Better I think than any other medium, a good film is a wonderful escape that enables us to see the world and other people from a different perspective and has the power to move us.

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