

THE BEST OF SCREENINGS & MEANINGS



A JOURNEY THROUGH FILM

Gerald J. Schmitz

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Online at: www.screeningsandmeanings.com

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Looking back, I owe a debt to St. Peter's Abbey, whose college stimulated a rural Saskatchewan boy's passion for the cinema. As that has developed over the years I have also benefited from comments by and conversations with colleagues, readers and friends.

I am grateful too for the support of family, my sister, Yvonne, and brother, Roger. They will recall how my father, Bernard, spent time in California as a young man, enamoured of that movie mecca, and how my mother, Denise, who had been a teacher, passed on her love of reading and writing. This anthology is dedicated to their memory.

A note from the editor

My love of film began when I was a shy kid in the late 1960s. My parents would let me stay up late on a Friday night to watch a movie — with popcorn I didn't have to share. It was my refuge from the commotion of a house with four younger brothers. Comedies like *Please Don't Eat the Daisies* were OK, but from the time I saw Sergio Leone's films featuring "the man with no name," played by Clint Eastwood, my favourite genre would forever be the western.

The first time I met Gerald Schmitz — Gerry — was at a St. Peter's College reunion. His reputation as a scholar was well known, but I was also aware of his passion for film. When I became associate editor of the *Prairie Messenger*, my favourite section was arts and culture. We ran movie reviews from a news service, but they were unsatisfactory for a discerning readership, and my dream was to eventually feature our own film analysis.

In 1999 I asked my boss, Father Andrew Britz, OSB, for permission to ask Gerry if he'd consider writing the occasional film column. "You can try," Andrew said, "but he'll never say yes — he's too busy." Well, Gerry was too busy, but that didn't stop him. When I found out Gerry admired the work of Clint Eastwood as much as I did, I was delighted. But through his columns on films and books, I discovered a world beyond anything I'd imagined.

The *Prairie Messenger* was a Catholic journal, but it was also very much catholic. Gerry's perspective fit the paper's mission to "challenge its readers to know and live their communal and personal responsibilities in church and society." In his columns there is the element of Catholic

faith, of course, but also of a universal faith in human goodness. Gerry writes through the lens of compassion.

His contributions to the relatively unexplored realm of documentary (for many) are invaluable. Of particular interest is the eye-opening analysis, through documentaries and books, of the Afghanistan and Iraq wars of the past couple of decades. They should be part of high school curriculums.

It's one thing to read these columns on a weekly basis, as I have done over these many years. But here are the best of them in a collection that has the energy of a journey, as the title indicates. If you are not engaged in the realm of film, this book is a launching pad for discovery. If you are a film aficionado and want to deepen your exploration, you will find treasures. If you're looking for a movie to watch on a rainy weekend, look through the titles. There's something for everyone.

Throughout his journey, Gerry shows us how the many facets of the human quest for meaning can be revealed through the art of film.

From his favourite film, *Wings of Desire*, the angel Damiel, in his longing to experience life, says to a former angel who has "come to earth": "Wait! I want to know everything," to which his friend replies, "You need to figure that out for yourself. That's the fun of it."

INTRODUCTION

This is in some ways a golden age for enabling movie viewing beyond the limitations of traditional theatrical distribution. More movies are being shown on more television channels than ever before, including specialized subscription services such as The Movie Network. Nor is content limited to middling made-for-TV fare. Some providers such as HBO have earned a reputation for producing first-rate dramatic and documentary films. Add to that an increasing array of digital platforms and online streaming services like Netflix, Amazon and others.

For older films, notably including some rarely seen, I love the Turner Classic Movies channel. For example, on January 12, 2016, I was able to watch the black-and-white masterpiece *Little Fugitive*, restored by the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art. The film was a revelation. Made in 1953, the year after I was born, it is remarkable how much it anticipates the spirit of cinema vérité and the French New Wave. Two days later I had another revelation, courtesy of the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN), watching *Misery Harbour*, a 1999 Canada-Denmark-Sweden-Norway co-production that stars young Danish actor Nikolaj Coster-Waldau, long before his famous role in the popular television series *Game of Thrones*. He gives a superb performance, speaking flawless English.

I have come to appreciate this expanded access to cinematic content. That said, nothing can replace the experience of watching a good movie in a darkened theatre with others similarly absorbed in what is taking

place on screen. So I very much hope traditional movie-going pleasures will continue for as long as movies are made.

* * *

Growing up in rural Saskatchewan, on a farm near the small German Catholic village of Englefeld, meant a childhood far removed from movie capitals. I was seven when our family got its first black-and-white TV in 1959, receiving two channels. The publicly owned CBC channel showed movies on Saturday mornings, and I recall watching two in particular: *A Tale of Two Cities* (I think it was the 1935 classic with Ronald Colman as Sydney Carton, not the 1958 version with Dirk Bogarde in that role), and 1952's *Ivanhoe* with Robert Taylor as the swashbuckling titular hero.

What really made an impression on my boyish imagination was a rare family outing to an actual theatre in the nearby little town of Leroy for Cecile B. DeMille's 1956 biblical epic, *The Ten Commandments*. I think the year was also 1959, as it took a few years for such features to reach the prairie hinterland. Even more stirring was going to the "big" city of Saskatoon to see another such epic, William Wyler's *Ben Hur*, also starring Charlton Heston, in the Capitol Theatre, a grand old-style movie palace that sadly, like so many others, fell to the wrecker's ball of urban "redevelopment" in 1979. (It had opened a half-century earlier with 1,600 seats.) The famous chariot-race sequence is still burned into my memory.

These were occasional delights. It wasn't until my later teenage years attending a Catholic boys boarding school, St. Peter's College in Muenster about 15 kilometres from our farm, that my eyes really started to open to the power of the movie screen. The high school was run by the Benedictine abbey which, from the early 1900s, had played an instrumental role in the settlement of the region known as St. Peter's Colony. The priests and monks of the abbey offered a level of education beyond anything I would have had at a local public school.

My English teacher, Fr. James Gray, OSB, imparted a lifelong appreciation for literature and writing. Something similar happened with

then-Brother Bede Hubbard, the college librarian, who was in charge of a “Ciné Club.” That is where and how during the 1968-69 school year I saw *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*, which moved me tremendously and was all I could think about for days after. It ignited a cinematic passion going on 50 years. As noted below, St. Peter’s would also play a key role decades later in encouraging me to write about film.

During university and work years my movie-going habits might best be described as sporadic. It wasn’t only a matter of time and attention. I spent much of 1976-77 in Latin America doing doctoral research. But that included a few memorable movie experiences. In Maceió, Brazil, a priest from the Saskatoon diocese’s Brazil mission, Fr. Don McGillivray, took me to see *Dona Flor e Seus Dois Maridos* (released 1978 in North America as *Dona Flor and Her Two Husbands*), the steamy scenes in which would probably have scandalized prudish Catholics back home, but were no big deal to Fr. Don, accustomed as he was by pastoral experience to Brazilian attitudes and realities. That was a good cultural lesson.

A while later in a Buenos Aires scarred by military dictatorship and a “dirty war” against dissent, I recall going to see *Lenny*, with Dustin Hoffman as the transgressive comedian Lenny Bruce, and *The Outlaw Josey Wales*, starring Clint Eastwood, whose work I would come to greatly admire. Also in the cast of the latter was Sondra Locke, who became Eastwood’s wife. Her first major movie role had been in *The Heart is a Lonely Hunter*.

In 1979-81 I became an assistant to Fr. Bob Ogle, a Catholic parish priest who had served in the Brazil mission and who had just been elected as the member of Parliament for Saskatoon-East. Moving on from that, I joined the Research Branch of the Library of Parliament in November 1981, beginning a 30-year career of non-partisan parliamentary research that included many years as a principal analyst for international affairs.

Although I had left Saskatchewan in 1974, initially to pursue a doctorate in political science at Carleton University, I had remained a faithful reader of the *Prairie Messenger*, the weekly Catholic journal that has been published by St. Peter’s Abbey for over a century. In 1982, the editor, Fr. Andrew Britz, OSB, who had been one of my high

school teachers, approached me about putting some movie reflections on the page.

The first result, which opens this anthology, strikes me as containing commentary that is still pertinent, notwithstanding the changes of the intervening 35 years that have affected how movies are made and consumed. During the 1980s I contributed a number of intermittent pieces in that pre-Internet era, then stopped altogether for over a decade given the demands of my research positions. I've chosen to leap ahead to 1999 when *Prairie Messenger* associate editor Maureen Weber contacted me and convinced me to take up the pen again on the movie scene.

The controversial feature that sparked this return to the *Messenger's* pages was Stanley Kubrick's last directorial effort, *Eyes Wide Shut*. It was the stimulus I needed to make time in a busy schedule to re-engage with the current cinema in a deliberate way.

Even before that, in 1997 and 1998, I had written and shared brief best-of-the-year commentaries that are included in this collection. Moreover, I had always made a note of the titles of movies I saw, and put them in a range of categories from "poor to awful" to "exceptional/classic," which is why I can reliably state that I have now seen more than 12,000 feature films and counting.

For some years after 1999, my contributions were limited, appearing monthly and sometimes more often. Gradually, however, that pace increased in order to be able to provide expanded coverage of the world of film. I had been going to the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF) off and on since 1984, the year I discovered the Coen brothers with their breakout feature, *Blood Simple*. When I started getting professional accreditation to major U.S. film festivals, notably the Sundance Film Festival in Utah, founded by Robert Redford, I was able to see many more films, and a richer international diversity of films, than ever before. Sundance's promotion of edgy, independent cinema and documentary excellence also provided impetus and inspiration to explore cinematic worlds beyond mainstream Hollywood.

That inquiring spirit has been a central motivation as my writings on film became a more regular weekly feature under the heading of "Screenings & Meanings." It can be fun to trash a mediocre or bad

movie playing at the multiplex, and there is generally no shortage from which to choose. But the passing parade of forgettable, meaningless fare doesn't hold my interest. I am always looking for something more than disposable entertainment, something that speaks to the culture of the times, or at least holds the possibility of meaning.

What follows is the first article of reflections on movies as “signs of the times” from 1982, and a selection of columns from 1999-2018. (Additional film references can be found in an appendix, available online, summarizing my annual “best of” columns covering two decades of movie-watching from 1997-2017.)

Included in this selection are columns on some of the movies that have had a profound effect on my ongoing journey through film, notably Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life*, Richard Linklater's *Boyhood*, and Krzysztof Kieślowski's *Dekalog*.

Looking back on decades of movie-watching, it also includes classics like Orson Welles' *Citizen Kane* (1941) and Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo* (1958), both of which have topped international polls of film critics. There are many others to love, such as Michael Curtiz's *Casablanca* (1942), which I enjoyed again in early 2017 on a giant screen at Ottawa's National Arts Centre with its symphony orchestra providing live accompaniment.

These are among screening pleasures too numerous to mention. At the same time some additional film titles stand out about which I have not previously written. Before moving on, here are 20 that have had the greatest impact. Consider the following a prologue to a lifetime of appreciation for the movies and what they mean.