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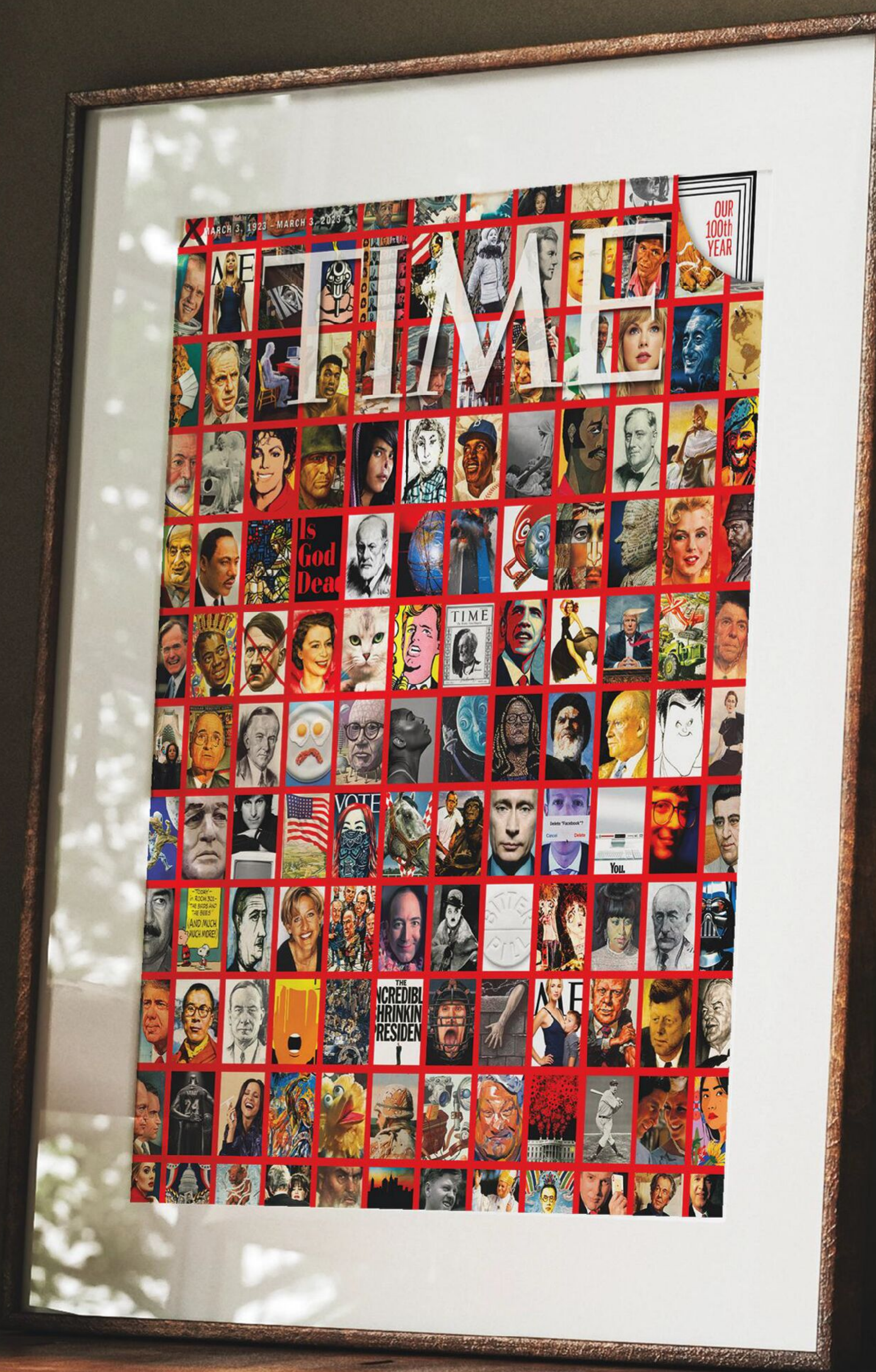
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**FILM CRITIC  
STEPHANIE  
ZACHAREK'S  
ULTIMATE  
LIST**

**MUST-SEE  
MOVIES**





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SPECIAL **TIME** EDITION

# 100 MUST-SEE MOVIES

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# THE BEST MOVIES OF THE PAST 100 YEARS

**I spent over half a century finding what spoke to me.**

**BY STEPHANIE ZACHAREK**



**IF YOU'RE LIKE MOST PEOPLE,** you probably freeze when someone asks you what you think is the best movie of all time. What if you give a confident answer, only to wake up in the middle of the night, certain you should have said something else? And do you choose the movie you love most, or one you know is commonly identified as great? After all, if you go with one of the classic, default choices—*Citizen Kane*, *Casablanca*, *The Godfather*—no one can accuse you of having bad taste, or strange taste. Or the wrong taste.

After compiling and annotating my own list of the best movies of the past century—broken down by decade, 10 films in each—I'm here to reassure you that there's no such thing as the wrong taste. And if there is such a thing as bad or strange taste, then my advice is to own it. No one can dictate

your preferences to you; they're as individual as your fingerprints. Besides, the issue is further complicated by the fact that there are so many barometers of greatness. Is the best movie the one you can watch anytime, the one that always lifts your mood? Is it the one that makes you cry the hardest? Is it the one with the actors you never tire of watching?

Your decisions about what constitutes greatness will be specific to you. In this case, I'm giving you mine. The internet is full of polls that have divined, by soliciting votes from film critics and filmmakers, what are ostensibly the greatest movies of all time. This list isn't the result of a poll. Aside from the question of whether we really need yet another film survey, there's a way in which choosing by committee irons the idea of loving movies into a smooth, flat sheet, as if the right amount of number crunching will yield the answer. But as with all individuals, our sensibilities are much more nuanced; there is no such thing as an objective truth when it comes to art. Our movie tastes are determined by some indefinable electrical current of enthusiasm or joy or deep, radiating sadness, or some combination of the three. In that sense, our favorite movies aren't about taste at all, but simply

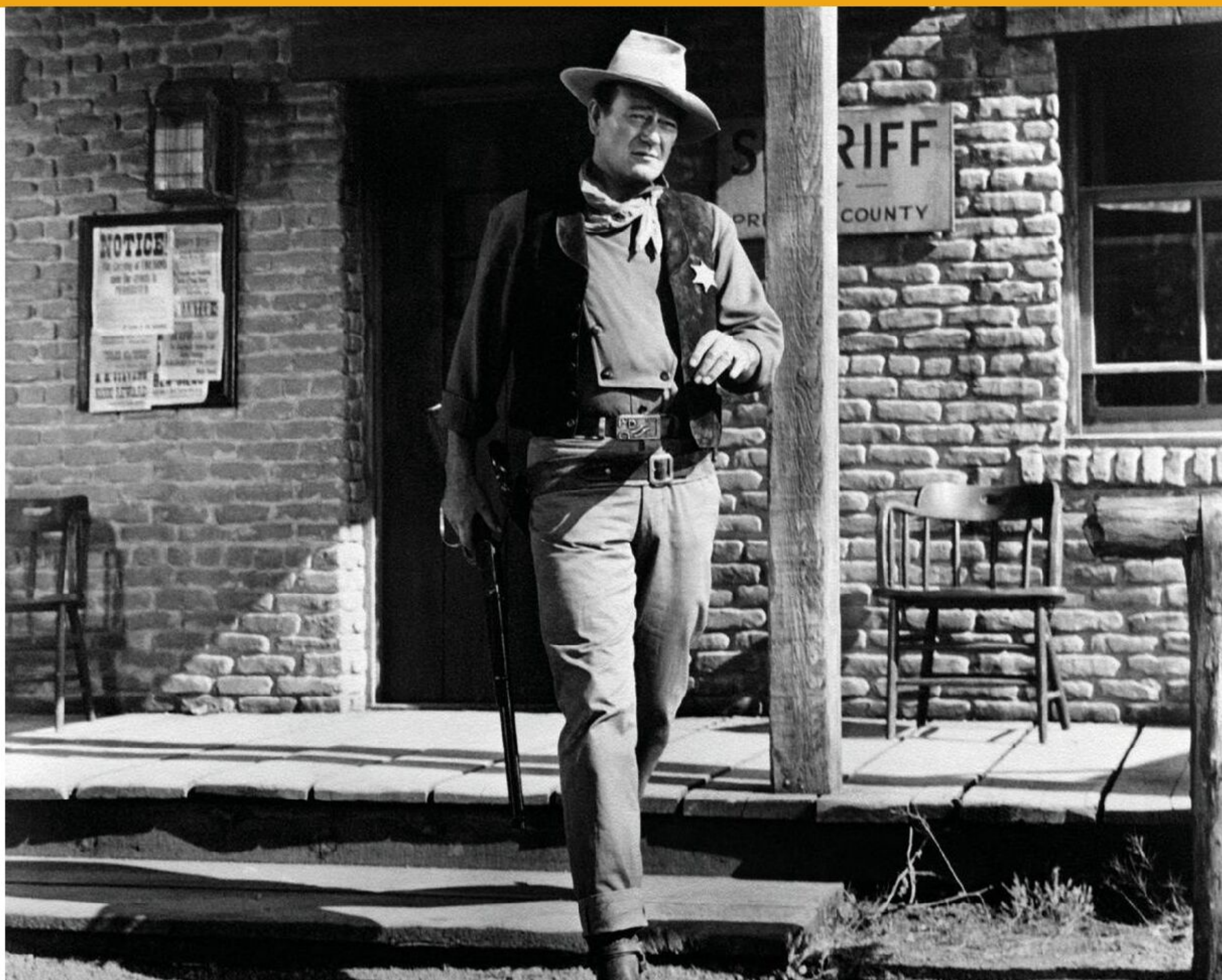
about listening to what really speaks to us.

So how did I choose these 100 films? I've spent more than 50 years choosing. These are movies that entwine craftsmanship and spirit. They often feature striking performances. For whatever reason, they touch me deeply.

And all speak, in some way, about the era in which they were made; they're place markers for the things we've seen and the places we've been and the experiences of our forebears—or, more accurately, some of our forebears. The unfortunate truth is that through most of the 20th century, the world of filmmaking belonged to white men, at least behind the camera. (Women flexed their power with great performances, many of which are reflected in this list.) There were certainly women filmmakers working in the early part of the century—Alice Guy-Blaché, Dorothy Arzner, Ida Lupino—but until the 1960s and 1970s, at least, the barriers to entry were high. The same is true for filmmakers of color, particularly in the U.S. Through much of the 20th century, it was easier for Black artists to make their mark in music, literature, and painting than in movies. There are exceptions: there was







► **Top left:** Mark Hamill and Kenny Baker in *The Empire Strikes Back* (1982), p. 58. ► **Top right:** John Wayne on the set of *Rio Bravo* (1959), p. 41. ► **Above:** Robert De Niro in *Taxi Driver* (1976), p. 56.

a flowering of so-called race films in the early part of the century, films made specifically for Black American audiences. The novelist and filmmaker Oscar Micheaux was an early, successful pioneer, but it would be decades before filmmakers like Charles Burnett, Melvin Van Peebles and Julie Dash would find a footing. In that sense, one component of the past 100 years of cinema is a blank space filled with unrealized possibilities. American history is filled with such blank spaces, and they say a lot about us.

Another note about this list: It's marked by what some will see as glaring omissions, including many of those default classics. There's no *Citizen Kane*, no *Casablanca*, no *Wizard of Oz*, no *Goodfellas*. It's not that I dislike those films. But sometimes the filmmakers behind those pictures have made other movies I love more: I'm thinking of Orson Welles' *The Magnificent Ambersons*, or Michael Curtiz's *Mildred Pierce*, great movies that deserve some space in the spotlight.

Because this list is broken down by decade, certain patterns emerged, motifs that couldn't help influencing my choices. For example, any list of great movies might contain a few films each by Howard Hawks and Alfred Hitchcock, lumped in with all the

rest. But scrutinizing each decade also means recontextualizing the filmmakers with the longest careers: The same man who made *Scarface* in the 1930s had something totally different to say in the late 1950s, with *Rio Bravo*. And some decades filled up astonishingly quickly: The 1950s, in particular, left many favorites on the cutting-room floor. It's almost incomprehensible to me that *All About Eve*, *Tokyo Story*, *Sunset Boulevard*, *Gun Crazy* and *The Breaking Point* are not on this list, but triage was necessary. The days I had to cut films like *Alien*, *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, *Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World*, *Cold War* and John Guillermin's 1976 *King Kong* (which I prefer to the original) weren't happy ones.

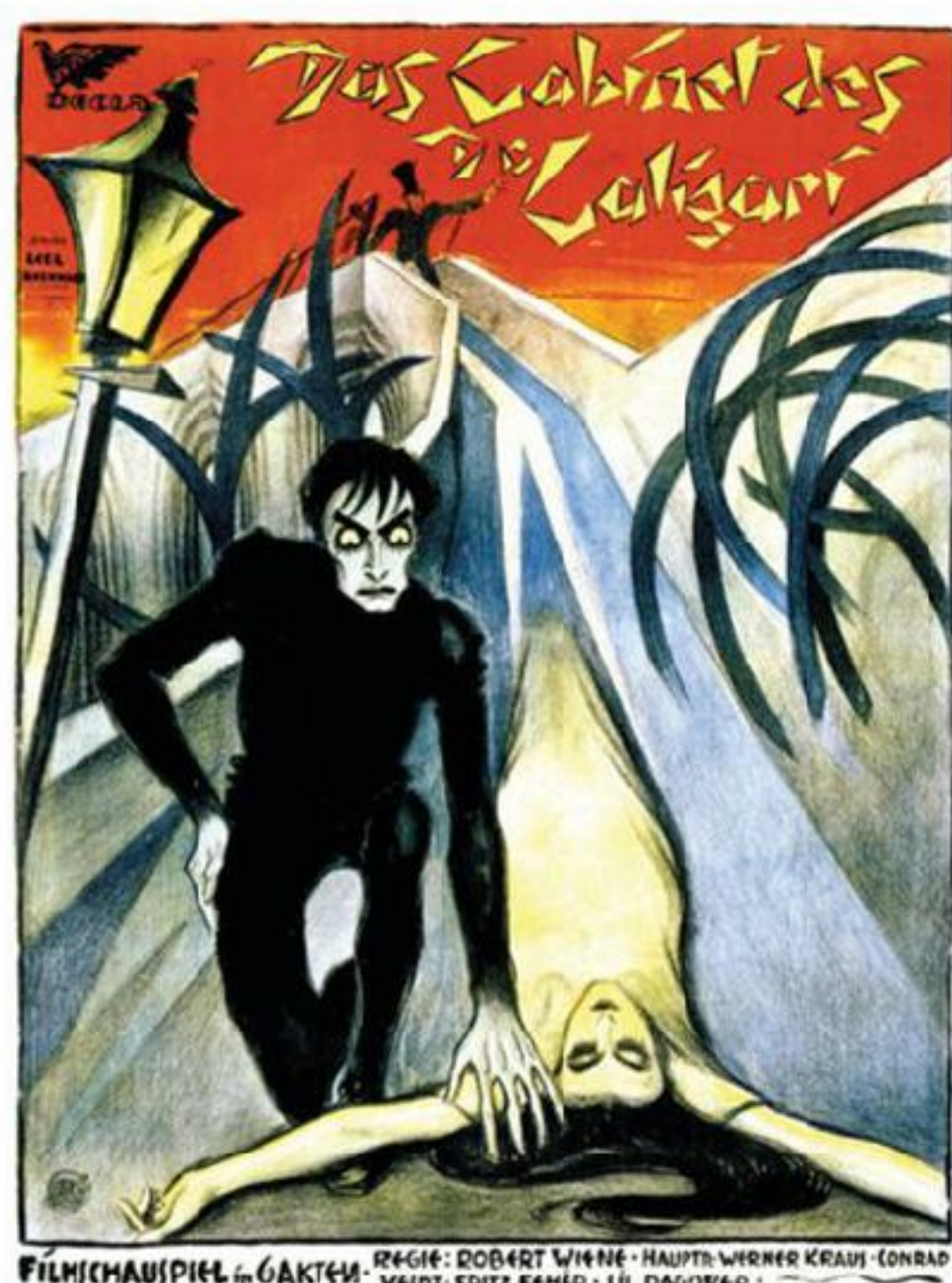
On the plus side, this list includes more comedies than most poll-derived lists do. Comedies are often the also-rans; everyone wants to be taken seriously, and comedies—even the greatest of them, by the likes of Hawks, Preston Sturges, or Billy Wilder—are frequently treated as a frivolity. But they often reveal even more of a soul than so-called serious movies do—if movies can be said to have souls, and I think they can. That's why our love for them stretches so wide and deep that no single list, whether made by an individual or a group of experts, can contain it. Rather than appease some invisible god of movie objectivity, I'm hoping this list will foster a sense of discovery, adventure and imagination. Idiosyncrasies are a huge part of what makes us fall in love with other human beings. They're the heart of movie love too—the wrong taste that's totally right.

**Stephanie Zacharek** is the film critic at *TIME*. She is the recipient of a *Newswomen's Club* of New York award and was a 2015 Pulitzer Prize finalist.



# THE CABINET OF DR. CALIGARI

1920



IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE job of movies to mess with our heads, which you know if you've ever seen Robert Wiene's nerve-jangling work of mad genius *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*, now more than 100 years old and as chilling as ever. The unhinged hypnotist Caligari (Werner Krauss) keeps, like a pet, a 23-year-old sleepwalker whom he calls Cesare the Somnambulist (Conrad Veidt). Caligari has put Cesare to work as a

sideshow attraction, parading him before audiences as a curiosity. But Caligari also uses this zombie servant to do his murderous bidding. In a shivery, archetypically psychosexual tableau, Cesare, with his zinc-white pallor, his eyes blank and tragic, enters the gauze-shrouded bedroom of a sleeping woman and startles her awake with the aim of killing her. Stunned by her beauty, he loses his nerve and, despite her cries of terror, carries her off, her white nightgown trailing in the stark moonlight. Wiene's film, with its highly stylized painted-fabric backdrops and its angular, perspective-twisting sets, is a German Expressionist extravaganza, a shout of modernity, beckoning us into its mirror world of fractured visual poetry. Remain only as long as you dare.

► **Above:** Werner Krauss in *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.  
 ► **Right:** Evelyn Preer in a scene from *Within Our Gates*.



## WITHIN OUR GATES

1920

**THE STORY OF WRITER,** producer, and director Oscar Micheaux is that of a ghost industry that might have been—in other words, an American film industry with plenty of latitude, opportunity and breathing space for filmmakers who weren't white. From the teens to the early 1950s, there was a small but thriving industry of films made primarily for Black audiences, commonly called race films. Micheaux was one of the genre's most significant figures, and *Within Our Gates* stands both as a model of American film

melodrama and an expression of the mores and attitudes in its day, in terms of how Black Americans saw themselves—as opposed to how they were seen by whites at the time. Sylvia Landry (Evelyn Preer) is a young woman from the South visiting her Northern cousin, Alma (Flo Clements), who also, as it turns out, is secretly in love with Sylvia's fiancé. That personal drama becomes entwined with a greater one: After Alma engineers the dissolution of Sylvia's engagement, Sylvia returns to the South and becomes deeply involved with a school

striving to provide an education for underserved Black children. Her efforts to raise money for the beleaguered school—and her own complex backstory—form a kind of archway for Micheaux to discuss significant social events of the day, including the Great Migration and the murderous persistence of the Ku Klux Klan. Micheaux's sturdy throughline is that education would cut a path forward for Black Americans. To watch *Within Our Gates* today is to see how far we haven't come, and to mourn the country we are still waiting to become.



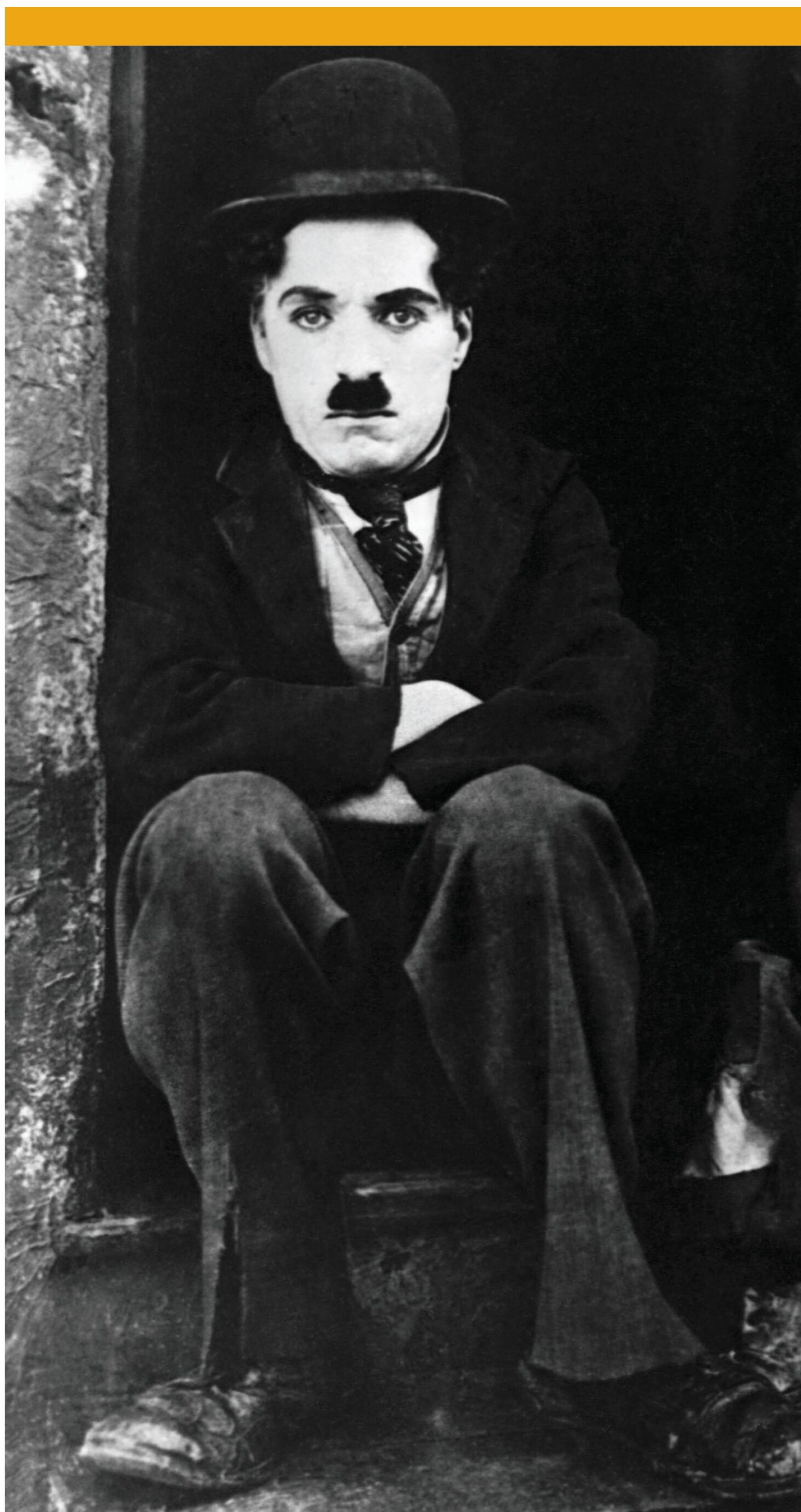


# THE KID

1921

## THOUGH IT SOMETIMES SEEMS

there's an invisible force in the universe decreeing that we must all love Charlie Chaplin, complicated feelings are allowed. As the great critic Robert Warshow has said: If Chaplin's insistent, naked message is "love me," we're also entitled to ask if he loves us back, and the answer may not be what we want to hear. "He does not love us; and maybe he doesn't love anything," Warshow writes. "Even in his most genial moments we get now and then a glimpse of how cold a heart has gone into his great blaze." But even among those of us who don't worship at the altar of Chaplin, his first full-length film as a director, *The Kid*, is a close to perfect picture in both its inventiveness and its warmth. The character Chaplin is most closely associated with, the Tramp, with his brushy mustache and battered bowler, finds an abandoned infant on the street and reluctantly takes him home. The baby grows into a child, Jackie Coogan, in a performance so beseeching and guileless that it seems he's opening a world to us, rather than striving to make us feel. These two are both a family and a team, held close by genuine joy in one another's company, even if they're living off pennies. When they're torn apart, it's wrenching; when they're reunited, it restores our faith in the order of the universe. Even by this point, Chaplin had invested a great deal in the on-screen persona he'd created in the previous decade. But his genius was still translucent; he hadn't yet locked us down with a loyalty clause. It's easiest to love him here, in *The Kid*, and to feel we're getting something like love in return.





► Charlie Chaplin and Jackie Coogan in a scene from *The Kid*. ► **Right:** Lillian Gish and Dorothy Gish in *Orphans of the Storm*.



1920s

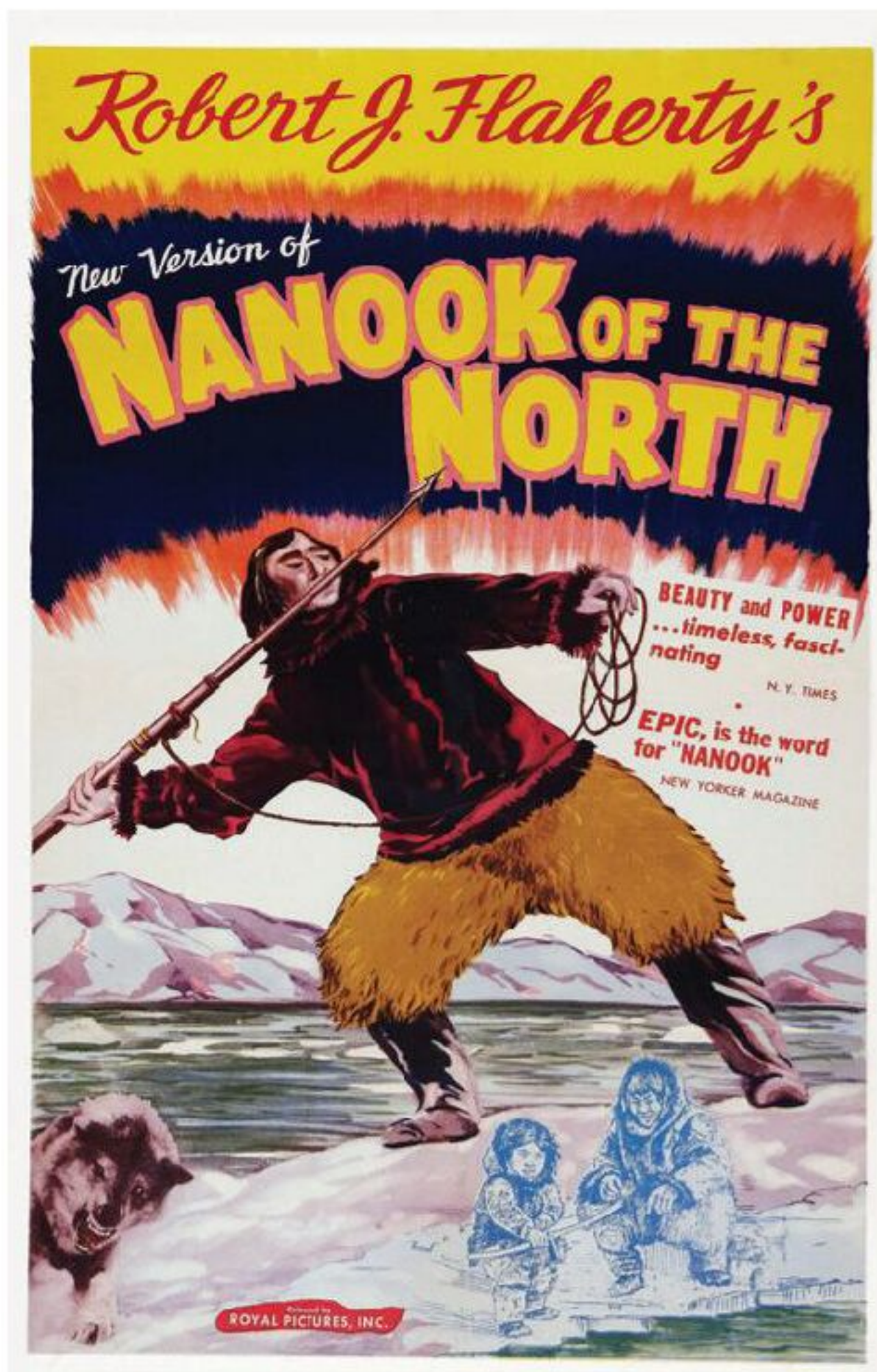
## ORPHANS OF THE STORM

1921

**D.W. GRIFFITH WAS A RACIST, AND** his most famous and infamous film, the 1915 *Birth of a Nation*, is filled with made-up events and setups that glorified the Ku Klux Klan and white supremacy in general. It's also an astonishingly effective and affecting piece of filmmaking, revolutionary in its complex staging, in the way it propelled cinema toward greater realism, in its use of techniques like the close-up and the fade-in (which Griffith didn't necessarily invent but used brilliantly). Isn't it better to be realistic about the truth that filmmaking's power can be marshaled for causes other than noble ones? By 1921, Griffith's star had begun its descent, as other filmmakers—many of whom he'd influenced—raced faster into the modern world. But *Orphans of the Storm*, once you get past its wacky, sentimental patriotism, may be his last gasp of greatness, showing the delicacy of feeling he could bring to even the most extreme melodrama. Sisters Lillian and Dorothy Gish play Henriette and Louise, young

women raised together in late 18th century France as revolution brews. Louise is the daughter of a noblewoman, left as an infant on the steps of a church on a cold winter day. An impoverished local, having mournfully decided to drop his own offspring there, thinks better of it and takes both babies home with him. The girls grow up; their loving parents die; Louise is blinded by the plague. Henriette brings her to Paris, hoping for a treatment that will restore her sight. All of this happens—coincidentally—just as Robespierre and Danton are changing the face of France. It's easy enough to get swept up in the film's crazy, epic rush, but the Gishes are the main attraction, reaching toward one another in the midst of an anguishing separation, or embracing after finding one another again. Lillian, especially, even with her gently fluttering eyelids, her delicate rosebud mouth, is a defiantly resolute presence. You wouldn't want to mess with her. She outlived silents for a reason.





## NANOOK OF THE NORTH

1922

**IS ROBERT FLAHERTY'S** celebrated picture a 100% unstaged and fully accurate picture of how members of the Inuit population of the Canadian Arctic lived in the early 1920s? Of course not. At the time of its release, audiences may have taken it as a kind of cinema verité, a concept that at the time did not yet have a name—in fact, the filmmaking techniques necessary to achieve it hadn't even been developed. But *Nanook of the North* represents another kind of filmic truth: an artist and explorer's desire to understand a way of life among a specific group of people and to capture some version of that reality for a greater audience. In that sense, *Nanook of the North* stands as a work of enduring beauty. Photographer and explorer Flaherty spent 16 months living with an Inuit named Allakariallak, called Nanook in the

film, and two women who were presented as his wives, though in real life they were not. (At least one of them, called Nyla in the film, may have been Flaherty's common-law wife.) These people are both Flaherty's protagonists and friends, and he enlisted them to re-enact traditional—but at that time declining, or nearly altogether lost—modes of life, including the building of an igloo from blocks of snow and the hunting of walrus with spears. In reality, guns were already in common use for hunting, but it's possible that Allakariallak was himself hoping to preserve, if only via Flaherty's camera, ways of life that were already fading in his world. In any case, Flaherty's film is luminous, haunting and joyful all at once—not a documentary, strictly speaking, but a document of one man's attempts to see, and to help others do so as well.

▶ Douglas Fairbanks in *The Thief of Bagdad*.





# THE THIEF OF BAGDAD

1924

OF ALL THE SWASHBUCKLERS FEATURING THE SWINGING KING OF THE SILENTS, DOUGLAS FAIRBANKS, none is more fanciful and dreamlike than *The Thief of Bagdad*. In this *One Thousand and One Nights*-inspired escapade, the suave, wiry Fairbanks is Ahmed, a devil-may-care thief who delights in stealing whatever he wishes, wheeling through the city in a pair of billowing chiffon pants, heedless of the laws of God or man or anyone who insists men shouldn't wear printed silk. While the upstanding citizens of the city are distracted by their daily prayers, he steals a magic rope, a whatnot with a thousand and one nefarious uses. But his plans swerve when he falls in love with a stunningly beautiful princess (Julanne Johnston): He must win her love, even if that means outwitting her watchful servant (played by a very young Anna May Wong). *The Thief of Bagdad*, director Raoul Walsh's breakthrough film, cost roughly \$1.14 million, a small fortune at the time, and took 65 weeks to make. Audiences adored it, and even today, it's easy to see why. (Fairbanks and some of the other actors wore brown makeup in their roles, not uncommon at the time, as unacceptable as it would be today.) The special effects may be technically primitive by today's standards, but that doesn't diminish their enchantment. In the final sequence, Fairbanks' Ahmed whisks his beloved through the sky on a flying carpet, his arms crossed jauntily, as the stars reassemble themselves to spell out a final message: "Happiness must be earned." Sometimes, though, it arrives in the form of a somersault, a mischievous silent cackle, or a silky little rug soaring on an air current, defying science in the name of delight.





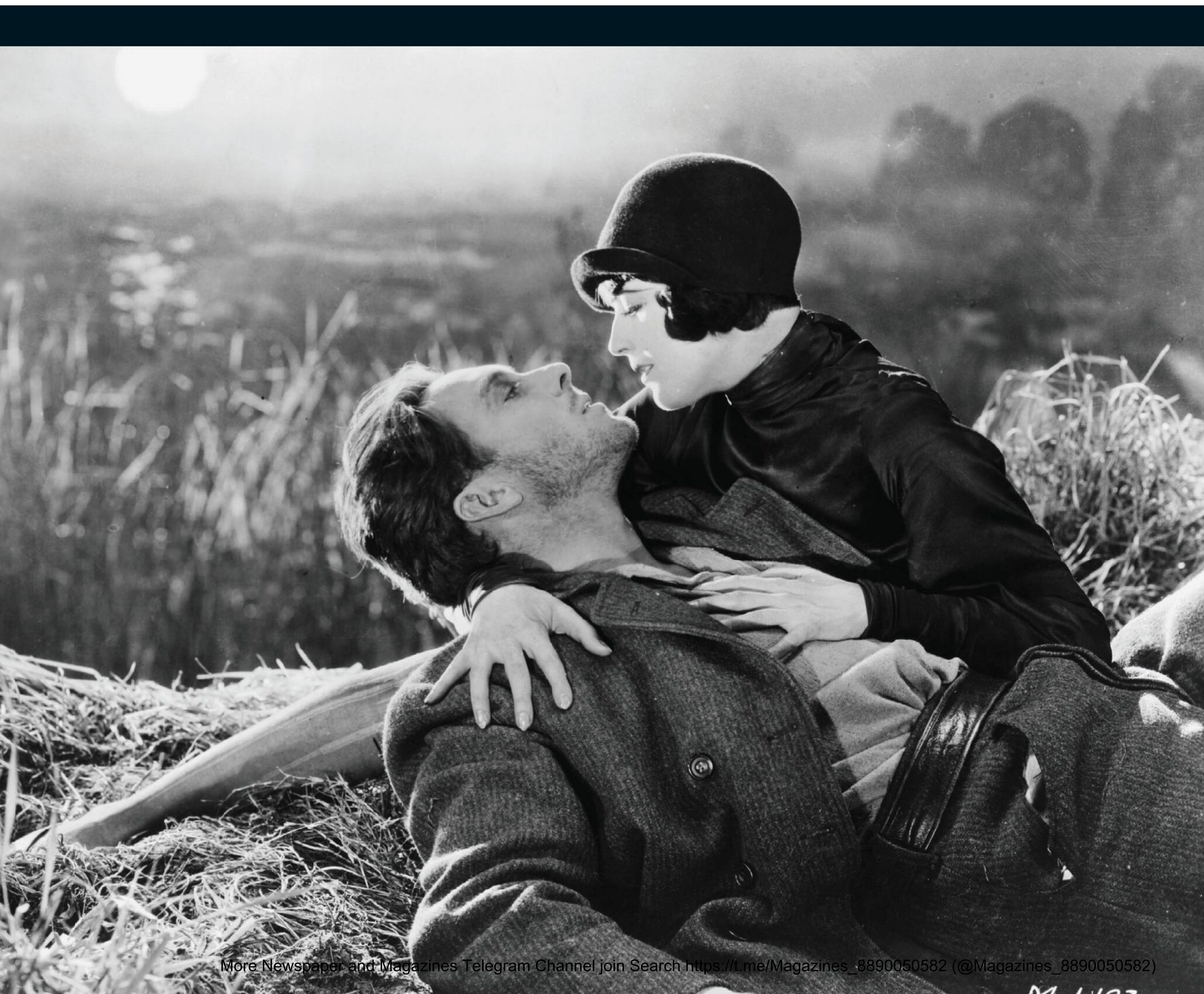
# SUNRISE: A SONG OF TWO HUMANS

1927

**THE DIRECTOR OF THE** gorgeously stylized 1922 horror film *Nosferatu*, F.W. Murnau was already considered a master of German Expressionism when he emigrated to Hollywood in 1926. The first film he made there, *Sunrise: A Song of Two Humans*, was also one of the first films to feature a synchronized score and sound effects, pointing the way to the future of talkies. But *Sunrise* seems to exist in a world without time. It's a close to perfect story, universal in its painful, iridescent truth: that even when two people truly love each other, the human

desire for novelty can exert a dangerous pull. George O'Brien is the character known only as the Man, a country farmer who was happy with his life until he fell under the sway of the Woman from the City (Margaret Livingston), a manipulative flapper. Janet Gaynor, in a performance of exquisite porcelain dignity, is the Wife, quietly distraught as she sees her husband drifting away from her. One day she gets a glimmer of hope—he's invited her for a day in the city—and she puts on her best dress, not knowing his plan is a murderous

one. Yet the story shifts again, illuminating the way people who have been together for a long time can rediscover one another, in this case bolstered by the energy and spirit of the city. *Sunrise* is both joyous and piercing, and gorgeously filmed: Murnau's sense of invention was outshone only by his deep, radiant affection for his troubled characters. In the years following, silent pictures would be left behind forever, like a lost, shimmering shore. *Sunrise* is a final echo from that rapturous island, a reminder of all that can be said without uttering a word.





## STEAMBOAT BILL, JR.

1928

**IN THE LAST OF BUSTER KEATON'S** independently made features, *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*, co-directed with Charles Reisner, Keaton plays recent college grad William Canfield Jr., who reconnects with the father he hasn't seen since he was a baby, a crabby steamboat operator (Ernest Torrence) who wants nothing to do with him. Keaton's William spends the movie alternately defying and trying to win over his father, and ultimately saving him from a deadly storm. (That's when he also wins his pixiesh lady love, Kitty, played by 16-year-old Marion Byron.) Keaton's stunts here—including the collapsing house, the most elaborate version of a feat he'd pulled off in earlier movies like *One Week*—are both astonishing and astonishingly dangerous. Yet there's so much deadpan joy in them, as if this generally unhappy and somewhat unlucky man had poured his very soul into the physical and mental discipline required to pull them off. His movements are economical and precise, though they appear unstudied. But it's his inherently serene face that gets you. It's not the face of a man who can't believe what's happening to him, but that of a man who saw it coming all along. It's a face that will always feel modern.

► **Left:** George O'Brien and Margaret Livingston in a scene from *Sunrise*. ► **Right:** Buster Keaton in *Steamboat Bill, Jr.*







## THE PASSION OF JOAN OF ARC

1928

### A FACE CAN MAKE A MOVIE.

We're used to that idea today, though it's hard to comprehend that the mere notion of the movie close-up—anecdotally, at least, popularized by D.W. Griffith—was still relatively young when Danish filmmaker Carl Theodor Dreyer embarked on his film version of the story of Joan of Arc. Broken down into its basic filmmaking components, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* is a brazen, experimental work, a symphony of sharp angles and austere expressive lighting. But once you've seen this film, the face of its star, Renée-Jeanne Falconetti, sometimes known also as Maria Falconetti, becomes its most haunting element. As the doomed 15th century political prisoner, tortured and taunted for adhering to her faith, Falconetti holds the film around her in something close to a state of suspended animation. Her suffering, captured in the unwavering gaze of Dreyer's camera, is less beatific than intimately human. Falconetti's face, lunar in its radiant complexity, holds multiple truths at once—there's anguish in her eyes but peace in her soul. Impossible to watch casually, *The Passion of Joan of Arc* is a film that melts the space between decades, and centuries.



## PANDORA'S BOX

1929

### THERE ARE FEW TRAGIC

heroines more alluring than Lulu, the heartbeat of Georg Wilhelm Pabst's *Pandora's Box*, brought to life by a performer whose image—the winsome, mischievous eyes, the glossy, art-deco bob—remains a symbol of sexual charisma and freedom. Louise Brooks' Lulu is both a wily opportunist and a sympathetic survivor. She's the kept woman of a powerful newspaper publisher (played by German stage actor Fritz Kortner, who's said to have despised Brooks, stomping off the set the instant he'd finished a scene with her), and when her position is threatened by his bland blonde fiancée, she summons infinite reserves of petulance to get him to marry her instead. She'll be the death of him, he knows, but her ill-advised marriage is

also the beginning of her own fatal spiral: The picture's ending quietly knocks the wind out of you, because over the course of the movie's runtime, a world without Brooks' Lulu comes to seem unimaginable. *Pandora's Box* was based on a duo of plays by German playwright Frank Wedekind, and upon its release, critics in Berlin and elsewhere reviled Pabst's adaptation, and Brooks' performance in particular. The consensus at the time was that she couldn't act. She certainly could, though what she brings to *Pandora's Box* goes far beyond technique. To watch her today is to become her prisoner all over again. She's as dismissible as a moonbeam.

► **Above:** Louise Brooks and Fritz Kortner in *Pandora's Box*.



# I AM A FUGITIVE FROM A CHAIN GANG

1932

**IN THE 1930S, WARNER BROS.** was the scrappiest studio, specializing in jagged gangster films (*Scarface*, *The Public Enemy*) and escapist musicals with a social conscience (*42nd Street*, *Gold Diggers of 1933*) alike. It was a studio deeply in tune with a country in the dumps, and one of its signature pictures was the muckraking social-issues drama *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*, made by the prolific journeyman director Mervyn LeRoy. Paul Muni, one of the decade's most respected and sought-after stars, is James Allen, a World War I veteran who, having gained engineering experience in the

service, returns home hoping to launch a career in construction. But he hits the skids after being laid off from one job after another, through no fault of his own. And his luck takes an even more drastic nosedive when, after becoming an unwilling accomplice in a violent crime, he's sentenced to several years of hard labor in a camp located in an unnamed Southern state, though we can be pretty sure it's Georgia. The camp conditions are brutal, as they were at the time in real life. With the help of a fellow inmate (Edward Ellis' Bomber, a feisty agitator who's earned his nickname) Allen escapes and, after years

of determination and study, builds a solid engineering career for himself, becoming a model citizen—until the long arm of the law snatches him back. *I Am a Fugitive* was based on a true story, and one of the chain-gang wardens depicted in the film, J. Harold Hardy, took the movie so seriously he sued the studio for a million dollars. Its impact endures: *I Am a Fugitive* features one of the bleakest endings of its era, one that hasn't lost its ominous power.

► **Below:** Prisoners shackled together in a scene from *I Am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang*.







## SCARFACE

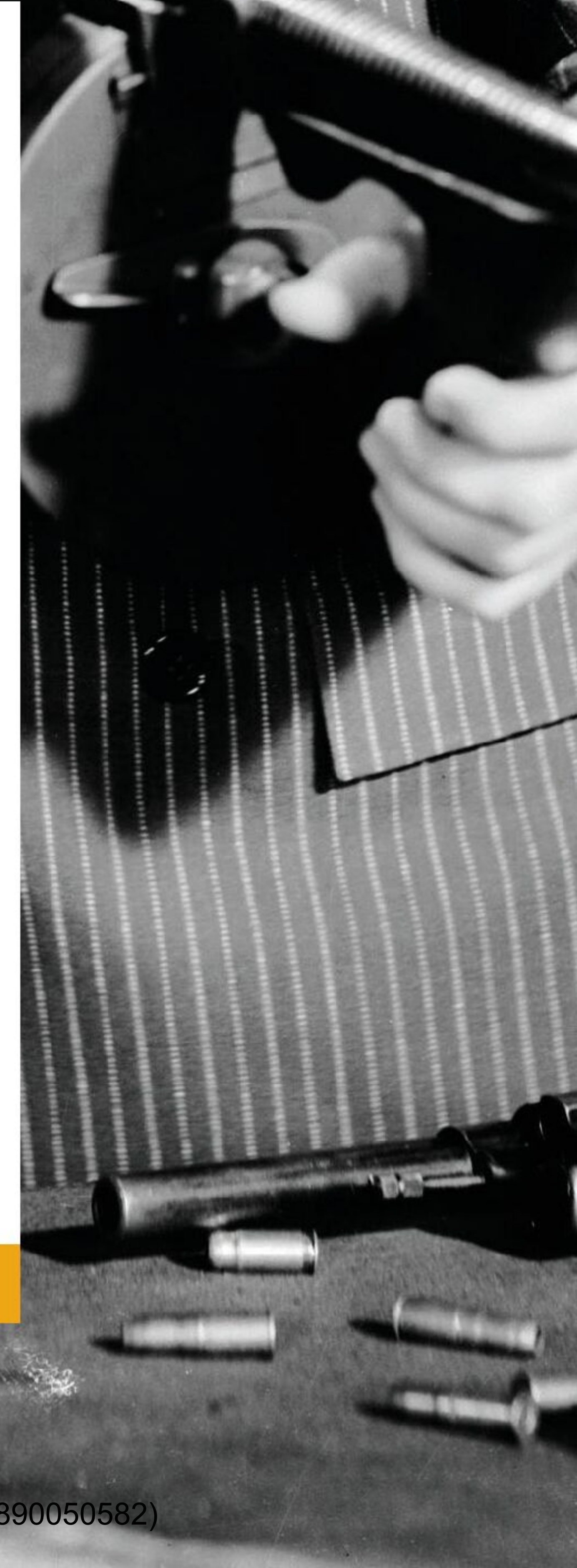
1932

**THE TRUE HORROR OF HOWARD** Hawks' grimly satisfying pre-code gangster elegy *Scarface* is that you find yourself falling in love, at least a little, with the scrappy, heartless thug at its center: Paul Muni's Tony is a rising star in the Chicago mob, swaggering his way toward total control of the city. He has a suave right-hand man who'll do anything for him, George Raft's laconic Rinaldo, and a sister he adores, Ann Dvorak's Cesca, though he's possessive of her in a darkly unhealthy way. Tony has no morals and no manners, but

there's also something naively cheerful about him. When Rinaldo hands him his first tommy gun, his delight hits like a flare. "Look," he says, "you can carry it around like a baby!"—he's awful and bitterly funny at once. But Tony is no good—the film is set up to make sure we know it's really a serious social-issues picture, standing firmly against the horror of lawless gangsters. As a director, among the greatest of them all, Hawks walks the razor's edge between playing on Tony's raffish, murderous

appeal and keeping sight of the reality that ultimately, law and order must win the day. The movie's ending is as cold as a frozen cadaver, and aptly so. But something goes out of you when Tony loses the fight; you feel a little complicit in both his crimes and his downfall. And that's how Hawks gets you, leading you to a place of regret and sympathy you couldn't have imagined when the movie started.

► **Above:** Vince Barnett, Paul Muni and Karen Morley in *Scarface*.







## L'ATALANTE

1934

**MARRIAGE CAN BE THE MOST** romantic thing in the world, until reality hits: Is it even possible to mesh two lives? At the beginning of Jean Vigo's *L'Atalante*, one of the most poetic movies about romantic partnership ever made, a young bargemaster, Jean (Jean Dasté) takes a radiant country girl, Juliette (Dita Parlo), as his bride. The two will begin their life together on the barge, gliding along in the water in an idyll of lovemaking. But it doesn't turn out quite that way: There's friction when Jean becomes jealous of Juliette's burgeoning friendship with his outlandishly tattooed, grunting first mate, Old Jules (Michel Simon). Jean has promised Juliette he'll take her to Paris when the barge docks there, but Jules and the cabin boy slip off first, and Jean can't leave

the boat unattended. Juliette, longing to see the city, sneaks away by herself, intending to return before the barge pushes off. But in a huff, Jean leaves her behind. What follows is a story of a marriage off to a bumpy start, but not a hopeless one. It's a movie about human mistakes, though Vigo—who died of tuberculosis at age 29, shortly after the film's premiere—addresses these foibles with infinite tenderness. When Jean realizes how much he misses his young wife, he plunges from his barge into the water and sees her as an undersea vision, dancing in her wedding dress, a promise of love that he himself has pushed away. The movie ends, as it must, with reconciliation. Anything less would be too much for us to bear.



# THE 39 STEPS

1935

**EVEN THOUGH SO MANY OF HIS** films are mischievously funny, we don't commonly think of Alfred Hitchcock as a filmmaker of wit and levity. In *The 39 Steps*—among the films Hitchcock made in England before coming to the United States to become enormously famous—Robert Donat plays Hannay, a debonair yet average Canadian in London who, as the result of information he gleans from a chance encounter, treks to the Scottish moors to prevent a spy from spiriting top-secret information out of the country. Hannay's story, as Hitchcock unfurls it, goes like this: Within the span of a few days, a mysterious and alluring secret agent is murdered in his flat; he hops a train only to be forced to literally hop off; a group of sneaky baddies posing as police apprehend him and whisk him away for nefarious purposes; he's handcuffed to a beautiful young woman who wants

nothing to do with him (she's played by moonlit-blond Madeleine Carroll); and he solves a mystery whose biggest clue was standing right before him in the first scene. Somewhere in there, a flock of sheep assemble haphazardly into a country traffic jam, and a love-starved wife in the Scottish countryside gets a vision of all she's missing when she gazes into Hannay's eyes. (She's played by the young Peggy Ashcroft.) One event follows another in a seamless chain, Hitchcock linking them into a supple whole, focusing on what matters without bothering to address extraneous details. The result is an elegant, saucy delight, in which an on-the-rise filmmaker, already in command of his powers, shows off his best dance steps with a flourish.

► **Below:** Robert Donat and Madeleine Carroll in a scene from *The 39 Steps*.

► Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dance in *Top Hat*.







## TOP HAT

1935

### CHOOSING THE BEST FRED

Astaire and Ginger Rogers musical is a task no one should take lightly. But for the crazy exuberance of its sets, for its fantastic trio of second bananas (Eric Blore as an all-seeing gentleman's gentleman, Edward Everett Horton as an innocently flirtatious society rake, and Erik Rhodes as a preening Euro-suitor), and most of all for the exquisite "Cheek to Cheek" dance number, let's go with Mark Sandrich's *Top Hat*. The plot is your standard mistaken-identity loop-de-loop. But to watch the slow-burning romance between Astaire's eternal playboy Jerry Travers and Rogers' no-nonsense charmer Dale Tremont is bliss: You almost don't want them to get together so their

fox-trotting courtship can go on forever. When Astaire looks at her, sings to her, he somehow appears both sick with love and seductively self-confident; Rogers, as the one who must be won over, is so against being pursued that when she melts, she melts us too.

The seduction happens in a delightfully ultra-fake version of Venice, a pristine sound-stage reverie of candy-white art-deco bridges, gliding gondolas, and curving terraces that wouldn't be out of place atop a wedding cake—the great dance critic Arlene Croce called the setting "a kind of celestial powder room." As Astaire and Rogers whirl on that phony Venetian dance floor—Jerry has just told Dale, in the most convincing terms possible, that he's in

heaven when she's around, a feeling he barely has the words to express—they play out a romance of resistance and surrender that exists not just in Depression-era Hollywood but also outside of time. Even just to summon this number in memory, let alone watch it, is to open a floodgate of wistfulness. The lore has it that the ostrich-feather gown Rogers wore for this number annoyed Astaire—wisps of it kept flying off; its fluffiness ruined the clean lines of the dance. But those airborne feathers now read like a whisper from the past. A faulty dress is sometimes exactly the right dress, quivering with every movement, an approximation of what it's like to anticipate a new lover's touch.





## MY MAN GODFREY

1936

**THE COMEDIES OF THE 1930S** held people together in the darkest of days. But as we watch them today, what's even more remarkable is how so many of them seem to be driven by a mysterious bristling energy, a force born, maybe, of a devotion to craftsmanship and a desire to delight. In Gregory La Cava's *My Man Godfrey*, one of the greatest romantic comedies in a decade full of terrific ones, Carole Lombard plays ditzy heiress Irene, who makes a down-on-his-luck "forgotten man," William Powell's Godfrey, an unwilling participant in a party game. She takes a liking to him and wrangles a job for him as her family's butler. Then she falls

in love with him—because who wouldn't? Powell, among the slyest and most debonair comic actors of his generation, was a perfect match for Lombard, with her boomerang-on-a-zephyr timing. The two, in fact, had been previously married, though they'd divorced by the time *My Man Godfrey* was being cast. Powell wouldn't accept the role unless Lombard starred opposite him, and the fun they had together onscreen is proof that friendship can outlive a marriage—and it's also one of the reasons this film feels as effervescently fresh on the 10th viewing as it does on the first.

► **Above:** Carole Lombard and William Powell in *My Man Godfrey*. ► **Right:** Katharine Hepburn and Cary Grant on the set of *Holiday*.



## HOLIDAY

1938



**ROMANTIC COMEDIES ARE** designed to make us feel great. But sometimes, even as we're wrapped in that cottony cloud of pleasure, we can't help feeling just a wisp of melancholy. George

Cukor's blissful, wistful romantic comedy, adapted from a 1928 play by high-society playwright Philip Barry, echoes some of the biggest questions we ever ask ourselves as we make our way in the world: What do we want out of life? And who do we want around while we do it? Cary Grant is Johnny Case, a freewheeling sort who almost literally tumbles his way through his days. His plan is to retire young and have fun, and he thinks he's in love with frosty heiress Julia Seton (Doris Nolan), a woman he barely knows and who he believes shares his values. But it turns out that Julia's sister Linda (Katharine Hepburn) is his truest match. She's not only stifled by the upper-crust life, she's nearly broken by it, and Johnny represents a future of adventure she doesn't dare hope for. Hepburn's crisp, confident

diction, the vocal equivalent of a long, arm-swinging stride, is one of her greatest trademarks. But even greater is her gift for expressing vulnerability, as she does in one of this movie's pivotal sequences, a moment in which we see the flood of longing and confusion rushing beneath the surface of Linda's professed confidence. In one of the greatest leap-of-faith metaphors ever put on film, Johnny and Linda—in full New Year's Eve formal garb—execute a dual gymnastic flip, tipping over a couch in the process and landing side-by-side with a graceful flourish. It's in this moment that we, and they, know they're perfect for one another, and their hard-won happily-ever-after is the privilege of stepping out together into an uncertain world.





# STAGECOACH

1939

**JOHN WAYNE HAD APPEARED IN** some 80 movies, sometimes in uncredited roles, by the time he showed up as the Ringo Kid in John Ford's majestically modest western *Stagecoach*. It was the role that made him a star, and it's easy to see why: He moves with the easy, lanky grace of a lynx, and phrases his lines with the same languorous poise. In *Stagecoach*, a group of seven mismatched passengers, the Ringo Kid among them, rumble unsteadily through hostile Apache territory, all aware they may not reach their destination alive. There are two ladies aboard, Louise Platt's prim, pregnant army wife Lucy Mallory, and Claire Trevor's pensive, wary Dallas, a woman of ill repute. Several of the passengers—like John Carradine's Hatfield, a professional gambler and a gentleman only in the self-proclaimed sense—look upon Dallas with disdain, but Ringo sees her as a social equal, fostering a mini-model of democracy within the confines of this little coach. Wayne doesn't always get credit for being a subtle actor, but in *Stagecoach*, he imparts a whole code of decency with the merest glance, and charmingly so. Ford had made his first films in the silent era; by the time of *Stagecoach*, he'd been working in Hollywood for more than 20 years. This gorgeous and vivid western, one in which each character is sharply drawn, is the work of a director who knew just how to get what he wanted—and to anticipate so many of the things we as viewers want, too, before we've even had a chance to dream of them.





► Claire Trevor and John Wayne in Stagecoach. ► **Right:** Jean Renoir and Roland Toutain in The Rules of the Game.



1930s

## THE RULES OF THE GAME

1939

**ANY PERSONALIZED LIST OF** great films is bound to contain films we've watched so many times they've practically crawled into our DNA. *The Rules of the Game*, Jean Renoir's wry, ruefully affectionate look at the foibles of Parisian aristocrats on the eve of World War II, is so intimate and observant that its contours change dramatically every time you watch it. In this glorious ensemble escapade, perched halfway between comedy and tragedy, Marcel Dalio plays a flippant aristocrat obsessed with expensive mechanical novelties. Yet even so, his feelings for real people take precedence: He fears he's losing his wife (Nora Gregor) to a dashing but earnest

aviator (Roland Toutain). Renoir's characters are shallow, selfish, and at times nearly unbearable. But he has such deep love for them that by the end of the film, we embrace them too. That's not nearly the same as liking them: Instead, suddenly, somehow, and perhaps against our better judgment, they belong to us. Renoir's descendant François Truffaut said of *The Rules of the Game* that it's so immediate, we almost feel as if we were there as it was being made: "For an instant, we think to ourselves, 'I'll come back tomorrow and see if it all turns out the same way.'" It does—and it doesn't. That right there is the magic of it.





## GONE WITH THE WIND

1939



### LOVE IT, HATE IT, OR, PERHAPS

most reasonably, love-hate it, Victor Fleming's *Gone with the Wind* can't and shouldn't be reduced to one monolithic statement. It's too complex a work for that, too much a lightning rod for all sorts of potent American feelings; its greatness lies in the way it so readily seduces

us with its sun-dappled, julep-on-the-porch vision, only to—quite literally—burn it all down. It's also just too damn entertaining.

The easiest route to classifying *Gone with the Wind* is to decry it as a sentimental piece of wish fulfillment riffing on white Southerners' longing for the good old days. But what if, as the late, great critic James Harvey posited, it's really a "kind of ultimate tough comedy, its vitality more a development of '30s movie comedy than of any historical romance tradition"? Harvey cites the film's "two terrific, hard-as-nails lovers"—Clark Gable's Rhett Butler and Vivienne Leigh's Scarlett O'Hara—as its selfish, beating heart. These deeply unlikable opportunists are not intended to be role models; if anything,

they're glaring symbols of why the South, and the times, had to change. And while it's normal to wish that the era had offered better opportunities for actors like Butterfly McQueen and Hattie McDaniel (the latter of whom won an Oscar for her role, the first Black person to do so), erasing the movie from our landscape, if it were even possible to do so, would do them an even greater disservice. These are both great performances, stealthily subversive in their own way. To close ourselves off to what these women accomplished would only further shrink their world, which was so restrictive to begin with.

► **Above:** Clark Gable and Vivienne Leigh on the set of *Gone with the Wind*.



## HIS GIRL FRIDAY

1940

**NOTHING AT THE BEGINNING OF** Howard Hawks' glorious screwball comedy *His Girl Friday*—not even the coat worn by star Rosalind Russell, a sharp confection of mitred stripes as meticulous as an airtight lede—prepares you for what's coming, and for how much work you'll have to do to keep pace. But in *His Girl Friday*, the work is fun. Cary Grant is charmingly manipulative newspaper editor Walter Burns, and he's just about to lose his star reporter, who also happens to be his former wife, Russell's Hildy Johnson. (The movie's source material is Ben Hecht and Charles

MacArthur's *The Front Page*, one of the greatest American plays, retooled by Hawks as a romantic comedy.) Walter wants Hildy back, both as a wife and as an employee, but he's about to lose her forever to a dutiful but boring suitor played by Ralph Bellamy (who made these roles an art form). So he assigns her an enticing but morally complex story he knows only she can pull off. She rises to the bait, and the two end up living happily ever after—after a fashion. *His Girl Friday* is crazily blissful to watch, and groundbreaking for the way Hawks orchestrated so many rapid-fire lines. The movie's dialogue

overlaps, boomerangs, skitters between characters like billiard balls—you can almost visualize it as it clacks, clatters and careers through the air. Hawks—who made comedies, gangster films, westerns, and more in a career that spanned more than 40 years—was one of the defining filmmakers of his century, and in this era in particular, he set the bar high. There are few comedies, of any period, more exhilarating than this one.

► **Below:** Ralph Bellamy, Cary Grant and Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday*.







## THE LADY EVE

1941

**WHEN ANYONE ASKS MY FAVORITE** movie of all time, my answer is immediate and always the same. Writer-director Preston Sturges' *The Lady Eve* is the greatest American movie comedy, period, a definitive movie about the unreliability of other humans, about the cruelties people can inflict upon each other in the name of love (played for laughs, and easily getting them), about the ways in which people need to truly see themselves, and one another, for love to work. Barbara Stanwyck is Jean Harrington, a card sharp plying her trade on an ocean liner when she spots a delectable mark: the awkward but handsome herpetologist and brewery heir Charles Pike (Henry Fonda) sits there in the dining room, his nose buried in a book. (It's called *Are Snakes Necessary?*) Jean works her

feminine wiles on Charles as a runup to cheating him out of some of his dough. Then she decides she really likes him and tries to abort the con, but no dice: Charles' right hand man Muggsy—played by William Demarest—tips him off. He's understandably furious, and though Jean tries to explain, he wants nothing to do with her. Deeply hurt, she plans an act of revenge which, unsurprisingly, draws out the worst in both of them.

Sturges, a rich kid himself, could dream up the most preposterous situations, with the wittiest dialogue curlicued around them. (A rich dowager's one-line assessment of a dinner party: "The fish was a poem!") His actors are perfectly in tune with his methods and his madness: Fonda plays

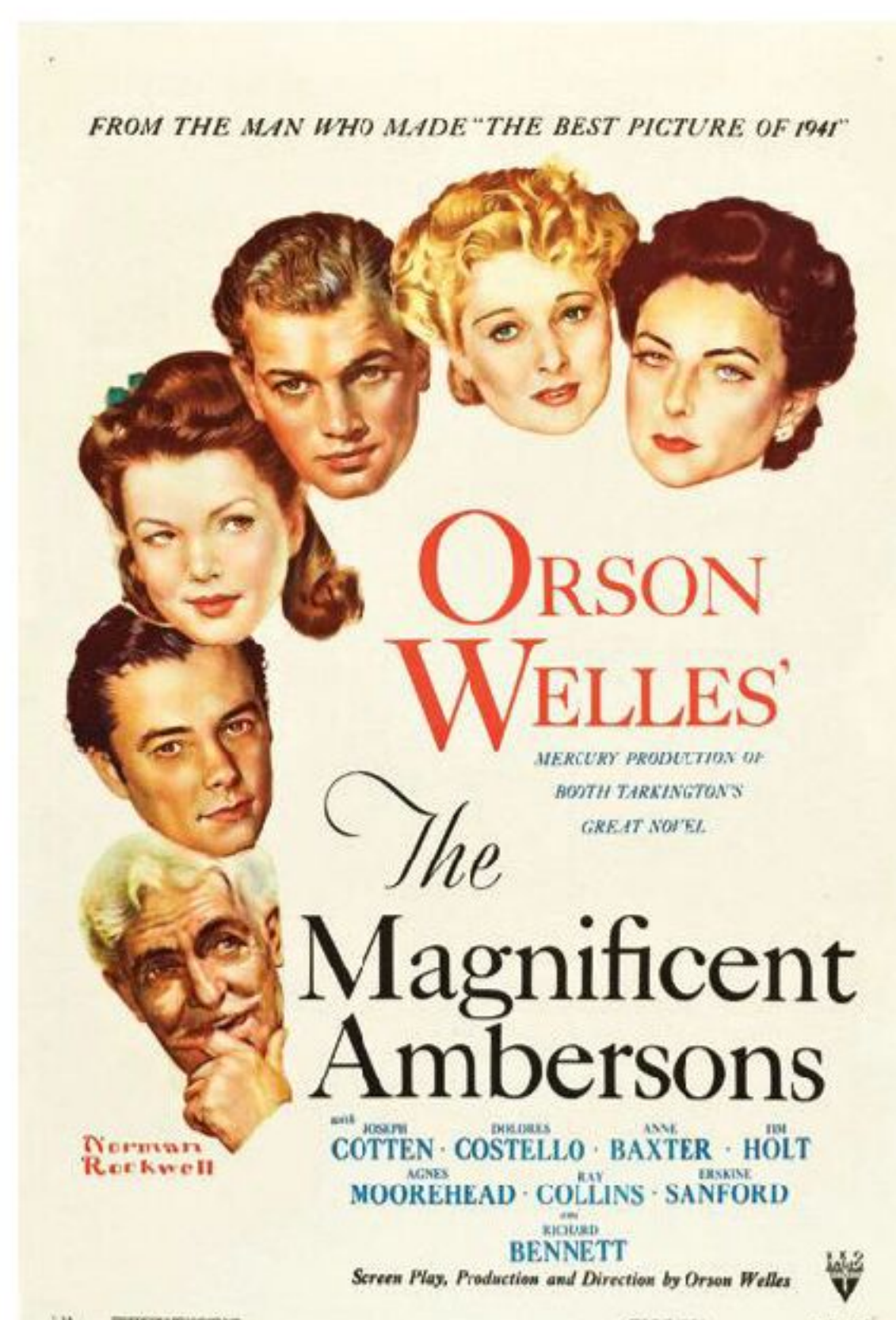
the innocent dupe perfectly, but there's a kind of stubborn imperiousness about him too—after all, he's so rich he can afford to be a bit of a bumbler. But Jean is hungrier, more conniving but also more vulnerable. And Stanwyck, possibly the greatest film actress of her generation, brings all those qualities to the surface. Jean's the one you feel for, even at her cruelest. *The Lady Eve* is deeply romantic not because these are two nice people finding love, but because each is, in fact, a little appalling. And you could argue that terrible people probably need love even more than nice ones do. Sturges, in his infinite, wicked wisdom—seeing us all as the works in progress we are—knew that.

► **Above:** Barbara Stanwyck and Henry Fonda in *The Lady Eve*.



# THE MAGNIFICENT AMBERSONS

1942



**IT'S SURELY AN ACT OF COCKEYED** optimism to love something so monstrously flawed, to prefer it, even, to the chiseled artistry of *Citizen Kane*. But *The Magnificent Ambersons*—which exists, for now, only in a cut that Orson Welles didn't authorize and never would have—is dappled with such

delicate, elegiac beauty that it's hard to turn away from it, even with its gaps, its curious ellipses, its odd, patched-on ending. Drawn from Booth Tarkington's 1918 novel, the story follows the decline of a wealthy midwestern family, the Ambersons, a fall they don't see coming until it's too late. Joseph Cotten plays Eugene Morgan, deeply in love with Isabel Amberson (Dolores Costello), but she spurns him for another man, with whom she bears a child, George, who will grow up to be a wretched soul. (He's played by the eminently pouty Tim Holt.) Eugene and Isabel reconnect many years later, but time seems to have sped past them; it's this aura of inevitable desolation that Welles captures so well. *The Magnificent Ambersons* was being completed just as Pearl Harbor was attacked,

and the releasing studio, RKO, was unhappy with the cut Welles delivered, declaring his original ending to be too much of a downer for audiences reckoning with an escalating war. They hacked 43 minutes from the picture—allegedly destroying the footage—and added a falsely cheerful ending. There are those who think the missing footage is out there, possibly in Brazil, where Welles spent time just after completing the film. But even in its mutilated state, *Ambersons* glistens quietly, almost proudly, as if it's merely waiting to someday once again be made whole.

► **Below:** Anne Baxter and Tim Holt in a scene from *The Magnificent Ambersons*.





# MILDRED PIERCE

1945

**THOUGH JOAN CRAWFORD WAS A** hugely successful Hollywood star throughout the 1930s—it was a stardom she herself willed into being, taking a hyperactive role in self-promotion that would leave even today's biggest social-media influencers in the dust—it's the Joan Crawford of the 1940s that tends to linger in our imagination. The square-shouldered, she-means-business fur coats, the hair artfully arranged into lush curls, those enormous, voracious eyes fringed with spidery mascara'ed lashes. That's the Crawford of *Mildred Pierce*, a women's drama nestled within the contours of your classic film noir, adapted from James M. Cain's novel and directed by the great journeyman director

Michael Curtiz. Crawford's Mildred is a dutiful housewife turned restaurant tycoon, a woman who'll do anything to give her spoiled daughter Veda (Ann Blyth) the best of everything. She loses one good man, Bruce Bennett's Bert Pierce, and forms an ill-advised union with another, Zachary Scott's Monty Beragon—you can tell from his mingy mustache that he's no damn good. Mildred suffers but perseveres. At one point she acknowledges, with a humility that's almost demure, that she's made grave mistakes in her life. And you believe it, you buy Mildred's humility and vulnerability, because Crawford is more of a sorceress than a mere actress, willing you to believe in whatever emotions she's putting

onscreen. There were relatively few women directors working in the 1930s and '40s, but Crawford's performance—not to mention the mettle she showed in conducting her career—is a prime example of how actresses of her era were able to exercise their authority in front of the camera. And while we've all heard plenty about what kind of mom Crawford was in real life, as a performer she was generally said to be the consummate professional. She participated in Blyth's screentest because she believed in the younger actor's talent and thought she'd be ideal to play Veda. She knew that having the best people around her would make her look good, too. And that right there is power.





# BEAUTY AND THE BEAST

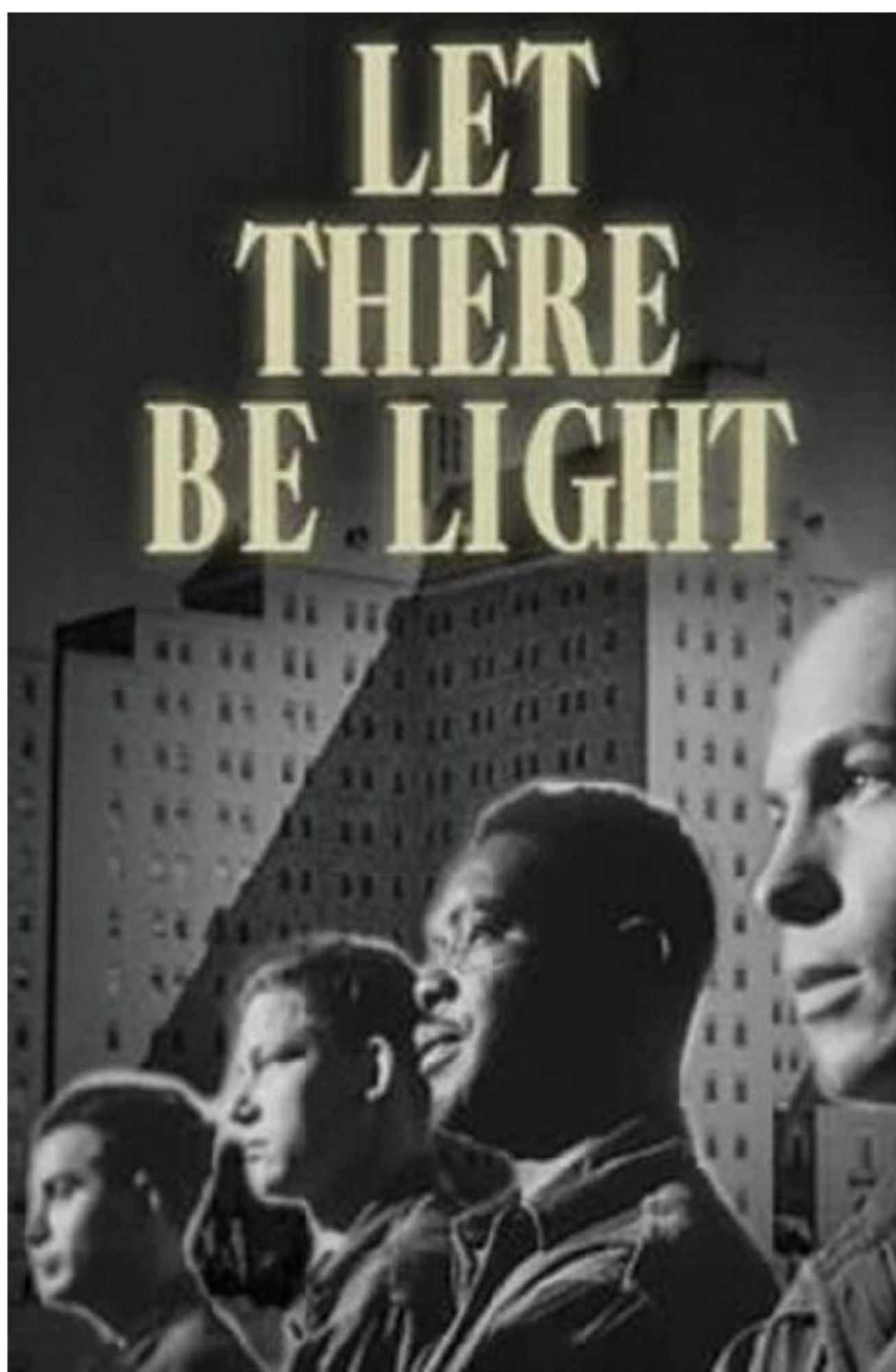
1946

**POSSIBLY THE MOST EXQUISITE** film to emerge in the wake of wartime deprivation, Jean Cocteau's *Beauty and the Beast* is a romantic fantasy born from the belief that finding beauty in our fractured and sordid world is the surest survival tactic. Jean Marais, Cocteau's lover at the time, plays the magnificent, soulful beast: Marais' gallantly handsome visage is hidden behind an intricately crafted mask of shaggy fur and makeup that took five hours to apply each day. (It was modeled on the face of his beloved dog, Moulouk.) This is the tragic face that the at-first clueless Belle (Josette Day) comes to love, as we do, in a surprise melding of the erotic and the spiritual. *Beauty and the Beast* is a triumph of illusion, especially when you consider the hardships its cast and crew suffered in making it, including ailments of all sorts as well as malfunctioning cameras and a general lack of materials for costumes and sets. In one of the movie's most haunting scenes, Belle is horrified to stumble upon the Beast slaking his feral thirst by lapping from a glistening stream. Reportedly, this body of water was in reality a sewage runoff near the filming location, but Cocteau makes it look magical, a manifestation of the film's ultimate meaning: that loneliness can be transformed by love.

► **Left:** Ann Blythe, Zachary Scott and Joan Crawford in a scene from *Mildred Pierce*. ► **Right:** Jean Marais and Josette Day in *Beauty and the Beast*.







## LET THERE BE LIGHT

1946

**JOHN HUSTON, THE TOUGH-GUY** director of early pictures like *The Maltese Falcon* and later ones like *Prizzi's Honor*, made a documentary in the immediate aftermath of World War II that almost no one was able to see until 1980, and even then, only in murky, badly damaged prints. Huston got the assignment to make the film that would become *Let There Be Light* when he was a major in the Army Signal Corps. The idea was to film veterans hospitalized for what was at the time called "psychoneurosis" or "neuropsychosis" (what we would now call post-traumatic stress disorder), capturing both the nature of their suffering and the types of treatment available to them. What Huston came up with is a deeply moving documentary that captures, specifically, the effects of wartime trauma on soldiers but also, more generally, the way men who have never been encouraged to talk about their feelings must find a way to do so in order to heal. *Let There Be Light*

is harrowing at times: When one Black soldier breaks down, talking about how his homesickness for his sweetheart became nearly unbearable, it's all too easy to imagine his feelings of isolation, fighting a war on behalf of a country he believed in even if it didn't believe in him.

The further we get from this defining period in time, the more valuable a record like *Let There Be Light* becomes. The film was long suppressed by the military (the releases Huston had obtained from the soldiers had been lost) and when it was finally cleared for release, playing in the 1981 Cannes Film Festival, the poor sound quality made many of the interviews difficult to decipher. Restored in 2012, *Let There Be Light* is now one of the finest direct records we have of servicemen's experience in World War II, an era that, though it may seem like ancient history to some, is part of the fabric of so many of our forebears' lives.



► **Above:** Myrna Loy, Fredric March and Teresa Wright in *The Best Years of Our Lives*.





## THE BEST YEARS OF OUR LIVES

1946

### WHEN WILLIAM WYLER

returned home after serving in the Second World War—his hearing in one ear irreparably damaged from participating in combat missions over Europe, which he chronicled as a wartime documentary filmmaker—he wasn't sure what to tackle next. A script that had begun as a blank-verse novella caught his attention. The film he made from that screenplay is itself a cornerstone of postwar American history, a fictional story so keyed into lived experience that it continues to find an audience across generations.

Frederic March, Dana Andrews, and a young nonprofessional actor named Harold Russell star as

servicemen returning from the war, struggling to readjust to civilian life. March's Al Stephenson has misgivings about returning to his old banking job, and though his all-knowing, no-nonsense wife Milly (played by the great Myrna Loy) adores him, she can't hide the fact that his homecoming has disrupted her routine, too. Dana Andrews' Fred is a highly decorated bombardier captain, but he can barely find work upon returning home; he's also coming to realize that he'd hastily married the wrong woman (Virginia Mayo) before being deployed. And Russell's Homer has lost both of his hands in combat; he's been outfitted with hooks that he's handily mastered,

but he can barely fathom the idea of holding his loving fiancée (Cathy O'Donnell) in his arms. (Russell—who himself had lost his hands during military service—won the Best Supporting Actor Oscar that year, and received an honorary Academy Award as well.) *The Best Years of Our Lives* is famous for lots of reasons—cinematographer Gregg Toland's skillful use of deep focus is one of the most touted. But its truest value is both more immediate and less tangible: This is a story of what it means to yearn to be home, only to realize that home is a place you need to find in yourself, sometimes at great cost.





## **BLACK NARCISSUS**

**1947**

**FROM THE QUASI-MYSTICAL MELODRAMA OF *THE RED SHOES* TO THE EARTHY FIGHTING SPIRIT OF *I Know Where I'm Going!* to the all-out fantastical romantic weirdness of *A Matter of Life and Death*:** how to determine the greatest film made by the British-based team of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger? When forced to choose, I go with the mad matte-painting glory of *Black Narcissus*, a story of nuns driven wild with desire in the Himalayas (drawn from source material by Rumer Godden). Deborah Kerr's Sister Clodagh is a mother superior newly arrived in this remote, desolate locale to establish a school and hospital; Kathleen Byron's Sister Ruth is one of her teachers. But can any of these virtuous women resist the allure of David Farrar's Mr. Dean, a robust male authority who favors shorts that are perhaps just a little too short? *Black Narcissus* is a great movie about obsession that is itself obsessive. Filmed largely at Pinewood Studios, it draws much of its visual magic from large painted backdrops overseen by a legendary effects technician Walter Percy Day. The movie's vertiginous cliffs and carnally suggestive purple-pink clouds are all so rapturously fake that they rearrange your brain circuitry. For the space of time you live within *Black Narcissus*, nothing in the world has ever looked so real.





► **Above:** Actor David Farrar intrudes, bare-chested, into a room filled with nuns in a scene from *Black Narcissus*.



## OUT OF THE PAST

1947

**WHEN AMERICAN GIs RETURNED** from World War II, they went to school and they went to work, building lives and families and sturdy, respectable legacies. But the movies seemed to know a secret that many Americans wouldn't acknowledge, and they mined that dark side in film noir. Jacques Tourneur's *Out of the Past* is one of the greatest of the genre, unsparing and bleakly beautiful. Robert Mitchum's Jeff Markham is the ex-private eye looking to bury his shady past in a clean new life with a good woman, Virginia Huston's Ann. But he can't escape the woman who sent him round the bend in the first place, the double-dealing Kathie, played by the disarmingly composed Jane Greer. Tragedy will entwine these

two, but there's no other way for them. As Markham, Mitchum plays so far behind the beat that, watching him, waiting for him, can lull you into a euphoric trance. Although he made a career playing the toughest of tough guys, his features are so soft and dreamy they're almost feminine. And Greer is magnificent, making her entrance as a firecracker in white linen and a halo-shaped sunhat. Her eyes have a melting, beseeching quality any guy would trust but shouldn't. She's the opposite of the American dream. She's the thing you want more than anything in the world, the gift of noir, the destructive force that's fulfilling only in fantasy. She's the reason you go to the movies.





## **BICYCLE THIEVES**

**1948**

**THE PROBLEM WITH THE** idea of an accepted movie canon—not to mention the abhorrent “1,000 movies to see before you die” approach—is that it relegates great films to a checklist of good-for-you vegetables, when the whole point of film watching is to sink into an experience. And there are few greater film-watching experiences than Vittorio De Sica’s *Bicycle Thieves*. Antonio—played by Lamberto Maggiorani, a nonprofessional actor—is a father and husband in postwar Rome struggling to support his family. He has a chance at a good job, but he needs his bicycle to do it; on his first day of work, the bicycle is stolen, and he and his young son Bruno (Enzo Staiola, also

a nonprofessional) set out to get it back, a quest of desperation and need that at first strengthens the father-son bond, before nearly tearing it apart. De Sica, a former matinee idol, had already directed the much-loved *Shoeshine* when he set out to make *Bicycle Thieves*. Even so, he had to raise the money to make this film himself. In the neorealist mode, he cast real people as actors, and used no studio sets—all of the settings are real-life locations in Rome. The resulting film is so visually beautiful that even a rainstorm seems bathed in muted radiance. And to watch it is to know a feeling that can’t be summed up by any canonical list—that of walking away with your heart broken and full at once.

► **Above:** Enzo Staiola and Lamberto Maggiorani on the set of *Bicycle Thieves*.



## THE BAND WAGON

1953

**EVEN THOUGH MUSICALS ARE** almost always more than the sum of their parts, Vincente Minnelli's Crayola-box wonder *The Band Wagon* enfolds more than its share of elegant truths. Fred Astaire plays aging song-and-dance man Tony Hunter, pulling into New York City by train and realizing there's no one there to greet him. Is he officially a has-been? Tony is hardly old—Astaire himself was only 54 at the time—but still old enough to foresee a future of creaky limbs and even creakier career prospects. So what does he do? He turns his anxiety into a musical number, "By Myself,"

a modestly scaled anthem of self-determination. "I'll face the unknown, I'll build a world of my own," he sings in that downy-soft, conversationally expressive voice—one that also happens to be one of the best voices ever heard in the world—as he tip-taps his way through Grand Central Station, creating a space for opportunity even though his horizons look grim. Luckily, he's got friends and accomplices, played by a marvelous cast including Scottish-born entertainer Jack Buchanan, ice-cool ballerina Cyd Charisse, Nanette Fabray and deadpan genius Oscar Levant.

(The latter two play a show-biz couple who mirror the real-life platonic writing team behind the movie, Betty Comden and Adolph Green, the same duo who wrote that other great 1950s musical, *Singin' in the Rain*.) *The Band Wagon* is an exuberant exploration of loneliness, middle-aged reinvention and the life-saving properties of singing and dancing. Its restorative powers are boundless.

► **Below:** Oscar Levant, Cyd Charisse, Jack Buchanan, Fred Astaire and Nanette Fabray in *The Band Wagon*.







## ON THE WATERFRONT

1954

**ELIA KAZAN IS FAMOUS FOR** lots of things: for being a founder of the Actors Studio, for his collaborative friendships with Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, for having discovered James Dean—and for going before the House Committee on Un-American Activities in 1952 to inform, as a former Communist Party member himself, against eight of his old Group Theatre colleagues. Unironically, *On the Waterfront* is itself a story about informants: One of its writers was Budd Schulberg, who'd also given names to HUAC. Operating on shaky logic, he and Kazan intended *On the Waterfront* as a justification for their actions. But how do you weigh the damage wrought by Kazan against the fact that this film changed the landscape of film acting forever? Method acting

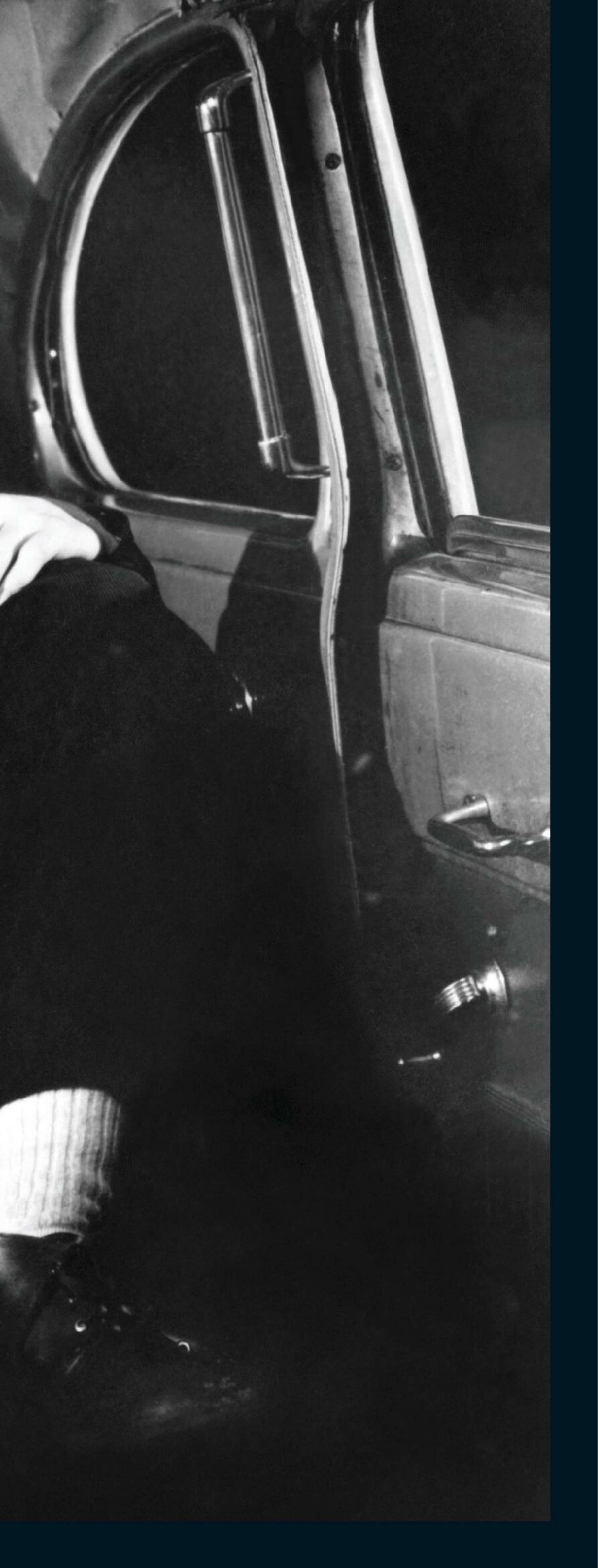
historian Isaac Butler has written of *On the Waterfront*, “Its characters aren’t always sure how—or whether—to express themselves. Instead they falter, they pause, they stammer and trail off, they allow their use of props to convey their hidden feelings and desires.”

Marlon Brando plays Hoboken dockworker Terry Malloy, a man who owes his livelihood to crooked mob boss Johnny Friendly (Lee J. Cobb); Terry’s older brother Charley (played, with a heartrending jumble of gruffness and tenderness, by Rod Steiger) is Friendly’s right-hand man. Then Terry falls for Edie (Eva Marie Saint, somehow both ethereal and earthbound, and extraordinary), whose brother, Joey, was killed by Friendly and his goons on the night before he was set to testify against them. It was Terry who

helped set Joey up, and Brando maps his character’s guilt in a performance that’s both subterranean and explosive. In one of the movie’s subtlest and most affecting scenes, Edie drops one of her knit gloves, and Terry picks it up, fiddles with it, smooths out its slender fingers before slipping it on his own meaty hand. It’s a gesture that speaks of cautious desire, that tells us much of what we need to know about this man who yearns for intimacy but feels he doesn’t deserve it. Could another actor, with another director, have brought this moment to life? Who can say? All we have is the evidence at hand, a film made, at least in part, on the broken careers of others, but also one that makes us feel more alive.

► **Above:** Rod Steiger and Marlon Brando on the set of *On the Waterfront*.





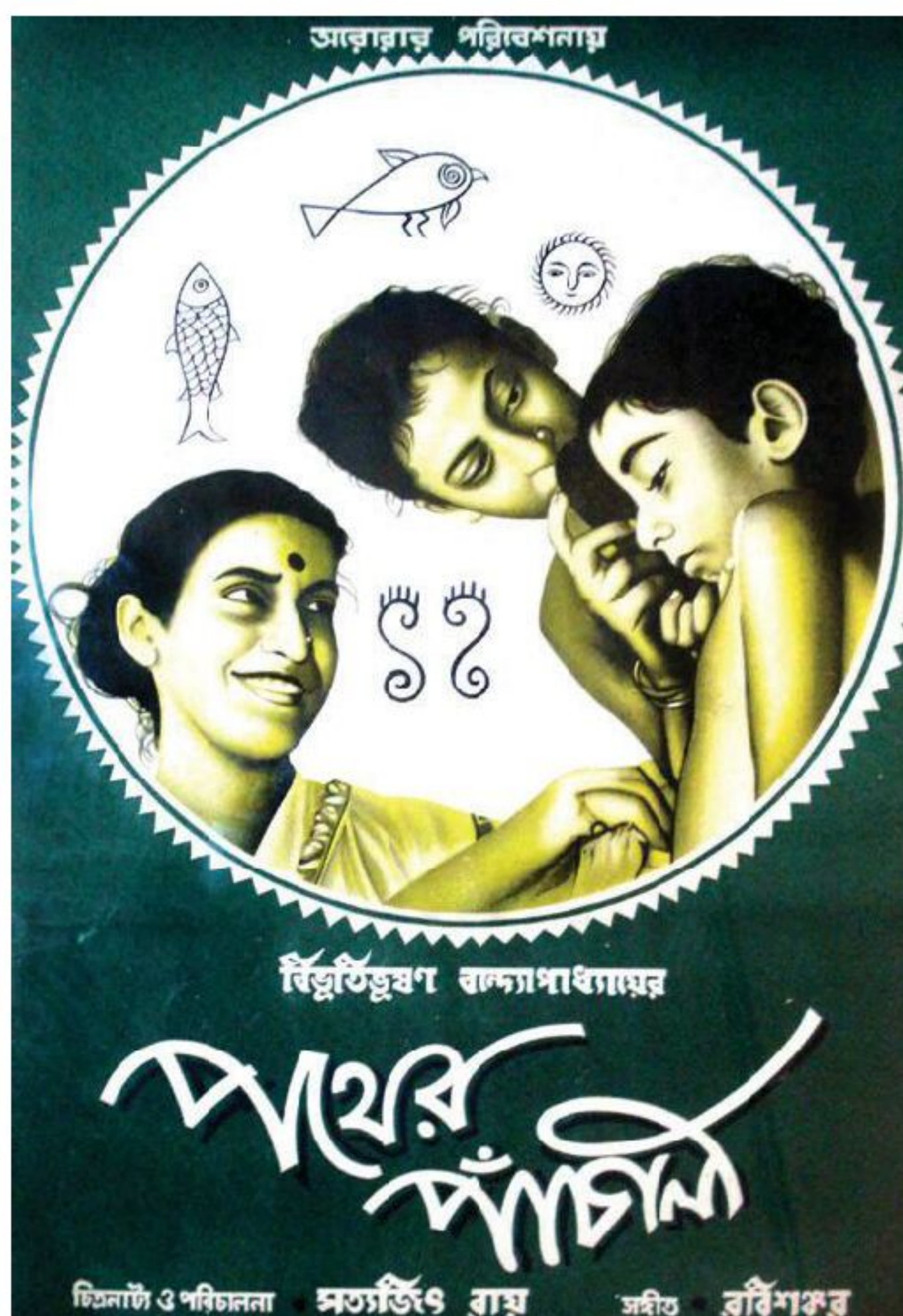
## SEVEN SAMURAI

1954

**WE THINK OF EPIC FILMMAKING** as being grand in scope, and Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* certainly is that. Yet what's most surprising about it—and what makes it truly great—is Kurosawa's delicacy of touch. This movie, about a group of late-16th-century farmers who enlist the aid of samurai warriors to help them fend off bandits, speaks in a bold language of symphonically precise battle scenes and rough-and-tumble violence that's more stately than scrappy. There's eloquence in the corners, too, as when the loose-cannon samurai-wannabe Kikuchiyo, played with boisterous vitality by Toshiro Mifune, teases the village kids while distributing the warriors' rice rations among them. And then there's the moment, so offhanded you barely see how it begins, when the resplendent Takashi

Shimura—as Kambei Shimada, the veteran samurai leading the mission—scoops up a village tot and cradles her with one arm as he details a battle plan for the locals. All of it is anchored by Fumio Hayasaka's soundtrack, a marvel of baritone sax and bongos, of woodwinds, trumpet and bamboo sticks—strings are used only sparingly, and somehow their absence only intensifies the urgency of the action. Hayasaka had composed the music for nearly every Kurosawa picture since 1948's *Drunken Angel*; he died of tuberculosis at age 41, not long after *Seven Samurai* was released. His death meant a sad end to a great partnership, but just listen to what he left behind, in a movie whose majesty stretches out to the margins and beyond.





## PATHER PANCHALI

1955

**BECAUSE OF FUNDING PROBLEMS,** it took Calcutta-born filmmaker Satyajit Ray three years to complete his debut film, *Pather Panchali*. It's one of those movies that exists almost against all odds, and also one of the most beautiful films ever made, in any language. It's unlikely your childhood was anything like Apu's, yet his story is a dream of every childhood, a recollection—or a wish—of love and family that reaches deep inside us. Young Apu (Subir Banerjee) lives in the Bengali countryside with his mother and father (Karuna Banerjee and Kanu Banerjee), his older sister, Durga (Shampa “Runki” Banerjee) and an elderly live-in auntie (Chunibala Devi). Apu's father comes from a long, proud lineage of writers, but he has failed to make a good living for his little family; they once owned a nearby orchard, but they've had to sell it off to survive. Apu is often impish and

naughty, but his family adores him, building a world of warmth and care for him despite their financial difficulties. Ray, in gorgeously silvery black-and-white cinematography, captures the texture of childhood—in the way, for instance, Apu and Durga rush out into the fields when the train passes by, excited by its speed and noise and promise of some mysterious elsewhere. The beauty of *Pather Panchali* (adapted from an autobiographical novel by Bengali writer Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay) is matched by its two superb sequels, *Aparajito*, from 1957, and *Apur Sansar*, from 1959. These rapturous meditations on the power of memory, and on the nature of love and loss, are for all of us to enjoy. Akira Kurosawa said, “Not to have seen the cinema of Ray means existing in the world without seeing the sun or the moon.” If you won't take my word for it, take his.

► *Giulietta Masina*  
in *Nights of Cabiria*.





## **NIGHTS OF CABIRIA**

**1957**

**TO WATCH GIULIETTA MASINA AS CABIRIA, A WOMAN WHO SELLS HER BODY BUT NEVER BETRAYS**

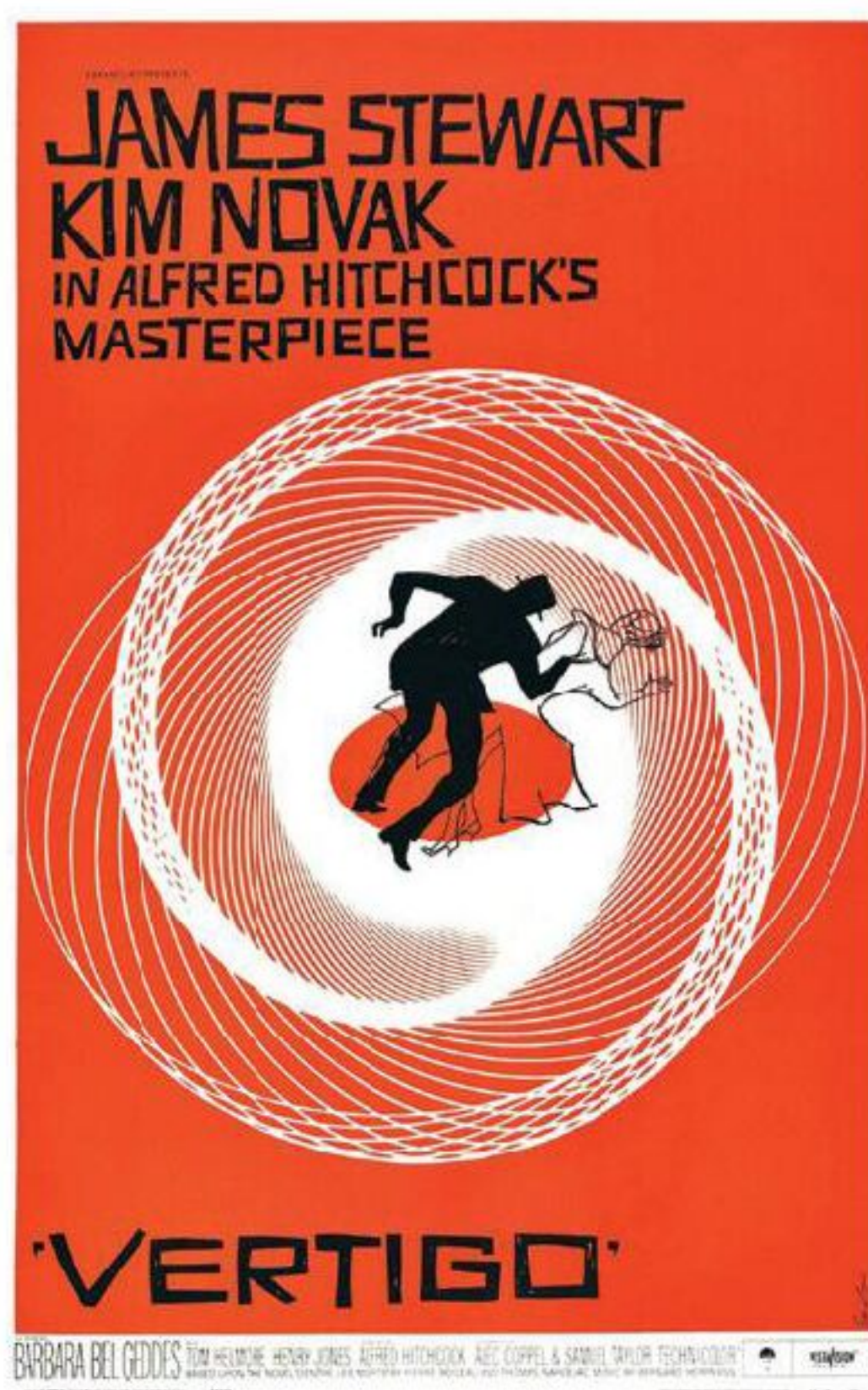
her sense of self, is to experience a kind of melancholy delight. When we first meet her, we know nothing of how she makes a living. She has a lover, though we quickly learn how little he cares for her: In an early scene, he grabs her purse and pushes her into a river, running off to leave her to drown. She survives, though she's dejected and humiliated; then she goes back to her little house, a ramshackle refuge on the outskirts of Rome, and proceeds to burn her ex-lover's shirts, clothes she'd bought for him in the first place. This is just the beginning of Masina's seduction as Cabiria: Later we'll see her working her territory, a jauntily figure in her short furry jacket and sandals with socks—she wins us over by making us laugh with her bow-legged, vaudevillian walk, her quicksilver smile tempered by just a hint of shyness. Cabiria's gift to us is her reminder that to be able to laugh at ourselves, and at our own misfortunes, is key to getting through life. In *Nights of Cabiria*, Federico Fellini's loveliest and most moving film, Masina—Fellini's wife and collaborator—gives one of the most perfect performances of the 1950s. This is one of the finest collaborations between husband and wife the movies have given us, a meeting of souls that unfolds on a movie screen, a glimmering reflection of a real-life marriage that couldn't have been easy.





# VERTIGO

1958



**MANY MOVIE PEOPLE, AND** especially movie critics, adore *Vertigo*, a movie about a man's obsession with a woman who isn't real—or, rather, she is real, but he fails to acknowledge any reality existing outside of his own view of her. The obvious metaphor is that this is like being obsessed with the movies, which are similarly not-real and yet, within our imaginations, staggeringly alive. But seeing *Vertigo* mostly as a movie about oneself is missing the point. It's great precisely because it isn't—or Alfred Hitchcock wasn't—particularly interested in catering to our personal obsessions. Instead, it's a film so pure in its emotional selfishness that it achieves something

like a state of grace. This is a romance of self-absorption and deep sadness, about the undiluted tragedy of a man's life when he fails to see the woman in front of him. At one point that woman is Madeleine, as poised as a great sculptor's dream in her granite-colored suit; at another she's the much coarser Judy, a shopgirl-type in a too-tight sweater. Both women are played by Kim Novak, descended from Mount Olympus just for the occasion. James Stewart's Scottie is the ex-detective so deeply invested in the idea of Madeline that he tries to remake Judy in her image. This Stewart is no longer the stammering sweetheart we saw in the '30s and '40s, but instead a man who's sleepwalking through a nightmare of his own making. You can always see the gears turning with Hitchcock, especially in *Vertigo*: The movie is as meticulous and exacting as the workings of the tiniest Swiss wristwatch. But he gets poetry out of those gears. It's the most wistful of his films, reaching out to something beyond his grasp. And if Hitchcock can't reach it, you know there's no hope for the rest of us.





▶ James Stewart and Kim Novak in *Vertigo*.



## THE 400 BLOWS

1959

### IN CRITIC-TURNED-FILMMAKER

François Truffaut's debut film, a picture telling some version of his own life story, the young protagonist Antoine Doinel—played by fledgling actor Jean-Pierre Léaud—gets into dozens of scrapes of his own making. Having intuited, as children can, that his mother cares nothing for him, he tells a schoolteacher who's hounding him that she has died, which is of course a lie. Antoine yearns only to break out and live life on his own terms, even though he's only 12. With his closest friend, he skips school to go to the movies, hiding their telltale book bags, which would mark them as boys playing hooky, though you need only look at their faces to see the truth. Antoine runs away from home overnight, stealing a bottle of milk in the morning for sustenance. And while at home, he escapes the indifference of his mother and stepfather by lounging around with a book by his idol, Balzac, in one hand and a cigarette in the other—but later, after lighting a candle in honor of his favorite

writer, he inadvertently sets a curtain on fire, angering his parents. Antoine Doinel can't win.

*The 400 Blows* is boisterous, exuberant—until it isn't. On Léaud's face you see both stony, preternaturally adult defiance but also childlike vulnerability—because he, 14 at the time, was at the same crossroads as Antoine. Truffaut saw Léaud as a kindred spirit and encouraged him to improvise; the movie is a portrait of adolescence sketched out by a man who'd survived it and a youth who was still stumbling through it, and the effect is piercing. In 1959, before he'd made any films of his own, Truffaut's *Cahiers du Cinema* colleague Jean-Luc Godard wrote, "Soon people will say Truffaut's children as they say Bengal Lancers, spoil-sports, Mafia chiefs, road-hogs, or again in a word, cinema-addicts." If you're reading this, you're most likely one of Truffaut's children. Your telltale satchel, even if only metaphorical, gives you away.

▶ **Above:** Jean-Pierre Léaud in *The 400 Blows*.



# IMITATION OF LIFE

1959

**MELODRAMA IS ONE OF THE MOST** maligned genres, often denigrated by people who think they're above being manipulated by a movie. But a great melodrama is really a vessel, a place for us to put overwhelming feelings that have nowhere else to go. In Douglas Sirk's *Imitation of Life*—adapted from a 1933 novel by Fannie Hurst and filmed previously in 1934—Lana Turner and Juanita Moore star as Lora Meredith and Annie Johnson, single mothers who join forces out of need and forge a lifelong friendship. Lora is an aspiring but struggling actor. Annie may be a close friend, but she's also essentially a servant,

helping Lora along on her rise to stardom as the two raise their children together. Sirk, a master of big feelings writ large on the screen, is fully aware of the complicated dynamic between the two women: At one point Annie speaks of her dream to have a big, lavish funeral, with all her friends in attendance. "It never occurred to me that you had any friends!" Lora responds, wide-eyed. "You never asked," Annie responds, not bitterly but with a kind of gentle weariness.

Turner is an undeniably glamorous presence, but it's Moore's performance—restrained even amid the movie's grand

swirls of emotion—that will stick with you forever. Annie's daughter, Sarah Jane (Susan Kohner), resents her mother for the darkness of her skin: Sarah Jane is light-skinned and desperately tries to pass, even as Annie pleads with her to take pride in who she is. *Imitation of Life* tangles with issues that still make America uncomfortable—but then, Sirk always defied the idea of comfort altogether. To be comfortable means accepting the status quo. With his grand gestures, Sirk sought to bust our world wide open.





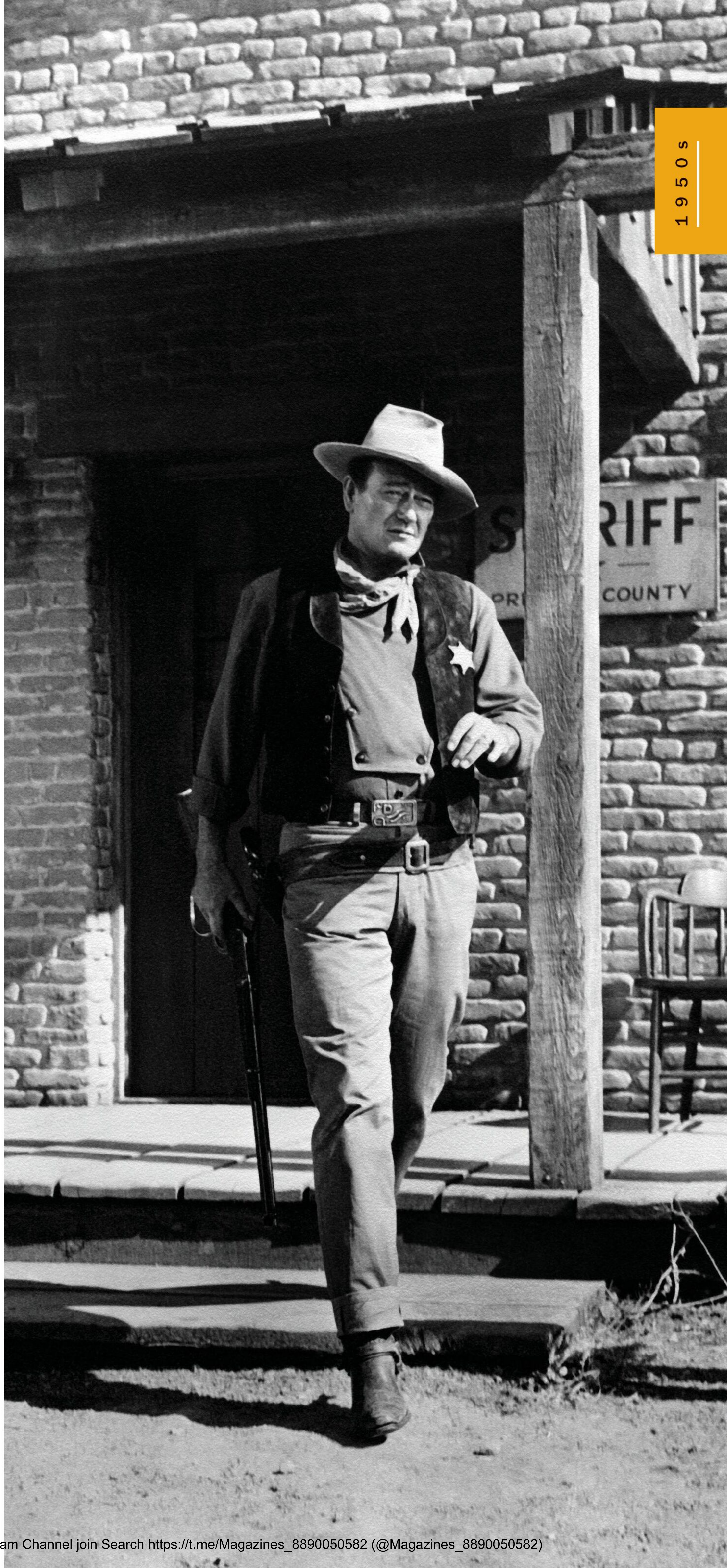
# RIO BRAVO

1959

## IN A STORY THAT COULD BE

apocryphal, but probably isn't, just before the great British-Canadian critic Robin Wood died in 2009, he dictated a list of his favorite movies to a close friend. At the top was Howard Hawks' *Rio Bravo*. What a way to go. In this perfect western—this perfect movie—John Wayne is an aging sheriff named Chance who takes a stand against a gang of criminals with the help of a deputy with a bum leg (Walter Brennan), a barely-dry and still shaky recovering alcoholic (Dean Martin) and a baby-faced, guitar-strumming youngster (Ricky Nelson). A wanted woman named Feathers (Angie Dickinson) also happens to be shimmering around Chance's periphery, stirring up a different kind of trouble. Though there are shootouts in *Rio Bravo*, the picture is short on action and long on talking. Some see this as a flaw, but if you're a certain type of person you will gravitate all your lifelong days toward those who think of the dialogue in *Rio Bravo* as the kind of trail that makes a movie worth following from beginning to end. (The script is by Jules Furthman and Leigh Brackett, from a story by B.H. McCampbell.) This is a movie of second chances and cowboy songs, of "worthless" people who prove their worth beyond gold, of the only certainty we can ever trust in: There is nothing certain in this world. What more could you ask, or want, from a movie?

► **Left:** Lana Turner, Juanita Moore and Terry Burnham on the set of *Imitation of Life*. ► **Right:** John Wayne in *Rio Bravo*.







## SOME LIKE IT HOT

1959

**IT'S SAID THAT AUSTRIAN-**born filmmaker Billy Wilder arrived by boat in America in 1934 with \$20 in his pocket and a vocabulary of 100 English words. Within just a few years he would become one of the most versatile and entertaining writer-directors Hollywood has ever known, as gifted at crafting drumskin-tight films noir (*Double Indemnity*, *Sunset Blvd.*) as he was at fashioning buoyant, gorgeously syncopated comedies. *Some Like It Hot* is nothing short of glorious: Marilyn Monroe's Sugar Kane Kowalczyk is the

lead singer of a roaring-20s, all-girl band infiltrated by two male musicians in drag, played by Jack Lemmon and Tony Curtis, on the run from mobsters. Curtis' Joe—a.k.a. Josephine—falls for Sugar and, when he's not dressed in women's clothes, tries to woo her by pretending to be a millionaire. Lemmon's Jerry/Daphne finds himself being pursued by a real millionaire (Joe E. Brown). Though Marilyn's saucy, frothy performance is bliss to watch, she is said to have been extremely difficult on set (not

least because she was at the time secretly pregnant with Arthur Miller's baby, a child she would lose). By the end of filming, Wilder was totally drained. But after Marilyn's death, he recalled, "There was a kind of exhaustion and there was a moment of 'never again.' All I can tell you is, if Marilyn were around today I would be down on my knees saying, 'Please, let's do it again.'"

► **Right:** Tony Curtis, Marilyn Monroe and Jack Lemmon in *Some Like It Hot*.





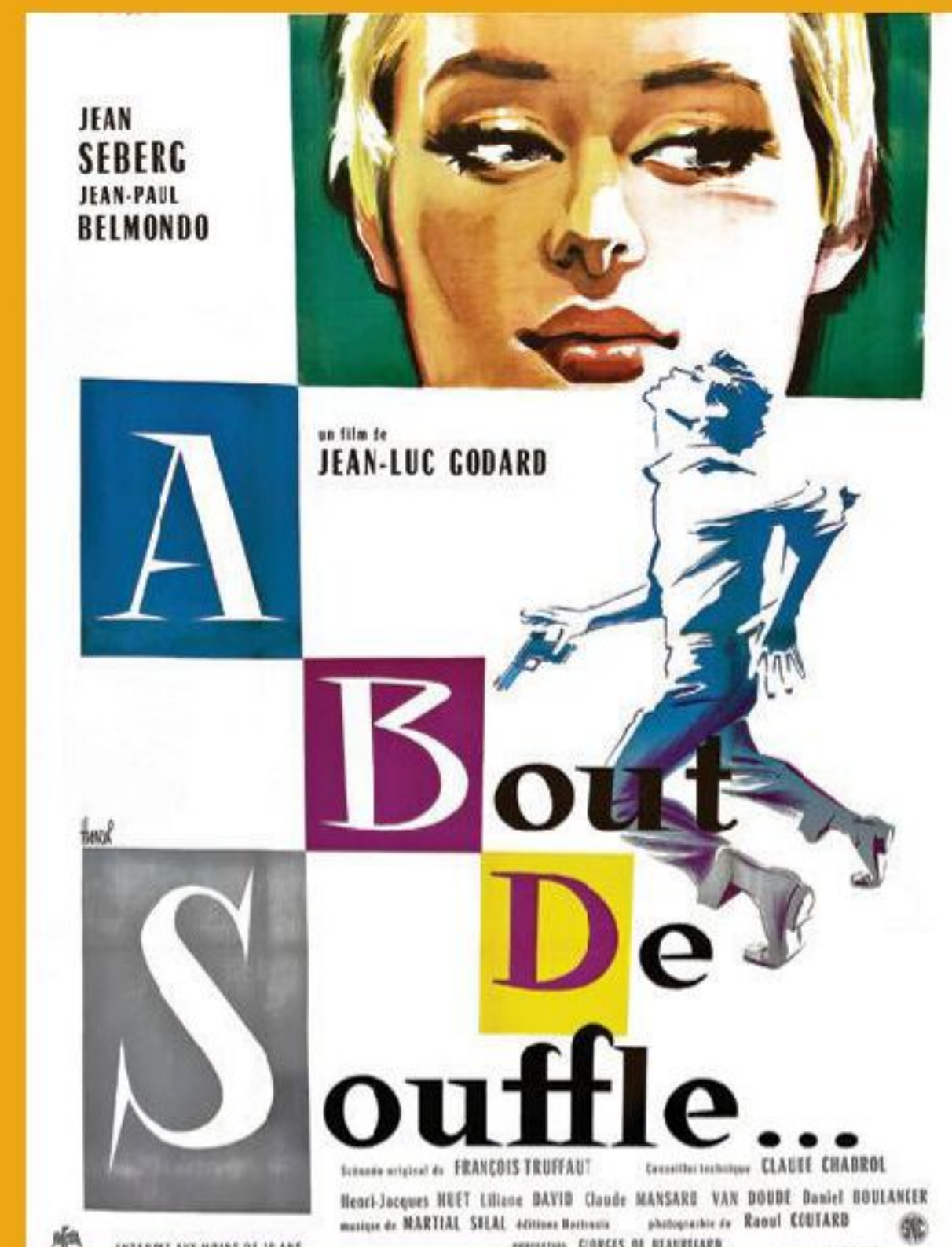
## PSYCHO

1960

**MANY OF US WHO LOVE MOVIES,** and love Alfred Hitchcock, have watched this one a million times, and somehow the millionth viewing electrifies as much as the first. A secretary (Janet Leigh) who meets her grisly fate behind a semi-opaque shower curtain, a seemingly gentle motel proprietor (Anthony Perkins) whose relationship with his mother is conflicted at best: The details of *Psycho* are etched knifepoint-sharp in our brains. This is evidence of Hitchcock's greatest pleasure as a filmmaker. His enduring desire was to get a rise out of his audience, and once *Psycho* had become a box-office hit, he knew he'd pulled off something extraordinary. As he

suggested to his great interviewer, François Truffaut: "I don't care about the subject matter; I don't care about the acting; but I do care about the pieces of film and the photography and the sound track and all of the technical ingredients that made the audience scream." Audiences weren't thrilled by any moral message, or solely by the performances, or by how well the movie captured the Robert Bloch novel it was drawn from. "They were," Hitchcock said, "aroused by pure film," a turn-on whose aftershocks, across decades, not even he could have imagined.

► **Above:** Janet Leigh in the shower scene from *Psycho*.



## BREATHLESS

1960

**THE 1960S KICKED OFF WITH** a shout, and it was in French: *Breathless*, the debut feature from the impishly brilliant young Franco-Swiss director Jean-Luc Godard, changed the landscape of filmmaking forever by mining Hollywood tradition, specifically the classic genre of gangster films. Jean-Paul Belmondo is a suave small-time thief who goes on the lam after killing a motorcycle cop. Jean Seberg is his femme fatale, a seemingly guileless young American whose pixie cut is by itself an emblem of youthful freedom. Their adventure—shot using brashly inventive low-budget techniques that would later become part of nearly every filmmaker's bag of tricks—is both exhilarating and tragic, and more than 60 years on, it still feels disarmingly fresh. For younger audiences today, this is the training-wheels Godard, the first work by this sometimes inscrutable genius seen by most moviegoers. For older movie fans—either those who saw it upon its initial release, or those who, like me, first fell for it when it showed up as part of a series of French films shown on PBS in the early 1970s—it is often a kind of touchstone. We can't imagine what our lives would have been like without it.





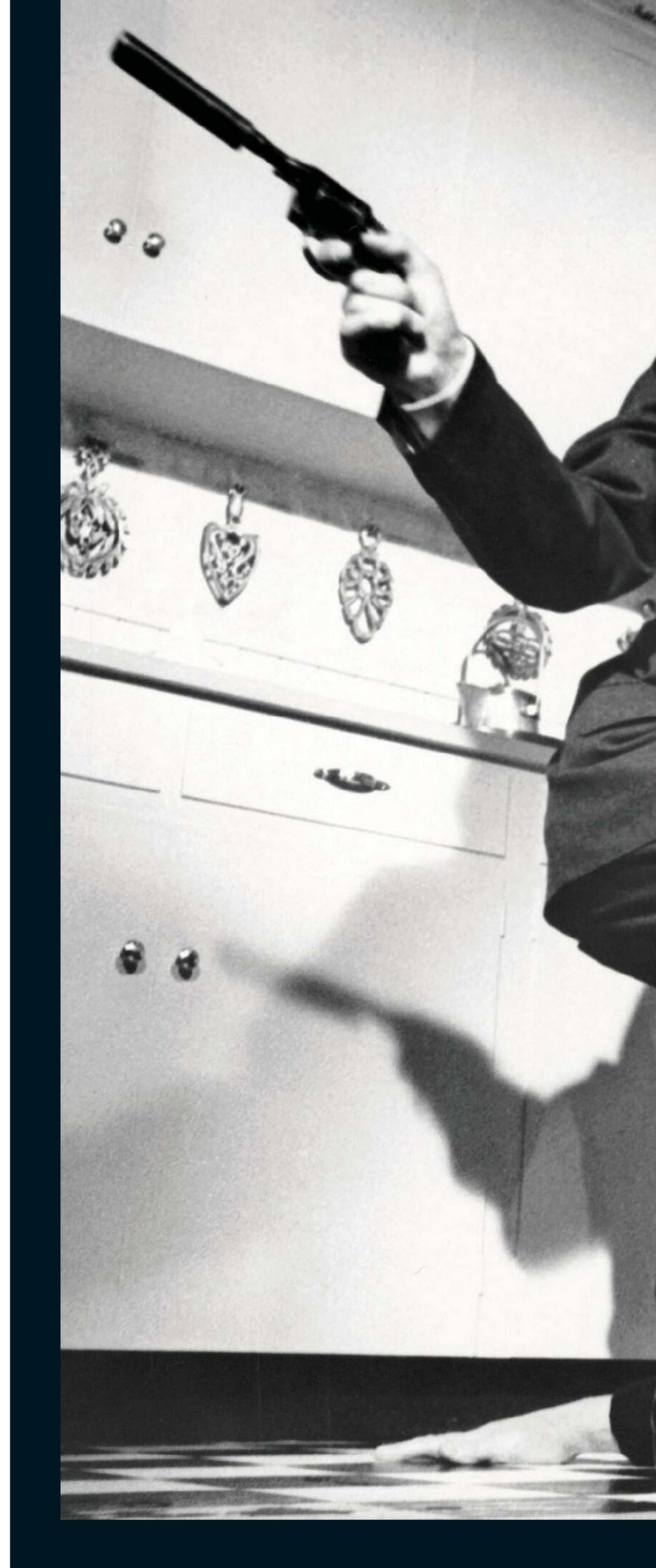
## CLÉO FROM 5 TO 7

1962

### FILM DEPICTIONS OF THINGS

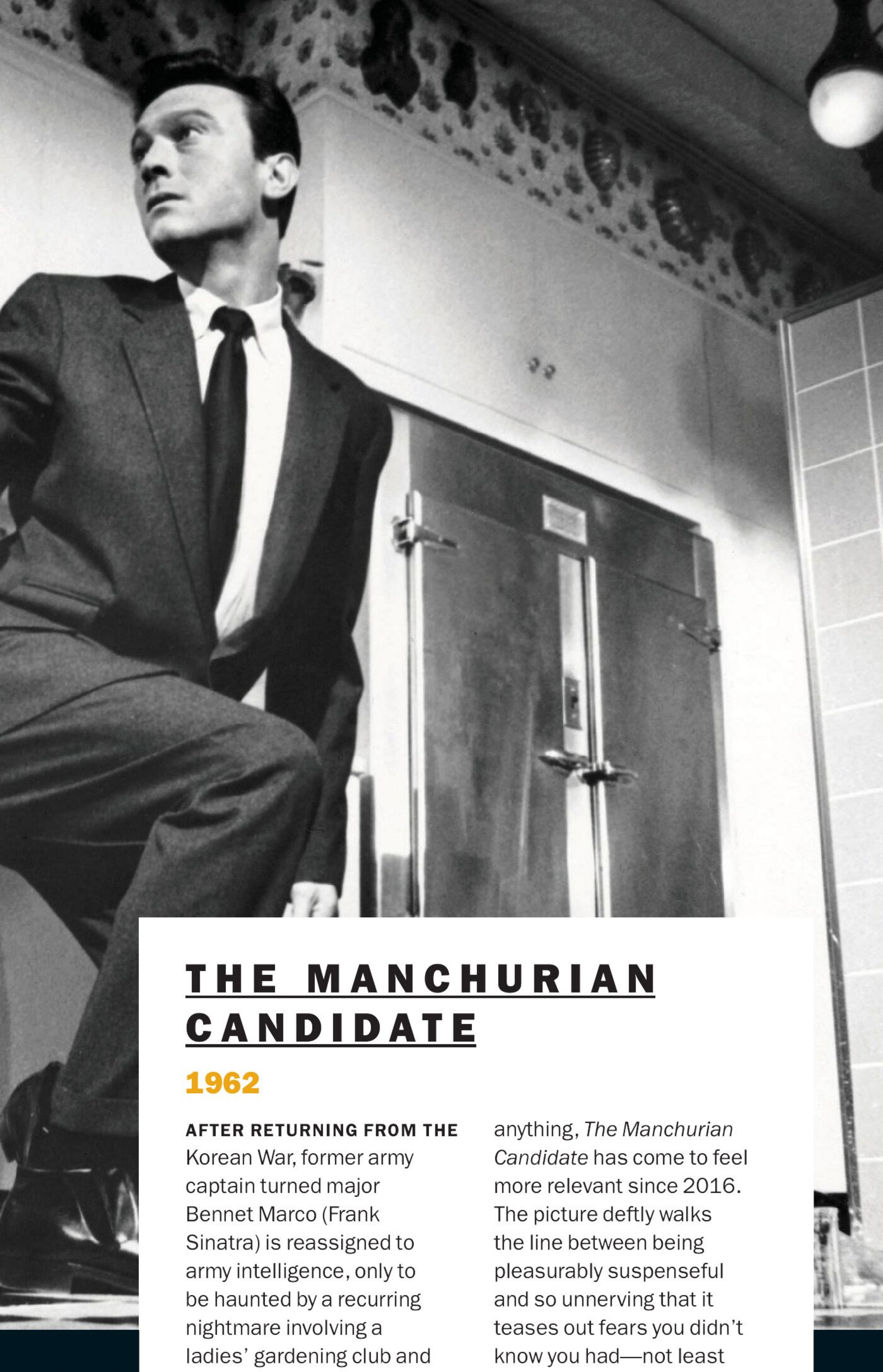
women have historically enjoyed—shopping, for instance—have long gotten short shrift from male critics, as if standing against frivolity were by itself a proclamation of seriousness. In Agnès Varda's *Cléo from 5 to 7*, the Cléo of the title, a self-absorbed pop singer played by Corinne Marchand, spends an anxious day in her home city of Paris awaiting a possible cancer diagnosis; her doctor has promised her an answer that evening. Throughout the day she argues with her assistant and rails against the boisterous songwriters who come by her spare, chic, spacious digs to bring her some new songs. She's electric with worry—but at one point she pauses in front of a shop window, marveling at a

display of fanciful hats, and dips inside, trying on one concoction after another before choosing the one she believes suits her best. Varda's film is a marvel of spontaneity and ingenious techniques—she captures the casual everydayness of Parisians on the street, circa 1962, and uses mirrors to work out clever split-screen effects. But Varda also knew the power of shopping. In that hat shop, Marchand's Cléo, ice-cool but also deeply touching, enacts a temporary re-invention of the self, well known to anyone who loves clothes and other accouterments. For a moment, turning this way and that in the shop's various mirrors, she's defying fate in favor of living in the moment. If that's frivolity, let's have more, and tie it with a bow.



► **Above:** Laurence Harvey in *The Manchurian Candidate*.





## **THE MANCHURIAN CANDIDATE**

**1962**

**AFTER RETURNING FROM THE** Korean War, former army captain turned major Bennet Marco (Frank Sinatra) is reassigned to army intelligence, only to be haunted by a recurring nightmare involving a ladies' gardening club and a murderous act committed by one of his men, Raymond Shaw (Laurence Harvey). John Frankenheimer's lethal ice pick of a political thriller, adapted from Richard Condon's novel and involving a brainwashed assassin whose actions are controlled by communist operatives, opened in late October 1962, smack in the middle of the Cuban Missile Crisis. That confluence is hair-raising enough, but if

anything, *The Manchurian Candidate* has come to feel more relevant since 2016. The picture deftly walks the line between being pleausurably suspenseful and so unnerving that it teases out fears you didn't know you had—not least because Angela Lansbury, as the assassin's mother and handler, casts such a sinister, seductive spell. The incestuous kiss she bestows on her son, in one of the movie's most rattling scenes, is just one manifestation of a world gone wrong in a million ways. There are no ghosts or demons in *The Manchurian Candidate*, but there are monsters. It's more chilling than any horror movie.



## **THE LEOPARD**

**1963**

**SOME FILMS PERFECTLY CAPTURE** the tone and texture of their source material, and *The Leopard* is one of them. Adapted from Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's 1958 end-of-an-era reverie, Luchino Visconti's film, as mournful as a moonlit dream, stars Burt Lancaster as Don Fabrizio Corbera, a Sicilian prince caught in the shifting winds of Italian unification. His own nephew, Tancredi (Alain Delon), is an insurgent, having signed on with revolutionary Giuseppe Garibaldi, though his allegiance will fluctuate as the national landscape changes. And both prince and nephew will find themselves enchanted by the dazzling Angelica (Claudia Cardinale), the daughter of a rich schemer, who seems perfectly suited to thrive in the new Italy. MGM, one of the studios behind the picture, had insisted on putting Lancaster, at the time a highly bankable star, in the lead. The decision initially made Visconti unhappy, though the men struck an accord and wound up being lifelong friends. And Lancaster's performance is the heart of this haunted palace of a movie: His Don Fabrizio is a ghost in the making, a living shadow of a gilded time, clinging as we all do to the shape and movement of the human form.



# BONNIE AND CLYDE

1967

THE FRENCH NEW WAVE TOOK American gangster films and interpreted them anew. With *Bonnie and Clyde*, Arthur Penn—by that point an established, Oscar-nominated director in his mid-40s—refracted the vision of directors like Jean-Luc Godard and François Truffaut and made a fresh American gangster film with New Wave energy, only it was more violent and more nervy in its stylized brutality than any New Wave film had been. Faye Dunaway is a dazzling, surprisingly vulnerable Bonnie Parker; Warren Beatty is her swaggering beau Clyde Barrow, fearless when it comes to robbing banks but tragically unable to perform in the bedroom. The movie divided

audiences at first—some thought it glorified real-life bloodshed. But its preoccupation with bloody remorselessness isn't beside the point; it is the point. *Bonnie and Clyde* is one of the most exhilarating pictures of its decade, or even its century, thanks in large part to its editing, by Dede Allen. The film's finale, in which the doomed couple meet their end in a hail of bullets prodigious enough to kill a whole platoon, is both merciless and elegiac, a wordless summation of all the conflicting things movies can make us feel.

► **Below:** Faye Dunaway and Warren Beatty in *Bonnie and Clyde*.



# BLACK GIRL

1966

FOR BETTER OR WORSE, WE LIVE in a world where a nearly 60-year-old movie can be a revelation. Senegalese filmmaker and novelist Ousmane Sembène's debut film *Black Girl* is already loved by many, but it deserves to find an even wider audience. Mbissine Thérèse Diop gives a harrowing, quietly fiery performance as Diouana, a woman who's brought from Dakar to the South of France to work for a young family; though the ostensible head of the household (Robert Fontaine) treats her with moderate indifference, it's his icy wife Madame (Ann-Marie Jelinek) who makes the rules, and she berates Diouana constantly. Diouana has been brought to France to care for the couple's children, but instead she's expected to cook and clean. Her employers' male dinner guests kiss her and paw at her as if she were theirs for the taking. Though Diouana has dreamed of being able to walk in the sun—and shop for fine clothes—in this new-to-her country, she's kept inside day and night, which drives her into a deep depression and toward madness. This graceful, desolate picture, inspired by a true story, haunts beyond the final frame.

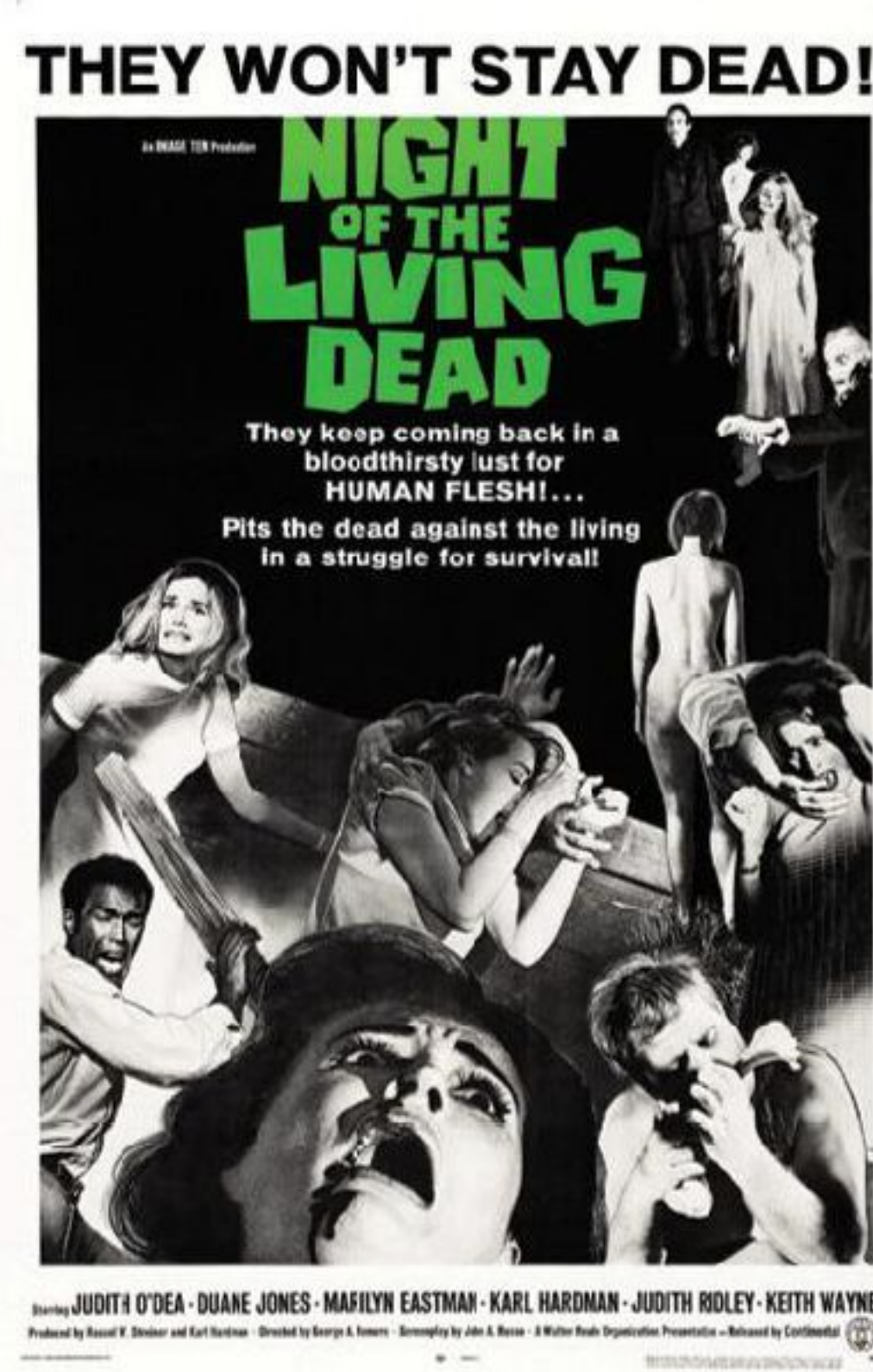






## NIGHT OF THE LIVING DEAD

1968



**GEORGE A. ROMERO'S** ULTRA-low-budget *Night of the Living Dead* was released in October 1968, just months after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr., which was shortly followed by that of Robert F. Kennedy. The dream of the Civil Rights Movement seemed to

be over. What would America now become? Romero's debut film offered a possible answer in unsparing black-and-white. Seven people huddle in the house in the country, fending off a group of hungry zombie hordes outside. Of the seven, Ben (Duane Jones) is the only Black man. He's also the voice of calm and reason in a dire situation, soothing one of the movie's more fragile characters, Barbra (Judith O'Dea). The white men have refused to help her, and they also view Ben with distrust, even though he's the one who's taken the step of blocking the doors and boarding the windows. Soon those desperate zombie hands will claw their way in even so. Their human brains have stopped working; they're

acting only on their rawest impulses. But they can't leave the world of the living alone, a clear metaphor for the indefinable anxieties tearing at the world—and specifically, maybe, the unrest and wariness of a not-even-close-to-being-integrated country. The world had gone mad, and Romero made a movie about it even as it was happening. This wasn't the first zombie movie, and over his lifetime Romero continued to revisit the genre, as well as inspiring countless others. But the mournful chill of *Night of the Living Dead*, an end-of-days movie in all senses of the term, stands apart.

► **Above:** *Zombies swarm the house in Night of the Living Dead.*





## ARMY OF SHADOWS

1969

**JEAN-PIERRE MELVILLE'S** extraordinary 1969 French Resistance drama *Army of Shadows* was dismissed by French critics upon its initial release and remained unseen in the United States until 2006, when it topped critics' best-of lists nationwide and became a 37-year-old overnight success—one that Melville, who died in 1973 at age 55, didn't live to see. The film is gorgeous—and shattering. The regally leonine Lino Ventura plays a Resistance operative who's captured by the authorities, uses his wiles to escape, and oversees the quietly brutal execution of the man who betrayed him—and that's just in the first 45 minutes or so. In adapting Joseph Kessel's 1943 book of the same name, Melville—who was himself a member of the Resistance—focuses not on spy-thriller heroics but on the workaday grind of fighting for the things you believe in. It's such an elegantly made picture that, compared with some of the wilder film experiments of its era, it could easily have been viewed as old-fashioned. But it has endured; its mournful aura is a radio signal that still resonates, an elegy for the kind of hero who fights to the end, never expecting a medal.



## SHAME

1968

**THE FICTIONAL CIVIL WAR AT** the heart of Ingmar Bergman's beautiful, somber masterpiece has no name, but it does have faces: those of Liv Ullman's Eva, fresh as a haystack in sunshine, and Max von Sydow's Jan, sturdy and thoughtful but with a twinge of scholarly absentmindedness. These two are a married couple living on a farm, scrounging to get by and doing their best to avoid the war raging around them—until avoidance becomes impossible. They're captured, turned into pawns, but they're also offered choices, and the moral compromises they make tear at the already frayed fabric of their marriage. *Shame* arrived as the

world was fixated on the Vietnam War, and although Bergman claimed it wasn't political, it's a movie that fits easily into its time. But it's also timeless, less an overt statement about events of the 1960s than an exploration of what can happen to humans when the dishonesty and brutality around them becomes too much to bear. The trick is that Bergman refuses to judge these characters. His tenderness toward them is infinite and resonant, like a caressing wind.

► **Above:** Max von Sydow, Liv Ullman and Sigge Füst in a scene from *Shame*.



## MCCABE & MRS. MILLER

1971

**THE MALE GAZE HAS GOTTEN A** lot of bad press, but aside from the fact that feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey's original ideas have often been carelessly applied, there's nothing inherently wrong with the idea of men looking at women. Ogling is one thing. But what about the way Warren Beatty, as bumbling early 20th-century Northwestern entrepreneur John McCabe, watches Julie Christie's brusquely practical madam Constance Miller devour a plateful of eggs, her hands streaked with grease as she shovels one forkful after another into her gob? He's never seen anything like it—his eyes practically have little stars in them, even with no star filter—and from that moment

he's a goner, a man green with lovesickness. Meanwhile, she finishes up and wipes her hand across her mouth with gusto.

The wary almost-romance between Beatty and Christie is just one of the gruff enchantments of Robert Altman's *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*, set in a Washington state boomtown called Presbyterian Church, in honor of its most significant building, a chapel that's underused by the locals. McCabe, in a big bearskin coat, swaggers in and takes over the town, establishing a brothel and a gambling hall; when Constance arrives, the two form a business partnership that also becomes a kind of love story, though she

charges him for sex. Altman never did anything the easy way, or the predictable way. The film was shot in sequence, on location in Vancouver, and its hushed, spellbinding finale takes place in a snowstorm that wasn't manufactured. The snow started falling, and didn't stop, on the day Altman and his crew were set to film the final scene, and rather than reschedule, they forged ahead. The result is a mystically beautiful film that also feels rooted in the earth and its bittersweet pleasures, among them love forged over a plate of greasy eggs.

► **Below:** Julie Christie and Warren Beatty in *McCabe & Mrs. Miller*.







## LAST TANGO IN PARIS

1972

**BERNARDO BERTOLUCCI'S** *Last Tango in Paris* is a demanding film. It's also one of the great films about loneliness. Marlon Brando plays a man grieving after his wife's suicide. By chance, he meets a young woman, played by Maria Schneider, when both turn up to look at a Paris apartment rental. The two embark on an affair—the rules are set by the man—in which they meet at the apartment regularly to have anonymous, consensual sex. They will not exchange names. But we do know the woman's name: Schneider's character is Jeanne. And even if Brando is the big star actor here, he is nothing without her. The sex in *Last Tango* is carnal and immediate; sometimes it's also tender and funny. But it's not sexy: The movie's opening

credits roll against images of two Francis Bacon paintings, one of a man and one of a woman, their faces unsettling blurs of paint—that should tell you something. But in addition to being provocative, *Last Tango* is strangely beautiful and affecting, exploring the ways humans sometimes use sex to escape and to attempt to erase the self. It's extreme in the way great art is often extreme.

Moving beyond the X rating the film received upon its release, *Last Tango* has become even more controversial in recent years: Schneider, who died in 2011, said in a 2007 interview that she had not been told in advance about a scene in which her character is raped, and that it made her feel humiliated. "I felt a little raped, both by Marlon and by

Bertolucci," she said. Schneider had, however, read the script in advance, and the rape scene had always been there. (And all of the sex in *Last Tango* was simulated: Schneider never claimed she was raped on set.) But it's true that Brando and Bertolucci had not told Schneider about the butter that was to be used in the movie's most famous scene, because Bertolucci had wanted her shock in the moment to feel genuine. That was a cruel surprise, and it represents a grave breach of trust. The rape scene in *Last Tango* isn't easy to watch, nor was it ever intended to be. We can count it as part of the film's complicated legacy.

► **Above:** Maria Schneider and Marlon Brando in a scene from *Last Tango in Paris*.





## CELINE AND JULIE GO BOATING

1974

**SOMEHOW WE'VE COME TO** distrust stories about friendships between women when they're made by men, without considering how few men actually care to think much about such friendships in the first place. But French New Wave filmmaker Jacques Rivette cared, and his affection and curiosity ring out through every minute of this three-hour (plus) whirl of theatrical experimentation and delight. Dominique Labourier's Julie is a dreamy librarian; Juliet Berto's Celine is a flaky magician. The two meet as Julie, sitting on a bench in a Parisian park, engrossed in a book about magic, looks up and sees a woman flying along the path on spindly legs, dropping silk scarves and invisible stardust in her wake. Julie runs after her, and a friendship is born,

one that draws the duo into an imaginary—or is it real?—world of Gothic domestic melodrama set in a spooky deserted house (and drawn, in a roundabout way, from two works by Henry James). Rivette speaks in a language of color and joy: There's enchantment in the moment Julie, a redhead in a rust-colored dress, hands Celine, a brunette in a blue silk robe, a bloody Mary—it's a talisman of relaxation after a long, stressful day. This is a great, sprawling work of wordplay, fantasy and revelry, with the occasional cat slinking through, a movie dream, a dreamed movie, or something in between.

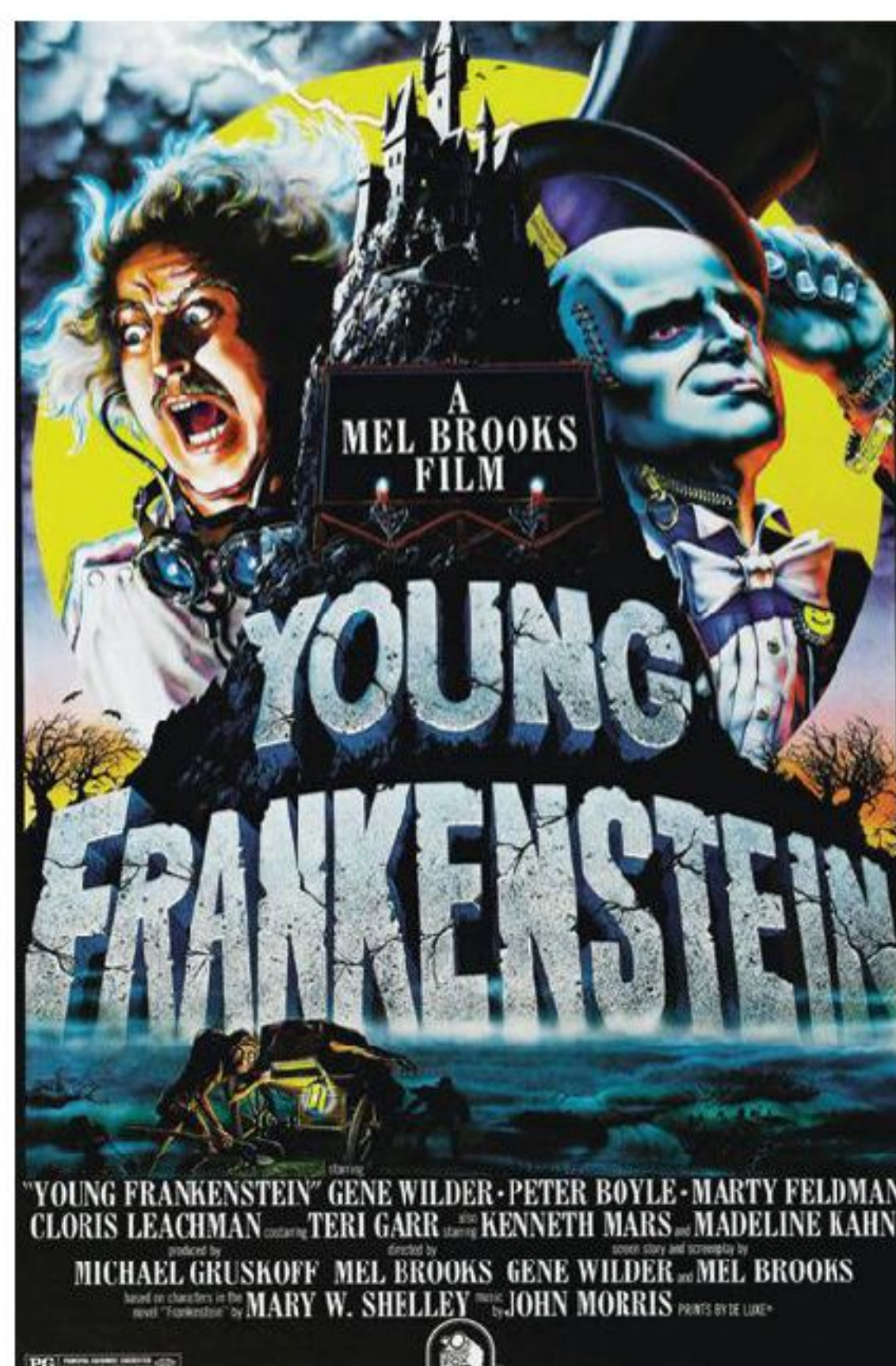
► **Below:** Juliet Berto and Dominique Labourier in *Celine and Julie Go Boating*.





# YOUNG FRANKENSTEIN

1974



**MEL BROOKS' RIFF ON THE JAMES Whale Frankenstein movies of the 1930s—conceived and co-written with one of the actors he'd worked with on *Blazing Saddles*, Gene Wilder—is so exquisite that even among comedies and farces, it deserves a special, gloriously**

cobwebby niche of its own. Wilder is Dr. Frederick “Fronkensteen,” the grandson of mad scientist Victor, who ends up reanimating a corpse of his own, which comes to life as Peter Boyle’s confused and bumbling but sympathetic monster. These two characters alone make a golden team—their “Puttin on the Ritz” top-hat-and-tails routine, which almost didn’t make it into the film (Brooks had thought it might break the mood), is a work of unhinged brilliance. But the cast that surrounds them—including Marty Feldman, Cloris Leachman, Teri Garr and Madeline Kahn, as well as a working-for-scale Gene Hackman—is the sort of assemblage that happens only once in a lifetime, a group of people so in sync they may as

well be plugged into the same electrode-enlivened brain. Brooks loved working with them all, but as he would recount years later in his autobiography, there were problems: The crew kept cracking up, which meant he was constantly reshooting. So he went out and bought 100 white handkerchiefs, instructing the team to stuff them in their mouths whenever they felt like laughing. “I turned around once in the middle of shooting a scene,” Brooks wrote, “and saw a sea of white handkerchiefs in everybody’s mouths.” Thank God Brooks’ tactic worked. For the rest of us, resistance is futile.

► **Below:** Marty Feldman, Gene Wilder, Teri Garr and Peter Boyle in *Young Frankenstein*.





## THE GODFATHER PART II

1974

**IF YOU COULD POUR DESPAIR** into a movie shape, it would be Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather Part II*. Is *Part II* a greater movie than the one that precedes it, released in 1972? Maybe only by a hair, but let's consider that fraction of a millimeter's worth of difference. Coppola's sequel, a tale of two dons, contrasts the early 20th-century rise of the syndicate boss Vito Corleone (played by Marlon Brando in the first movie, and here, in his younger incarnation, by Robert De Niro) with the slow unraveling suffered by his heir and favorite son, Michael (played once again by Al Pacino). Having left his native Italy as a young, trauma-scarred orphan, Vito builds a life for himself and his young family in New York. De Niro, in what is

possibly the greatest and most underplayed performance of his career, shows us the pure averageness of the younger Vito, before he has any sense of his innate gift for both helping people and controlling them. (In one of the movie's most extraordinary moments, Vito refuses the small act of charity offered by the boss who's just fired him—Vito's job will be given to the relative of a local mob potentate—and instead brings home to his young wife a perfect pear wrapped in paper. Her exclamation of delight tells you a thousand things about this man, and this marriage.)

And Al Pacino's Michael, no longer his father's reluctant successor, learns not just to live with his power but to love it, to his detriment: Pacino's face is a

shell of hardness with a million conflicts teeming beneath its surface—their vibrations, never seen but always felt, are the Brownian motion that keeps the movie whirring with tension. And then there's the remarkable John Cazale, as Michael's ill-fated brother Fredo, slow on the uptake but also haunted by his unachievable ambitions; his desolation is the essence of this family's crumbling soul. Maybe it's Cazale's performance in *The Godfather Part II*, in a role slightly more pronounced than he had in the first, that's the hair's breadth of difference between the two films, the edge of greatness that can come from a single glance.

► **Above:** Al Pacino in *The Godfather Part II*.



# JAWS

1975

**THE SHARK LOOKS PHONY—EVEN** Steven Spielberg knew it—but the delicate calibration of tension around it is sublime. Spielberg was only 26 when he made *Jaws*, and he wasn't sure he'd be able to pull it off: Plagued by malfunctioning mechanical sharks, not to mention a feud between two of his stars, Robert Shaw and Richard Dreyfuss, the picture seemed doomed as he was filming it on Martha's Vineyard. But the movie he delivered betrayed none of that anxiety. Roy Scheider plays a new police chief trying hard to make the beaches of fictitious Amity Island safe from a hungry killer with very sharp teeth. Dreyfuss and Shaw butt heads as, respectively, a

brainy oceanographer and a weatherbeaten shark hunter. (Offscreen, Shaw viewed the younger actor as an arrogant punk. He'd say to Dreyfuss, "Mind your mannerisms," just before the cameras rolled.) But the shark is what everyone remembers—even though you barely get to see it.

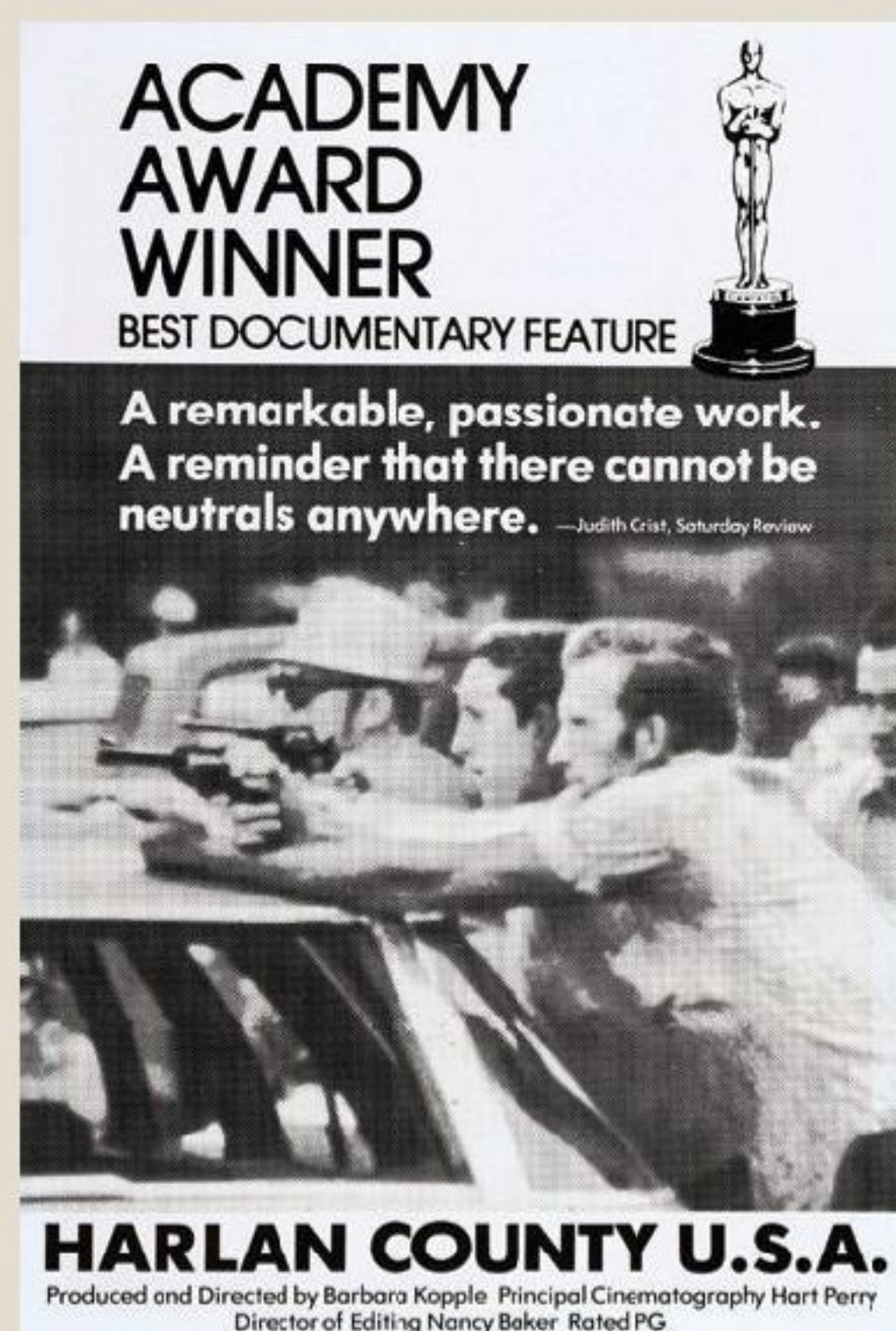
*Jaws* is always cited as the movie that changed the industry forever, a blockbuster whose success dictated how future movies would be sold. But its craftsmanship, and not its marketing, is what should be held up as a model. There's old-school elegance in Spielberg's use of movie language, even in a picture whose ostensible reason for existing is to scare audiences to bits. Like Alfred

Hitchcock before him, Spielberg knew that an implication could be more terrifying than anything you actually see. And so he shot and edited around his fake shark, using John Williams' score—its central motif carved from ominous, string-heavy strokes of sound—as the killer's aural calling card. We know how that shark ought to look, and in our brains, we reconfigure him into the most terrifying beast imaginable. We are our own best special-effects department, and Spielberg knew how to put us to work.

► **Below:** Murray Hamilton, Roy Scheider and Richard Dreyfuss on the set of *Jaws*.







## HARLAN COUNTY U.S.A.

1976

WHEN BARBARA KOPPLE AND HER small crew first rolled into Harlan County, Kentucky, to document a bitter miners' strike that would last 13 months, the locals viewed her suspiciously, at first refusing to talk to her. But Kopple, in her 20s at the time, eventually earned their trust, and her unassuming demeanor offered other benefits too. Officials at Duke Power, the entity which had refused to let its workers join the United Mine Workers, had no reason to take her seriously. "I was free to talk to anyone," she has said. "They just thought I was a funny little girl who carried a tape recorder and a camera." Kopple's casual doggedness is key to the film's power—*Harlan County U.S.A.* has a lived-in immediacy that still feels fresh today. This is a great film not just about a bloody labor battle, but also about the ways work can shape the lives of individuals and families across generations. Its truths are written on the faces of the miners and their families, particularly the women who joined the fight on behalf of their husbands, refusing to bow to a powerful corporation that would break them without a second thought.



1970s

## JEANNE DIELMAN, 23 QUAI DU COMMERCE, 1080 BRUXELLES

1975

**THE STUFF OF MOST LIVES** wouldn't make much of a movie. But that's exactly the point of Chantal Akerman's *Jeanne Dielman*, which, over the course of more than three hours, details the routine of a widowed mother (Delphine Seyrig) whose days have a regimented fullness: Her mornings are filled with errands, tidying up and preparing meals. In the afternoons, before her son returns from school, she has sex with one client or another in her bedroom (though we don't see those encounters). This, too, is just another part of her day, though there's something unraveling in her that we don't immediately see.

Akerman's camera doesn't lead us as we're accustomed to being led in a film; it doesn't show us exactly where to look or tell us what to think. Unremarkable events unfold in real time, captured in compositions as serene as austere flower arrangements. Akerman said that the film was intended as a love letter to people like her mother, women who do what's necessary, every day, with mindful attention to detail. Her film reframes how we think about conventional movie action—*Jeanne Dielman* shows us another truth, one piece of folded laundry at a time.

► **Above:** Delphine Seyrig in a scene from *Jeanne Dielman*.





## TAXI DRIVER

1976



**YOU DON'T NEED TO HAVE LIVED** through the American '70s to see how Martin Scorsese and screenwriter Paul Schrader captured its essence—the sense of hopelessness and

helplessness, of cities and a whole country spun out of control—in *Taxi Driver*. Robert De Niro's Travis Bickle, a loner—and a veteran—seems possibly harmless at first. Maybe he's just the sad, self-pitying teen of Paul Anka's late-'50s hit "Lonely Boy" grown into an anxious, sleepless man. He's trying to hold everything together, pouring his energy into long hours at work, keeping his diary of bromides, but we can see that his emotional logic, bolstered by judgment-day certainty, is frayed at the edges. De Niro gets right inside Travis, looking out with a steely gaze that claims to see all and yet also floats dangerously above the surface of reality. Released the

year after the United States pulled out of Vietnam, *Taxi Driver* spoke of a particular kind of defeat, but also of anger for which there was no healthy release. It's a drag that such a brilliant and unnervingly perceptive work has inspired so many lesser imitations, and that so many performers—even some very good ones, like Christian Bale, Joaquin Phoenix and Sam Rockwell—have at times tried to clutch at De Niro's brilliance without coming close to matching it. But that should never be held against it. *Taxi Driver* will forever be a film of chilly greatness.

► **Above:** Jodi Foster and Robert De Niro in *Taxi Driver*.



## KILLER OF SHEEP

1978

**THE MAVERICK FILMMAKERS OF** 1970s Hollywood—Scorsese, Coppola, De Palma—took big-studio money and spun it into works of thrilling inventiveness. But the decade also belongs to another kind of risk taker: Independent filmmaker Charles Burnett shot his first feature, *Killer of Sheep*, on weekends in the community of Watts, where he'd grown up. His budget was less than \$10,000, much of it grant money; the film would be his MFA thesis project at UCLA. *Killer of Sheep* is a movie about family life, about neighborhoods, about the perennial business of

kids' going around just doing what kids do. Stan (Henry G. Sanders) works in a slaughterhouse to support his wife (Kaycee Moore) and their two young kids (played by Angela Burnett, the director's daughter, and Jack Drummond). The job numbs him; he has little emotional energy left for his wife, whose love for him runs deep—in one scene, the two slow-dance in the family living room to Dinah Washington's "This Bitter Earth," and though she strokes his shoulders with an almost electrical tenderness, she can't shift his faraway gaze. Yet this is anything but a punishing study

of poverty and suffering. The characters' dialogue crackles with live-wire believability. The neighborhood kids—little groups of restless thrill seekers, roaming their neighborhood kingdom in T-shirts and sneakers—pick minor fights, stumble while running or roughhousing and just generally hang out. The texture of life is all over *Killer of Sheep* like a fingerprint, proof that the most daring filmmaking can spring from your own backyard.

► **Below:** Henry G. Sanders and Kaycee Moore in *Killer of Sheep*.







## **THE EMPIRE STRIKES BACK**

**1980**

**OF ALL THE MOVIES IN THE STAR WARS CONSTELLATION, IRVIN KERSHNER'S GRAND ADVENTURE** is the only one that works on its own, vivid and dramatic and redolent of classic Hollywood craftsmanship. The story, written by George Lucas, Leigh Brackett and Lawrence Kasdan, takes place three years after the cheesy space opera that started it all; the movie works because its creators take the story just seriously enough, leaning into the darker undertones of its central father-son conflict and giving its three primary characters—a warrior princess (Carrie Fisher), a swaggering, authority-defying smuggler (Harrison Ford) and a knight who doesn't yet know his worth (Mark Hamill)—more depth and dimension than they had in the first film.

No one had expected the first *Star Wars* movie to be the huge hit it became or, for that matter, to reverberate through the decades as it did. Lucas began coming up with ideas for a sequel in mid-1977, and enlisted Brackett, a respected screenwriter and science-fiction-fantasy novelist, to help bring them to life. Brackett had co-written screenplays for Howard Hawks (among them *The Big Sleep*, *Rio Bravo* and *Hatari!*), and had channeled crime novelist Raymond Chandler for Robert Altman's gorgeously inventive version of *The Long Goodbye*. She had already been diagnosed with cancer when Lucas hired her, and she died in 1978, having turned in a first draft only weeks earlier. While the finished film veers significantly from the material she filed, her presence can be felt in the final product even so. She helped bridge the old Hollywood and the new, shepherding one franchise toward a future almost wilder than science fiction.





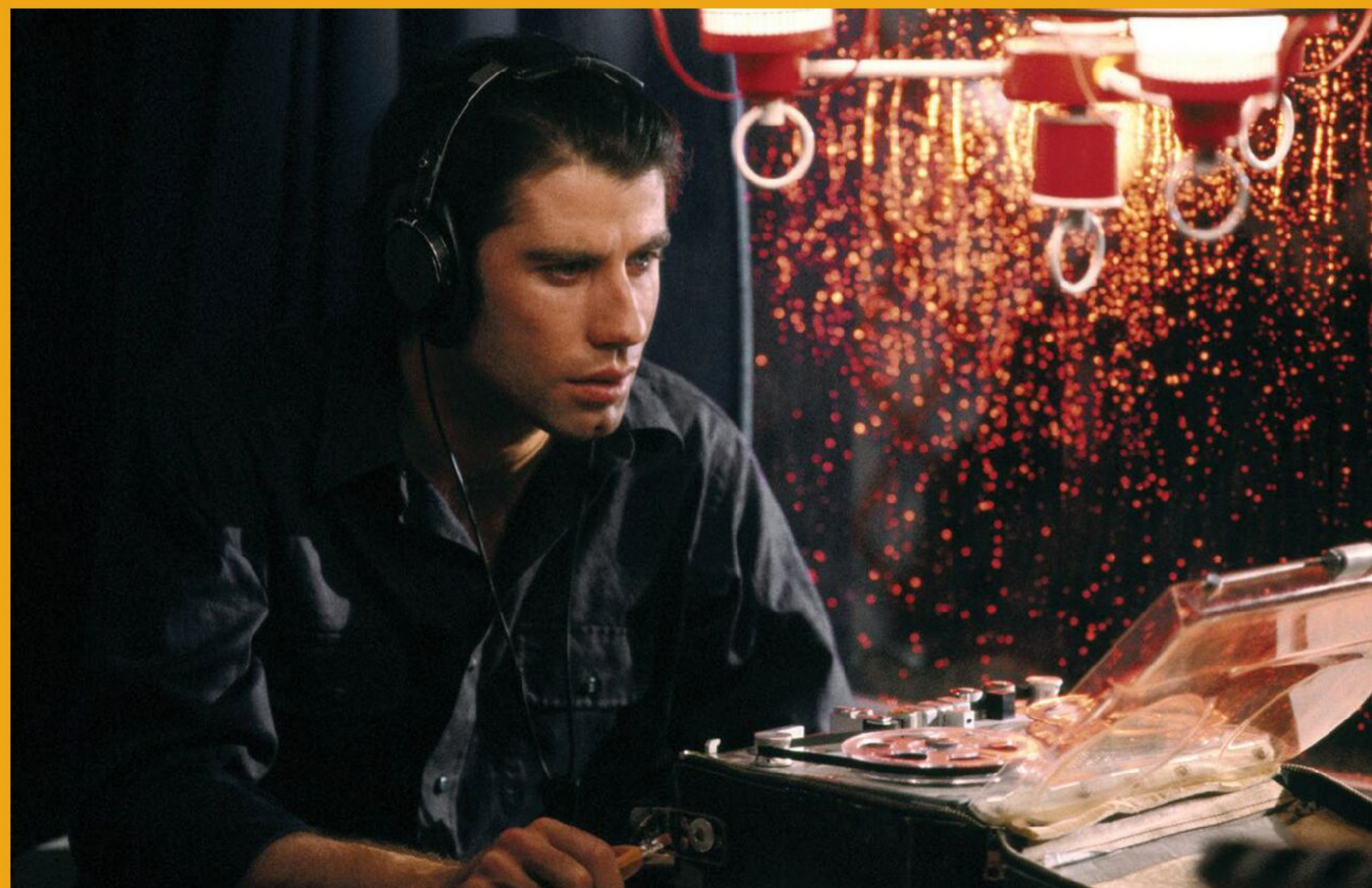
► **Above:** Harrison Ford, Carrie Fisher, Anthony Daniels and Peter Mayhew on the set of *The Empire Strikes Back*. ► **Right:** John Travolta in a scene from *Blow Out*.

## BLOW OUT

1981

**BRIAN DE PALMA CAME OF AGE** working in the New Hollywood of the 1970s, alongside peers (and friends) like Martin Scorsese, Steven Spielberg and Francis Ford Coppola. Yet his films, though often admired, weren't treated as great feats of artistry, as theirs were. History, shifted by the enthusiasm of younger movie lovers, has changed that in the past few years—but no matter when or how you've found your way to it, *Blow Out* has always been great. John Travolta's Jack is a sound guy, unambitious and stuck working on B movies, who's collecting wind noises out in the field one night when he sees a car swerve off a bridge and into a creek. He dives in after it and rescues the woman trapped inside, Nancy Allen's Sally, a makeup artist and sometime call girl who, it turns out, was consorting with the governor—he was at the wheel when the crash occurred. The governor's associates rush to cover up Sally's involvement; meanwhile, Jack begins to suspect that the

crash wasn't accidental. He listens carefully to the recording he collected that evening and clearly hears a gunshot—but the closer he gets to the truth, the more Sally is endangered, and his efforts to protect her backfire. *Blow Out* is a film filled with mistrust, one where the ghosts of Chappaquiddick and the Zapruder film lurk in the corners. No one, least of all those in positions of power, can be trusted. (The picture is set against a fictional, and garish, celebration of the Liberty Bell, as if to underscore how far the country has strayed from its original, not-yet-cracked ideals.) Allen and Travolta are wonderful here: Allen's Sally, naïve but not dumb, fills the movie with light—her description of “the no makeup look” is a marvel of airhead timing. But it's Travolta, an actor capable of great vulnerability, who breaks you. The movie's final scene sends you off feeling that nothing is right with the world. It's the opposite of numbness; rather, a sense of being much too alive.







## **E.T. THE EXTRA-TERRESTRIAL**

**1982**

**FOR KIDS BORN AFTER** roughly the mid-1970s, a world without *E.T.* seems unimaginable. The film became a huge hit upon its release, and children continue to watch it today, often via streaming rather than a VHS tape gone threadbare after being run through the VCR too many times. It's easy to take *E.T.* for granted. But few filmmakers have captured the texture of childhood loneliness and anxiety as well as Steven Spielberg does here, even as he spins a fantasy adventure that's captivating on its own terms. Young Elliott (Henry Thomas) is rumbling through

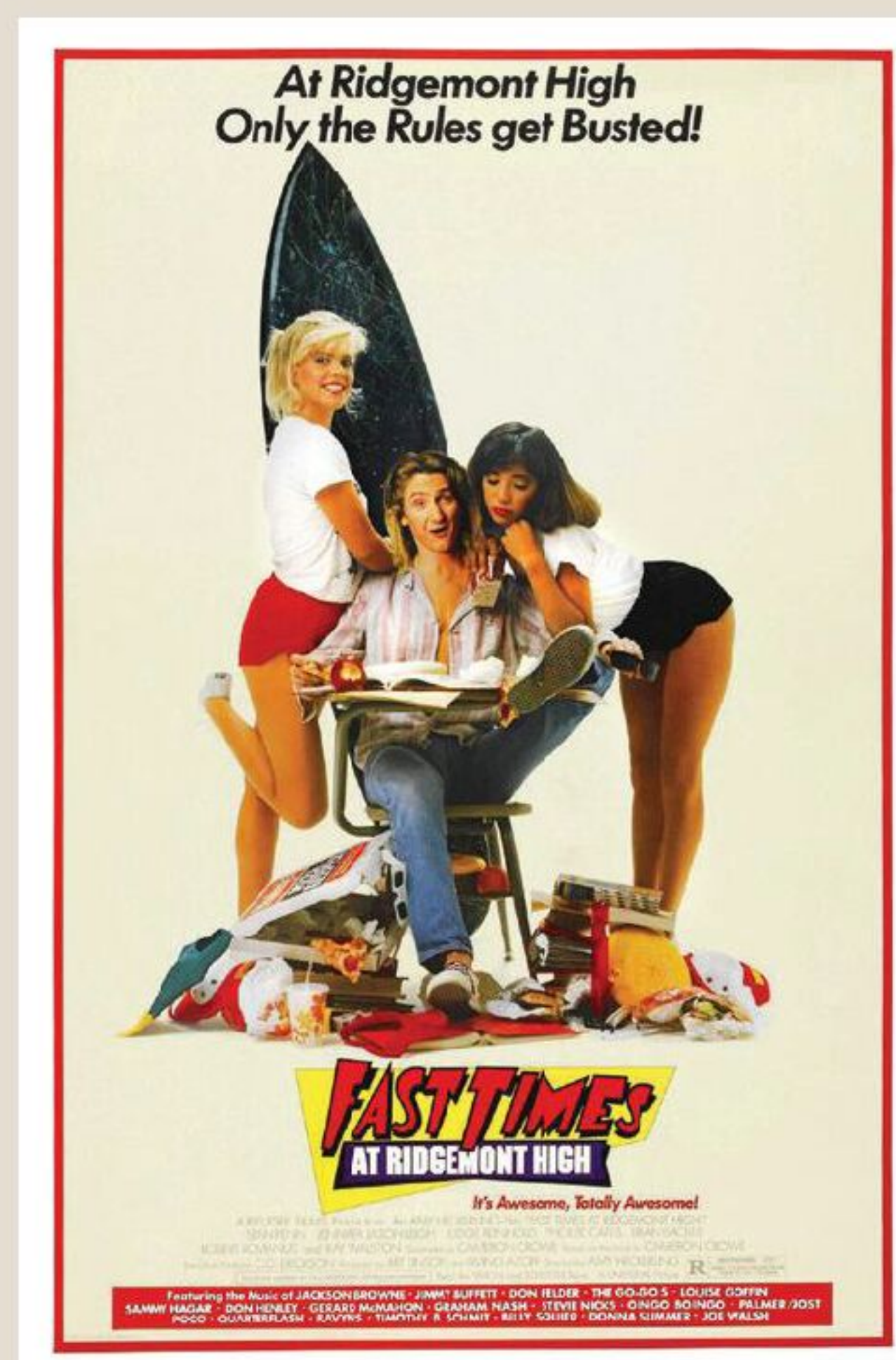
a rocky transition: His father has just left the family, and he and his older brother Michael (Robert McNaughton) and preschool-age sister Gertie (Drew Barrymore) watch as their mother, Mary (Dee Wallace), tries to hold things together. Everyone is confused and hurt. But Elliott is about to meet a squat, greenish-brown figure who has been abandoned by his extraterrestrial compatriots—the fact that this otherworldly being lingered too long to marvel over a little pine tree, the sort of thing we who live here might pass without a second thought,

is what causes him to be left behind. These two will form a bond so strong that each experiences the feelings of the other. Perhaps this is Spielberg and screenwriter Melissa Mathison's sly way of introducing children not just to the concept of empathy, but also to the idea of the sympathetic imagination, the foundation of all great literature. And that may be one reason the memory of seeing *E.T.* lives forever in many adults, even if they haven't watched it in ages. It speaks to us in a language we never outgrow.





► **Above:** *E.T.* and Henry Thomas in a scene from the film.



## FAST TIMES AT RIDGEMONT HIGH

1982

**BEGINNING IN THE FALL OF 1979**, a 22-year-old Cameron Crowe, who at the time already had several years of experience writing for *Rolling Stone* and *Creem*, spent a school year undercover at Clairemont High School in San Diego. He drew from the experience to write his 1981 novel *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, which he adapted himself for the screen: It was his first movie credit, and the first for director Amy Heckerling. Though teenage high jinks—and insecurities—are a staple of American comedies, *Fast Times* stands tall among them, not just for its brisk, breezy pacing, or for the vivid quality of its characters (like Sean Penn's glassy-eyed stoner-surfer Spicoli), but for its frankness about teenage abortion, and its refusal to address the termination of a pregnancy as a moral quandary worthy of society's handwringing. Which is not to say that Heckerling and Crowe treat the subject lightly: When 15-year-old Stacy Hamilton—played by a very young and extremely touching Jennifer Jason Leigh—confronts the young

cad who got her pregnant, Robert Romanus' Mike Damone, he resists taking responsibility. They only “did it” once; he’s just not interested in her problems. Then, with an eyeroll, he says he figures she expects him to pay for it.

Stacy tentatively lays out the terms: She’d like him to pay half, but also maybe give her a ride to the clinic? (He never shows up, though she gets through the procedure on her own.) You could argue that Heckerling doesn’t spend a lot of time showing the emotional toll of a terminated pregnancy. On the other hand, her matter-of-factness is just what’s called for. This act won’t ruin Stacy’s life; it might actually save it. And the fact that she has access to a safe abortion is a given. Leigh, as Stacy, is a young woman barely out of girlhood—her face still has a cherubic roundness. To think of what she’d have to go through today, if she happened to live in the wrong state, adds another layer of context to Heckerling’s approach. And it makes 1982, fairly recent history, seem so very far away.



# THE NIGHT OF THE SHOOTING STARS

1982

**IF YOU WERE A SERIOUS, SEMI-**highbrow moviegoer in the early 1980s, this was the film you went to see on a date. Yet somehow it seems to have fallen out of our collective moviegoing memory. Directed by brothers Paolo and Vittorio Taviani, *The Night of the Shooting Stars*, set in Tuscany in 1944, follows a group of citizens who leave their village just before their houses are set to be blown up by the Nazis, in advance of the liberating American troops' arrival. The story is told through the eyes of six-year-old Cecilia (Micol Guidelli), who sees the event as a great adventure, though not even she can be protected from fear or tragedy. The Tavianis

blend comedy, fantasy and mournful drama in such a heady swirl that you're sometimes not sure which is which; the whole film is a reflection on the way our memories, as recollections of lived events freed from the events themselves, tend to take on dreamlike qualities. The film closes with a great, bittersweet romantic flourish, a liaison between two sixtyish villagers (Omero Antonutti and Margarita Lozano) who confess that they've loved each other in secret since their youth. This is a wartime drama shot through with golden threads of grace.

► **Below:** Micol Guidelli in *The Night of the Shooting Stars*.

► Ed Harris in a scene from *The Right Stuff*.







## **THE RIGHT STUFF**

**1983**

**JEAN-LUC GODARD ONCE SAID ALL YOU NEED FOR A MOVIE IS A GUN AND A GIRL.**

How about astronauts and Sam Shepard? Philip Kaufman's adaptation of Tom Wolfe's bestseller about the early days of high-speed aircraft and the original Project Mercury astronauts is a story, largely, about men: their dreams, their sense of discipline, their fierce urge to compete among one another. But Kaufman doesn't let men get away with their usual crap. He's sensitive both to their hubris and their capacity for wonder, capturing the worst of them, the best of them, and the stuff in the middle that's just right. Ed Harris, Scott Glen, Dennis Quaid and Fred Ward star as John Glenn, Alan Shepard, Gordon Cooper and Gus Grissom, the first men chosen and trained to go into space. Shepard plays Chuck Yeager, the first pilot to break the sound barrier. Kaufman doesn't forget the wives of these men: They're played by Mary Jo Deschanel, Kathy Baker, Pamela Reed, Veronica Cartwright and Barbara Hershey, and they're all fully rounded characters, even when they get relatively little time on-screen. *The Right Stuff* did poorly at the box office upon its release, though critics loved it. Christopher Nolan did too: He has called it "an almost perfect movie." He's wrong about the "almost" part, but we'll forgive him. It's one of the great achievements of late-20th-century filmmaking, and the instant antidote to anyone who says the eighties were a terrible time for grown-up movies. You just had to know where to gaze: into space.



# **SANS SOLEIL**

**1983**

## **THE FIRST THREE TIMES I SAW**

Chris Marker's experimental documentary *Sans Soleil*, I couldn't explain it at all. The next three times, I felt less articulate than ever. But by that point the movie had entered my bloodstream, and there was no fighting it. Let's explain it this way: *Sans Soleil* examines the interlocking intricacies of how we see the world and how we remember seeing it. The movie is a sort of travelogue diary stitched together from images captured mostly in Japan and West Africa, though Marker's camera—and his eye—also roams in Paris, Iceland and San Francisco. The movie's ideas unfold through letters one man—a fictional one, with the delightful name Sandor Krasna—has written to the woman who narrates the film. (In the movie's English version, the voice belongs to Alexandra Stewart.) These letters contain observations that feel like fractured bits of some larger whole: "The Japanese invented CinemaScope 10 centuries before the movies;" "History throws its empty bottles out the window." The images Marker has assembled, most of them recorded in the 1970s, include smoggy urban sunsets and cars snaking along in traffic, beckoning plaster cats who serve a spiritual purpose, the mystical swirl of Kim Novak's chignon in Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. It's all as vivid as a dream, and as fleeting as a movie.





## BLUE VELVET

1986

**BY NOW, THE WORLD IS USED** to David Lynch's weirdness. But in 1986, *Blue Velvet*—so peculiar, so disturbing, so exhilarating—felt like the beginning of an amorphous revolution, and even if the movie left you feeling shaken, you automatically knew which side you were on. A guileless college student, Kyle MacLachlan's Jeffrey Beaumont, returns to his hometown of Lumberton North Carolina, where he finds a severed ear in a field—it lies there, pale and bloodless, like an inedible mushroom. Following the trail of its mystery, and with the help of a local detective's daughter—Laura Dern's Sandy, practically vibrating

with small-town sweetness—he's drawn into the world of gangster sicko Frank Booth (Dennis Hopper), who has a wholly unhealthy hold on a local nightclub singer, Dorothy Vallens (Isabella Rossellini). Jeffrey is the quintessential naif; his face looks to have been scrubbed clean with a Neutrogena bar. But not only does he get a glimpse into Frank and Dorothy's violent and twisted relationship; he too is seduced by Dorothy, who begs him to fulfill her masochistic desires. And so on. It's possible to love *Blue Velvet* even as you want to run a mile from its visions of depravity. But Lynch and cinematographer Frederick Elmes make it all look so

beautiful, so seductive. Jeffrey is drawn, as we are, to both the comforting hominess of Lumberton and the sordidness of Frank's world, with its faded art deco interiors and nighttime neon temptations. And then, of course, there's Rossellini's Dorothy, possessed of a sensuous, lunar beauty, the movie's true north, the one you want to protect. No wonder Jeffrey is drawn to her. And it's her face, even more than the Kodak-red roses of Lumberton, that stays with you across the decades.

► **Above:** Laura Dern and Kyle MacLachlan on the set of *Blue Velvet*.





## **MOONSTRUCK**

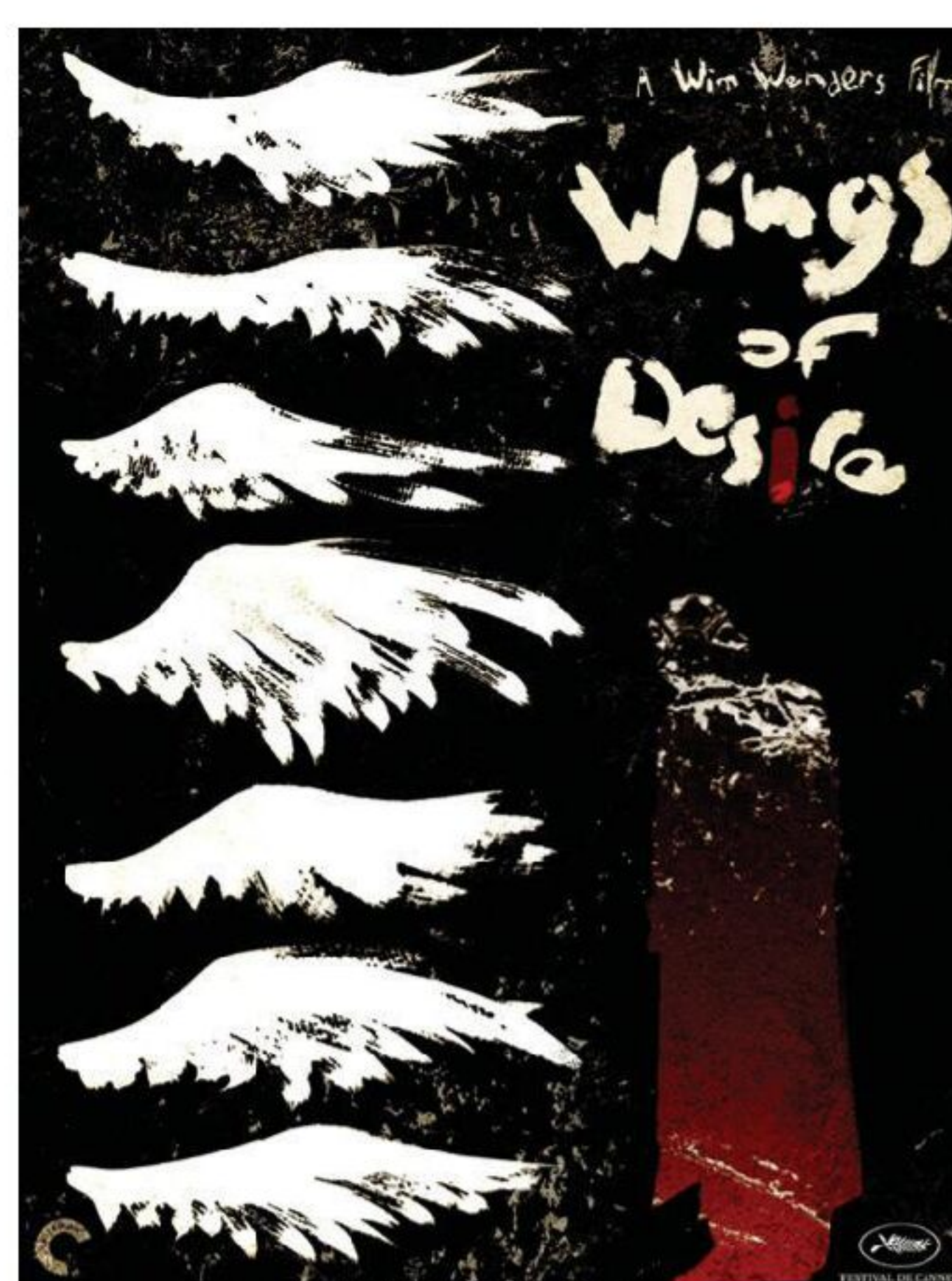
**1987**

**THERE WEREN'T MANY GREAT ROMANTIC COMEDIES IN THE LATE 1980S, WHICH MADE THE** appearance of Norman Jewison's *Moonstruck* a small miracle, like the special, glowing, love-bestowing moon that figures in the movie's plot. Cher plays Loretta Castorini, a 37-year-old widow who has dutifully agreed to marry a man who's all wrong for her, Danny Aiello's stolid Johnny Cammareri. When Johnny is called away to Sicily to tend to his dying mother, he sends Loretta on a mission to connect with his estranged brother. Ronny (Nicolas Cage) is a bitter and somewhat socially inept baker with a prosthetic hand, and he blames Johnny for the accident that caused it. But Loretta is having none of his complaints and nonsense, and that's how he knows immediately she's the woman for him: His passionate streak simply has no outlet, until he literally sweeps her off her feet and carries her "to the bed," at which point she knows she too is a goner and falls into a fake Sarah Bernhardt-style swoon. Cher, with her pinpoint timing and satiny voice, was one of the most delightful actresses of this era; Cage was still near the beginning of his career and figuring out what he could do, which, it turns out, was a lot. As the firebrand romantic Ronny, with his sad, mooing eyes, he gives one of his finest and funniest performances. *Moonstruck*—written by John Patrick Shanley—tells us that the wrong person is often the right person, and that doing things out of duty is sometimes the surest way to mess up your life. Those ideas come straight from the classic romantic-comedy handbook, but they're truths, not truisms. And to watch these characters find those truths for themselves is a particular kind of moonlit bliss.





► **Above:** Cher and Nicolas Cage in *Moonstruck*.



## WINGS OF DESIRE

1987

**IF, IN 1987, YOU HAD NEVER** been to Berlin, Wim Wenders' melancholy romance *Wings of Desire* was enough to make you fall in love with it, in all its tattered, muted-silver splendor. Berlin was, at the time, a city still divided by a wall, and there were ragged, muddy fields where, years later, modern office buildings and shopping plazas would spring up. But it was also, in Wenders' vision, a place where angels roamed. Bruno Ganz, with his great, bruised-boxer face, plays Damiel, an angel who watches people from various perches high above the city, including the golden-tipped Victory Column and the broken-but-mended Kaiser Wilhelm Memorial Church. As an angel, he can hear the thoughts of the humans below, a

cacophony of often-half-formed musings that constitute a kind of dada poetry. Damiel looks in on a circus, and there he sees, and falls in love with, a human who is almost an angel, the trapeze artist Marion (played by the late Solveig Dommartin). He longs to be with her, a dire complication for a winged, nonhuman entity. But Peter Falk, playing a version of himself who is also, it turns out, a former angel, has come to West Berlin to appear in a film. He has advice and encouragement for Damiel, and there's a happy ending, with Nick Cave presiding. Maybe it would be fun to be an angel for a while, to eavesdrop on citizens of the earth and bear witness to their experience. But nothing, Wenders decides, beats being a human.



# HARD BOILED

1992

**BEFORE VIOLENT ACTION EXCESS** became the norm—extended, shapeless, exhausting sequences of dudes blamming other dudes ad nauseam, wholly lacking in visual logic, poetry, or wit—there was John Woo, one of the princes of Hong Kong’s action-film golden age. Don’t even try to tally the body count in *Hard Boiled*—you’ll run out of fingers and toes before you know it. The criminally charismatic Hong Kong star Chow Yun Fat is Tequila, a cop who plays jazz clarinet during his off hours

and improvises similarly when he’s on the job: An early shootout in a mob-ridden café festooned with birdcages results in the death of a cop, and it’s Tequila’s fault. Eventually, he’ll tangle with a sly junior triad member on the rise, played by another actor with soulfulness to burn: Tony Leung’s Alan is a somber gangster for sure, and one with a secret. (At the end of the day, he retreats to his boat, where he solemnly folds an origami crane for each man he’s killed.) Woo’s violence—

in this and in other action films he made before the era of reunification, several of them starring Chow—is absolutely over the top, a jamboree of spurting arteries and blown-out kneecaps. But his artistry lies in the way he shapes a sequence for maximum kinetic effect, creating mosaics of sound and action that leave you feeling exhilarated rather than beaten up.

► **Below:** Tony Leung in a scene from *Hard Boiled*.







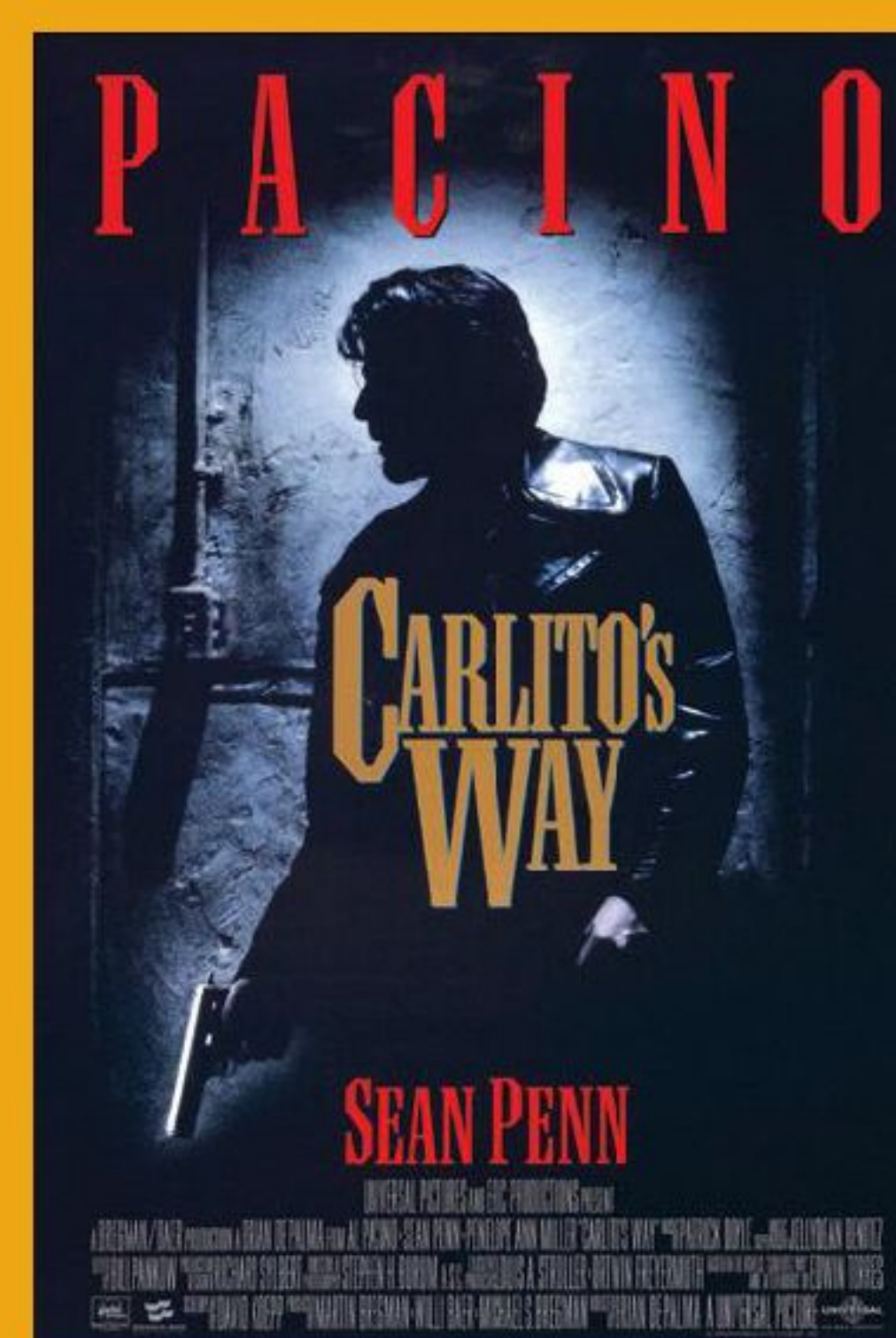
## MALCOLM X

1992

**IN THE WRONG HANDS,** A biographical epic can be a real snooze. In the right ones—and with a perceptive, expressive actor at its center—it can have a kind of transportive energy. Across three hours and then some, Spike Lee maps the life of the slain civil rights activist whose controversial words and deeds often cut against the grain of other, more moderate voices—like Martin Luther King Jr.—who sought to change the lives of Black people in mid-20th century America. *Malcolm X* didn't play nice with anyone; he was ideologically uncompromising, to the point

of pious inflexibility. But as Denzel Washington plays him, his flaws and remarkable strengths merge into a dazzling whole. Washington plays Malcolm X's charisma as a mode of seeking, a desire not to tamp down frustration and anger but to transform them into usable energy. Lee, respectful as he is, doesn't ignore his hero's flaws; he's deeply invested in Malcolm X the human being, a complex figure whose mission was aborted before his best ideas could blossom.

► **Above:** Denzel Washington as *Malcolm X* in the film.



## CARLITO'S WAY

1993

**THERE ARE A MILLION STORIES** about criminals sprung from jail who vow to go straight. And then there's Brian De Palma's *Carlito's Way*. Al Pacino—swaggering, streetwise, lovesick—gives one of his strongest performances as convicted drug felon Carlito Brigante, whose crooked lawyer (played, fabulously, by Sean Penn) somehow gets him freed after just five years of a 30-year sentence. Carlito's post-prison dream is to buy into a car-rental joint in the Bahamas—all the better if he can persuade the love of his life, Gail (Penelope Ann Miller), to join him, though he broke her heart before going up the river. Few movies give you pretty much everything—exhilarating action and diamond-hard violence, doomed romance, bitterly funny dialogue—in such a compact package. But there's something else: Movie craftsmanship can be deeply pleasurable, but not by itself. In adapting a duo of novels by Edwin Torres (the script is by master screenwriter David Koepp), de Palma works in a style both economical and luxurious. There's not a single superfluous shot; you're entreated not just to look, but to see. The visual logic of a sequence involving a poolroom shootout is gorgeously precise. *Carlito's Way* is De Palma's warmest film, so meticulous, so lyrical, so operatic in scope and pitch that it leaves you feeling both wrecked and deeply satisfied.



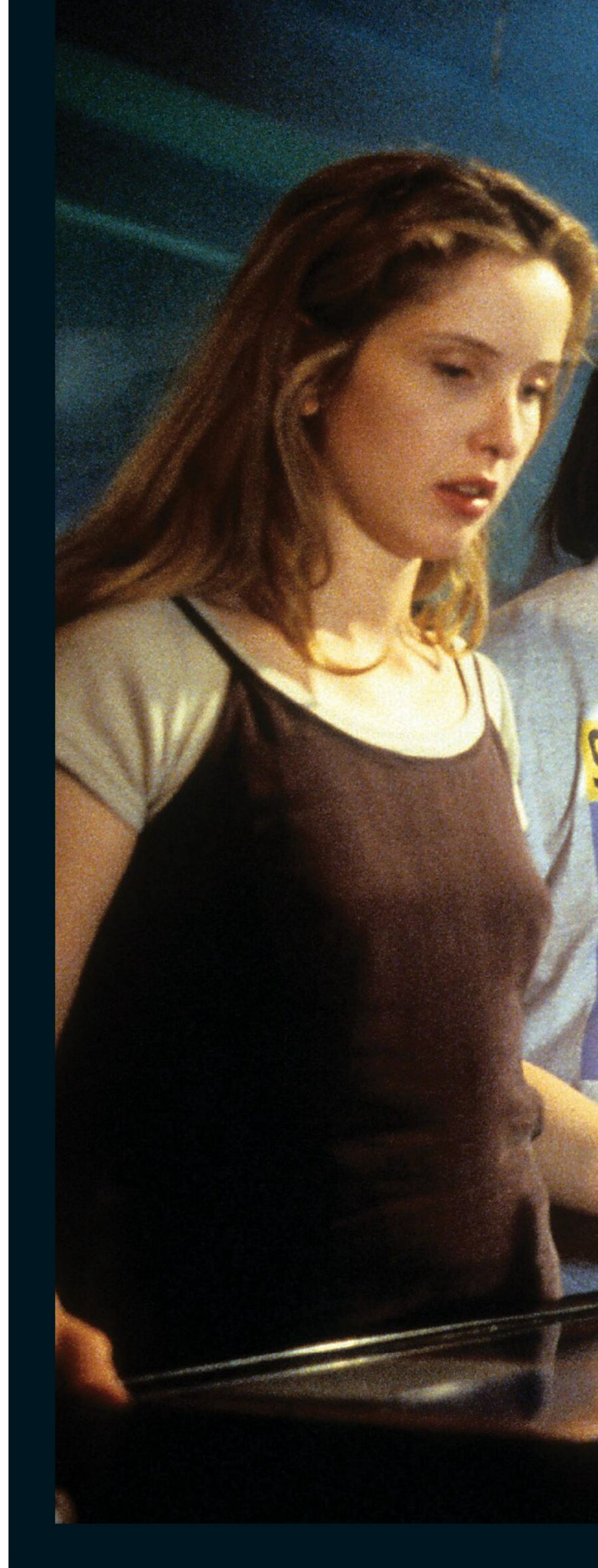
# CHUNGKING EXPRESS

1994

**TONY LEUNG, ONE OF THE STARS** of Wong Kar-wai's epic pop romance *Chungking Express*, is the most New Wave of the Hong Kong New Wave actors. His face has an old-school Hollywood movie-star quality—his sensuality is the slow-burning kind, lurking beneath quizzical boyishness—though it also feels modern and fresh. It's a face that might take you anywhere, and in *Chungking Express*, you follow willingly. The movie consists of two love stories loosely connected by, literally, the brushing of shoulders: In the first section, a plainclothes cop, Takeshi Kaneshiro's He Zhiwu (or Cop 223), falls for a heroin trafficker played by Brigitte Lin, a mystery vixen in a trench coat and sunglasses, her windblown blond wig marking her as the heir to dozens of movie femme fatales before her. There's no hope for these two—their story is a languorous cat-and-mouse chase through the city that ends with a burst of stylish, cathartic violence. But the lovers of the second story may fare better: Leung's Cop 663 is having trouble

getting over a lost love, a flight attendant whom he believed would stick around forever. Faye (played, winsomely, by pop star Faye Wong) is the pixielike lunch-counter girl who develops a huge crush on 663—but in his moony state he seems to look right past her. Faye obtains keys to his apartment and sneaks in when he's at work, at first just tidying up a bit and later redecorating the place, though 663 is so distracted he barely notices the changes.

All that may sound a little stalkerish, but in Wong's hands it's both delightful and potent, like a comedic take on the thematic spine of *Vertigo*: the man who can't see the woman standing before him. *Chungking Express* is a stylish, dreamy exploration of the nature of fateful encounters, of missed connections and of wishes that don't come true—for the best. Leung is our chief guide, and to find our way, all we need to do is to watch his face. Our reward comes at the end, when the elusive thing we know as happiness finally seems to be within his grasp.



► **Left:** Brigitte Lin in a scene from *Chungking Express*. ► **Above:** Julie Delpy, director Richard Linklater and Ethan Hawke on the set of *Before Sunrise*.





## **BEFORE SUNRISE**

**1995**

**THOUGH IT'S HARD TO FATHOM TODAY, RICHARD LINKLATER'S *BEFORE SUNRISE*—NOW CHERISHED** by so many as one of the most romantic movies ever made—wasn't a huge box-office hit upon its release. Though critics loved it, and though it made money because its budget was so modest to begin with, it found its true viewership later on VHS and DVD. Now, a world without *Before Sunrise*—or its two remarkable sequels, *Before Sunset* and *Before Midnight*—seems almost unimaginable. Two students, Ethan Hawke's Jesse and Julie Delpy's Celine, meet on a train from Budapest to Vienna. Celine, who is French, is headed home to Paris. Jesse, the quintessential spontaneous American, persuades her to disembark with him in Vienna. Jesse's flight home leaves in the morning, but he's almost completely broke; getting a room is out of the question. So these two spend the night roaming the city, talking about what matters to them, their thoughts streaming out like crisscrossing and entwining ribbons. And they begin to fall in love, though this one night in a quietly sparkling city may be the entirety of their story. Of course, now we know how their romance turned out, at least up to a point. But in 1995—or anytime before 2004, when *Before Sunset* continued their story—we were left to imagine what their future might be, or if they'd have one at all. Taken by itself, *Before Sunrise* is a movie about the people we are before we have any idea what life and love have in store for us. To watch it, or re-watch it, after you have some life under your belt is like revisiting a past self, and marveling at the walking, talking question mark you used to be.



# DEAD MAN

1995

**THE OLD AMERICAN WEST WAS** a place of bleak poetry, of people dying tragically young, of rugged, unwelcoming landscapes and self-righteous settlers thinking nothing of calling stolen land their own. In Jim Jarmusch's *Dead Man*, Johnny Depp is William Blake—but not that William Blake—a meek late-19th-century accountant in a plaid suit, newly arrived in a desolate town called Machine. On his first night there, he becomes the third party in a lover's altercation and kills a man, though the encounter also leaves him with a bullet lodged deep in his chest. He will have to die, sooner rather

than later. But before he does, he meets a Native American—played, with huge reservoirs of both dry humor and grandeur, by Gary Farmer—who goes by the name of Nobody. Nobody has tried and failed to dig the bullet from William's flesh. He has also decided that William is the reincarnation of the poet he adores—yes, that William Blake—and he takes it upon himself to guide his new friend peacefully toward death. Depp's performance here is marvelous, shifting between austere gentleness and fierce vitality. As he makes his way out of the

land of the living, with Nobody's help, his transformation is hardly peaceful: It's a metaphor for everything America was built on. This is a place that, for all its achievements, has never fully reckoned with its bloody past. Jarmusch's film, a reverie in stark, velvety black-and-white, contemplates that legacy—though it also takes time to wonder at the sky, with its shooting stars and rain-heavy clouds, and accept its benediction.

► **Below:** Johnny Depp in a scene from *Dead Man*.







## **IRMA VEP**

**1996**

**WHAT DOES FILM MEAN? WHAT** does making a film mean? Watching movies can be all-consuming by itself; why on Earth would anyone want to make one? Olivier Assayas' dazzling *Irma Vep* answers all of those questions and none of them. Hong Kong film star Maggie Cheung appears as a version of herself, brought to Paris to star in a remake of Louis Feuillade's 1915 crime serial *Les Vampires*. The director is an idealistic old-school auteur, René, played by New Wave legend Jean-Pierre Léaud. He has very specific ideas of what he wants, so intricately personal that those

around him don't always know how to follow his directives. He's also on the cusp of a breakdown, having burrowed so deeply into the nautilus of his ideas that he can't find his way out.

Assayas revisited and reimagined this material with a limited series for HBO in 2022, but the OG version, funny, hypnotic and brushed with tender melancholy, reigns supreme. The crew of *Irma Vep*'s film-within-a-film includes costume designer Zoé, played by the effervescent, wistful Nathalie Richard, who develops a crush on Maggie: In one scene, the two zip through

nighttime Paris on a motorbike, the lights of the city blurred like an unspoken promise. Cheung, as the actor Maggie, is as radiant as a guiding star. And as the jewel thief Irma Vep, slinking through the ill-fated movie-within-a-movie in a latex suit, she's a night-dweller of dreams, and of movies. She steals a little something from us, leaving us bereft at the end, until we start re-reeling the film in memory. Only then do we see the treasure we've walked away with.

► **Above:** Maggie Cheung in a scene from *Irma Vep*.





## **JACKIE BROWN**

**1997**

**THERE'S A GENERATION OF** people who adore *Pulp Fiction* (1994) because it practically blew the tops of their heads off—its brash energy counts for a lot. But *Jackie Brown* is Quentin Tarantino's great picture of the 1990s. It's less showy than the earlier film, but filled to the brim with feeling, a movie that brings the past into the present and reminds us to be careful about what we throw away—starting with the casting. Pam Grier, a

goddess of '70s grindhouse films who, by the '90s, wasn't exactly seeing the plum roles pour in, plays the Jackie of the title, a flight attendant for a low-rent airline who makes a little scratch on the side by smuggling money for her firearms-dealer boss (Samuel L. Jackson). She gets busted; bailbondsman Max Cherry (Robert Forster, another actor who'd practically been forgotten at the time) gets her out of jail and instantly

falls in love with her. The story, adapted from Elmore Leonard's 1992 novel *Rum Punch*, involves multiple double-crossings and a not-insignificant number of nasty murders. Yet the movie is filled with love, chiefly Tarantino's love for Forster and Grier, two actors he was nuts about as a kid, and they're glorious here. *Jackie Brown* is Tarantino's warmest movie, a love letter to the second chance. Everybody deserves one.





► **Above:** Pam Grier in a scene from Jackie Brown.

## **BEAU TRAVAIL**

**1999**

**TO WATCH CLAIRE DENIS' *BEAU Travail*** for the first time is to be handed a key, without knowing exactly what it opens or how to use it. The story is based, loosely, on Herman Melville's unfinished and posthumously published novel *Billy Budd*. Galoup, an officer in the French Foreign Legion, stationed in Djibouti—he's played by the astonishing actor Denis Lavant, like a man with a willful snake coiled inside him—takes an instant dislike to one of the new men under his command, Sentain (Grégoire Colin), who's tall, beautiful, well liked and acts with spontaneous bravery when it's called for. Galoup longs to be respected and loved by his men, as he loves his own commander, Forestier (Michel Subor), but Sentain is his stumbling block, drawing out all his worst impulses. Denis and her frequent cinematographer Agnès Godard film these men—who are often but not always shirtless—as part of the landscape, at one with the sand and sea and sun, though they also bring that setting to life. They're always walking, running, stretching—their exercise routines become a dance, an ode to the spirit of their own youthful beauty, and their offhanded masculinity. There are times when you may not be sure what Denis is showing us, or why. But by the end—one of the greatest endings in all of film, with Lavant as its pinwheel center—you know you've seen something unlike anything else, and you've had the key all along.





## **ALL ABOUT MY MOTHER**

**1999**

**WE LIVE IN A WORLD FIXATED** on identity, dependent on sorting people into handy groups. But how can any human be just one thing? This seems to be a question the great Spanish filmmaker Pedro Almodóvar has been asking, consciously or otherwise, for decades, and it comes to the fore with both pathos and joy in his 1999 masterpiece *All About My Mother*. Cecilia Roth gives a vibrantly shaded performance as Manuela, a devoted single mother who suddenly loses her 17-year-old son, Esteban. The boy had never known his other parent, but Manuela now feels the need to connect with her, a transgender woman named Lola (Toni Cantó). As she searches for Lola, Manuela reunites with old friends, like the ebullient,

generous trans sex worker Agrado (Antonia San Juan), and makes some new ones, like the sweet nun Rosa (Penélope Cruz), who also happens to be pregnant and HIV positive.

*All About My Mother* is largely a film about coping with, and moving on through, grief. But even more than that, Almodóvar uses every inch of this grand, colorful canvas to remind us how big the world really is. Old friends can bring us solace, and new ones can open doors we wouldn't have found otherwise. Whether we're at home in the bodies we were born with or must enact physical transformations to reflect who we are inside, we're all in it together. The biggest mistake we can make is to think we can go it alone.

► **Above:** Cecilia Roth and Eloy Azorín in *All About My Mother*.



## THE CIRCLE

2000

### EMBATTLED IRANIAN FILMMAKER

Jafar Panahi has been an irritant in the eyes of his government for at least a quarter century, and even after years of off-and-on imprisonment—and the persistent threat of worse punishments—he shows no sign of backing down. *The Circle*, his third full-length feature, was, unsurprisingly, banned in his home country. Decades after its appearance, it stands as a statement of defiance, a cry of quiet anguish over the way Iranian women are continually oppressed by their government—

though it also shows how sticking together is their best hope. Panahi follows a group of women who have just been released from prison, their stories interconnected and ever-shifting. Arezou (Maryiam Palvin Almani) and Nargess (Nargess Mamizadeh) scramble to make a plan for their future—though even more immediate needs, like finding a way to sneak a forbidden cigarette, take precedence. Pari (Fereshteh Sadre Orfaiy), another newly released prisoner, has no home to return to. Her brothers have threatened

her, and there's no one to help her in her desperation—she's four months pregnant. *The Circle* is relatively restrained as a piece of filmmaking, though it's so dramatically textured that you feel something's happening every minute. Panahi's camera, more than just reading the characters, practically breathes with them. His empathy is his most effective cinematic tool.

► **Below:** Fereshteh Sadre Orfaiy's character is confronted by police in *The Circle*.





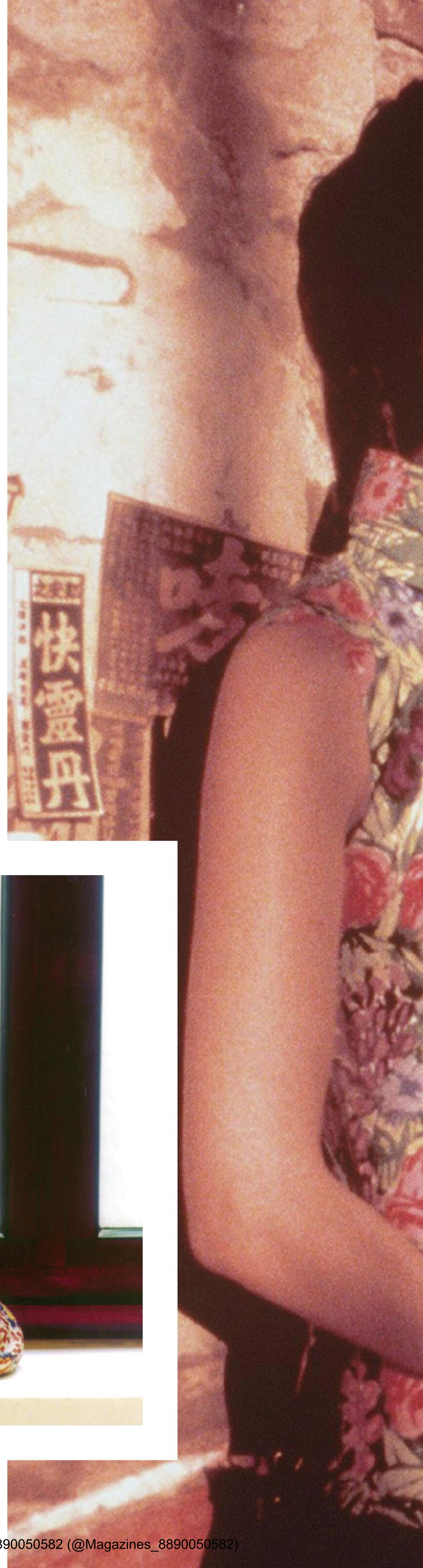
# THE GLEANERS & I

2000

AT ONE POINT IN THIS RADIANT, generous documentary about people—including herself—who salvage things that others have thrown away or rejected, director Agnès Varda trains the camera on the crinkled skin of her own hand. “My hands keep telling me that the end is near,” she says plainly in voiceover, though she doesn’t linger on the moment; instead, she jumps back into the business of filming people picking up bits of plastic tubing to incorporate into their artwork, or celebrating the shape of this or that bumpy root vegetable, deemed too ugly to sell but certainly good enough to eat. Varda, one of the central figures

of the French New Wave, was in her early seventies when she made *The Gleaners & I*, and even though she was clear-eyed about the future, she had much more filmmaking in her. Maybe that right there is evidence of this movie’s rejuvenating powers. It’s a ballad about making the most of every little thing, and every image. It’s about delighting in everything and letting nothing go to waste, and about recognizing the blessing of finding a heart-shaped potato amid a pile of ordinary ones.

► **Below:** Agnès Varda in *The Gleaners and I*.







## IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE

2000



**IT'S DOUBTFUL THAT ANYONE** who has seen it ever forgets it. Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* leaves a mark on you, like the ghost imprint of the touch of a long-lost lover. Maggie Cheung and Tony Leung, two of the most beautiful actors in screen

history, star as neighbors in a Hong Kong apartment building, circa 1962, who discover that their respective spouses are involved in an affair. They have already noticed one another, of course, passing on the stairs of their local noodle shop, each carrying home a takeout dinner to be eaten in solitude; they barely exchange glances, each adhering to an internal code of propriety, yet the air around them seems more golden when they're near each other. They become cautious friends, wary of becoming lovers, but their connection intensifies even so. And though they barely touch, the erotic tenderness between them seems to hover in a space outside of time itself. Wong

never gave these two actors a full screenplay before shooting the film. They would receive new script pages each day, feeling their way toward the completed movie over 15 months. The process, Cheung has said, was exasperating, even though she had worked with Wong several times before. She vowed never to do so again—but then she saw the finished product, and her anger dissipated. Nearly every frame of *In the Mood for Love* is burnished with a romantic glow. It's the most luxurious and hypnotic film about longing ever made.

► **Above:** Maggie Cheung and Tony Leung in a scene from *In the Mood for Love*.





## YI YI: A ONE AND A TWO

2000

### TAIWANESE FILMMAKER

Edward Yang was trained as an electrical engineer and worked in high tech for years before turning to filmmaking. Is it possible that having some life under your belt before you start trying to capture it on film can make you a better director? Early in Yang's extraordinary *Yi Yi*, middle-aged Taipei family man N.J. (Wu Nien-jen) runs into his first love from long ago, Sherry (Ko Su-Yun), and their chance meeting rattles him. He seems to be living his life as he should, whatever that may be: His wife Min-Min (Elaine Jin) is attractive and efficient. He has two children he adores, teenage Ting-Ting (Kelly Lee) and 8-year-old Yang-Yang (Jonathan Chang). Then

his mother-in-law (Tang Ru-Yun) suffers a stroke, intensifying the family's anxiety, and money troubles seem to be brewing as well. N.J. begins to wonder about the choices he's made, and he has a chance to rethink his future on a last-minute business trip to Japan.

*Yi Yi* is extraordinary for so many reasons: Yang shows a remarkable lightness of touch even when, or maybe especially when, he's dealing with big life questions. He understands city life, the way big feelings can flourish even in small, tight spaces. And as Yang-Yang—pensive, perceptive, hilarious—Jonathan Chang gives one of the great child performances in all of film. (He gets the film's final moment, and as you find

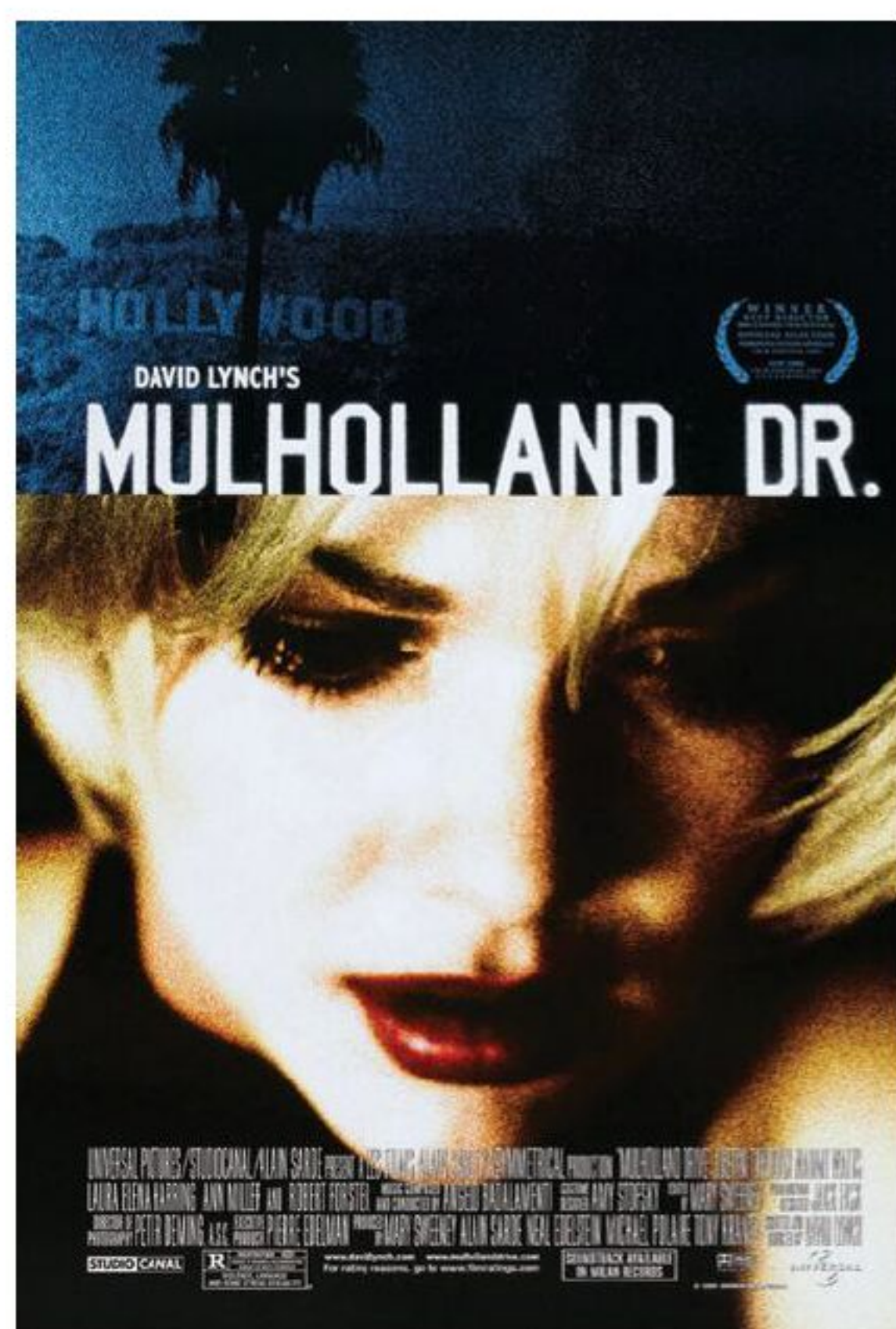
yourself re-launched into real life, you may not be sure if you're feeling bereft or filled with tempered joy.) Yang, along with Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang, was one of the great figures of Taiwan's late-1980s New Wave; he died in 2007, at 59, and *Yi Yi* was his final film. It's a gentle caress of a movie, but there's nothing lightweight about it. You can't get through life without feelings of wistfulness, because there will always be some path not taken. How do we ever know we've made the right choice? The bigger proof of our good judgment is how we live with the choices we've made.

► **Above:** Jonathan Chang (left) in *Yi Yi: A One and a Two*.



# MULHOLLAND DR.

2001



**WE'D BARELY GOTTEN OUR** footing in the new century when David Lynch rode in with a movie that would jostle us right off it. With its liquid pacing and codeine-glorious imagery, *Mulholland Dr.* has magic powers that put your head into a very weird place. It's

also one of the most visually beautiful films ever made, set in a modern-day Hollywood where the ghosts of the old one continue to walk among us, superimposed over everyday life. Everyone goes to Hollywood with a dream, and *Mulholland Dr.* suggests that those dreams never die, even after the people who clung to them draw their last death. Blond, bright-eyed Betty (Naomi Watts) has just arrived in Hollywood from Smalltown, USA, ready for stardom. No sooner has she unlocked the door of her borrowed flat when her fate blurs with that of a mystery woman she finds there—taking a shower!—Laura Elena Harring's slow-burning temptress Rita. At a certain flashpoint, this Hollywood dream becomes a nightmare—yet,

for all its malevolence, Lynch's nightmare Hollywood is just as seductive as the magical dream. *Mulholland Dr.* is about our need to control our destiny crashing with the realization that it's impossible to manage it fully. It's a movie filled with mystery, and with mysterious interlocking pieces. No matter how many know-it-all explainers you read, its corners will never fit together neatly: There are too many ragged edges, and too many that shift shape even as you scrutinize them. It's strange, exhilarating and haunting, a requiem for every Hollywood dream that never comes true.

► **Below:** Laura Elena Harring in a scene from *Mulholland Dr.*





# **FAR FROM HEAVEN**

**2002**

**TODD HAYNES' *FAR FROM HEAVEN***, made in the spirit of Douglas Sirk's searching melodramas of the 1950s, appeared in 2002, a not-particularly hopeful year in American politics, with the aftershock of 9/11 still reverberating. But by the end of the decade, it seemed we were at least on our way toward solving some of our problems: Gay marriage had been accepted, even embraced, by many if not most Americans; racial inequality was nowhere near being erased, but a path forward seemed possible. How many steps forward will we ever be able to take before being yanked back? *Far from*

*Heaven* is more than 20 years old now, but it has as much to say as ever about the complexity of the human heart, and the dangers posed by any society that tries to control it.

Julianne Moore is superb as Cathy Whitaker, an optimistic homemaker and mother in 1957 suburban Connecticut who discovers that her husband, Frank (Dennis Quaid), is gay. The couple tries to work through this problem, a problem that can't be worked through. Meanwhile, Cathy falls in love with her gardener, Dennis Haysbert's Raymond, who is Black, and the ladies of Hartford are having none of it. Using the

visual color language of Sirk, a world of hot-and-cool extremes of red, blue and gold, Haynes explores the unpredictability of love and the suffering humans can inflict on one another in the service of maintaining some skewed sense of order. It's a gorgeous film, both passionate and compassionate, about feeling our way along toward growth and change, even more relevant now that so much progress has been erased. Forward movement is our only hedge against hopelessness.

► **Below:** Julianne Moore and Dennis Haysbert in a scene from *Far from Heaven*.







## **25TH HOUR**

**2002**

One of the ways humans respond to large-scale tragedies is by making art. Unfortunately, it's not always good art. In the years after 9/11, several filmmakers attempted to scale both the enormity and the haunting details of the event. But there's only one great 9/11 movie—a movie that isn't overtly about 9/11, yet holds its dust like a reliquary—and it's Spike Lee's *25th Hour*. Edward Norton's drug dealer Monty Brogan, about to go to prison for seven years, spends his last night of freedom in his always-home, New York City. He connects with his two oldest friends (Barry Pepper and Philip

Seymour Hoffman), and spends some wistful, stressful time with his girlfriend, Naturelle (Rosario Dawson), who just may have betrayed him. Set in the time when the spot once occupied by the Twin Towers was still a dusty open grave, the movie—adapted from David Benioff's 2001 novel—shifts between poles of mournfulness and joy that's just out of reach; sometimes it's funny, and sometimes it burns. *25th Hour* is a vessel into which Lee pours his own love for troubled, crazy New York. He's a truth-telling artist, and sometimes a confrontational one. But he's also, to borrow

a phrase from Cornel West, a love warrior, a filmmaker who pours his soul into his movies, who sees the past as a key to changing the future, who's as interested in showing us the way forward as he is in showing us where we've gone wrong. Most of us paddle along believing there are only 24 hours a day; Lee accepts the mystical possibility of a 25th, a magic hour when we can achieve things we'd previously only imagined.

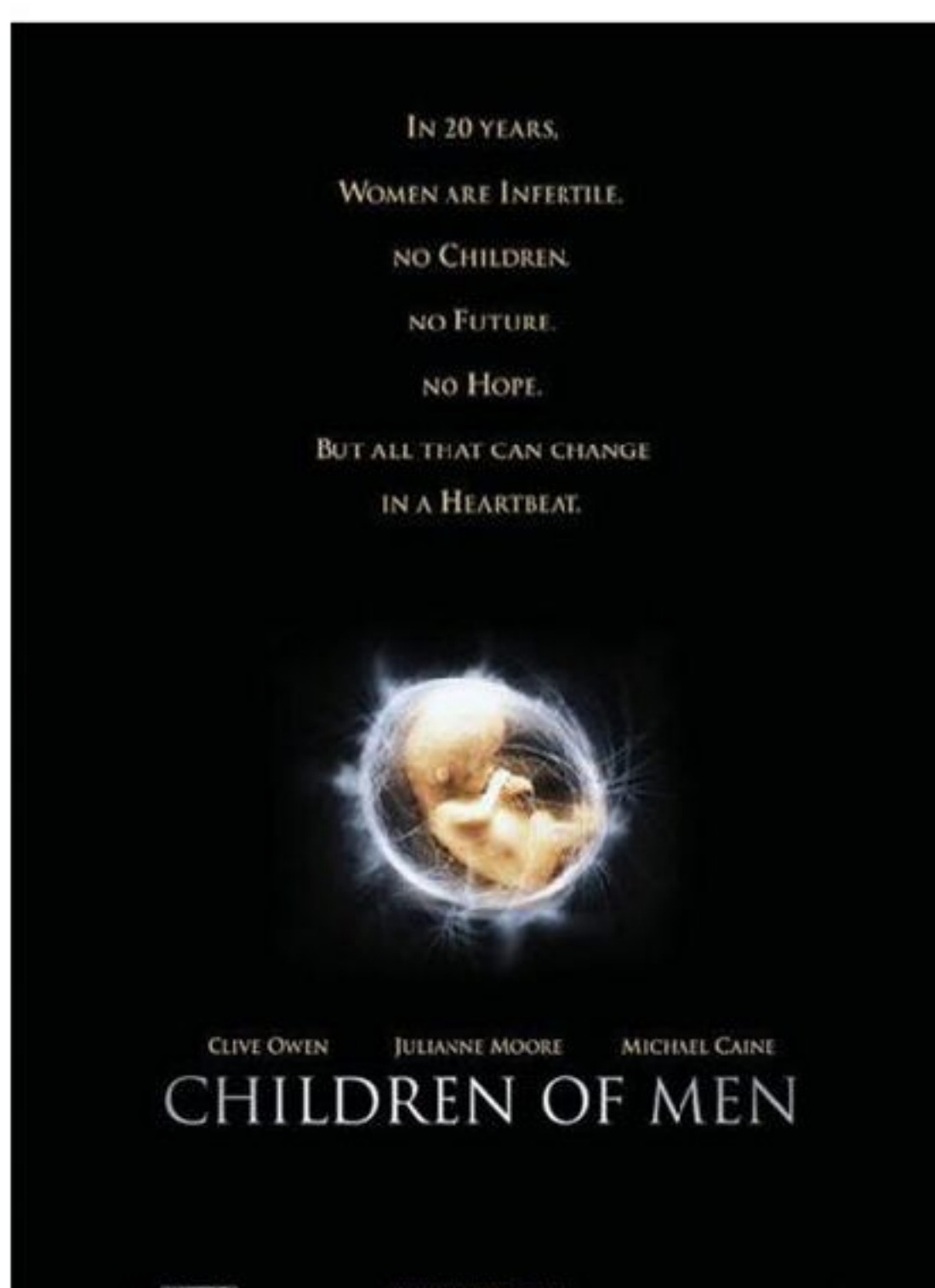
► **Above:** Barry Pepper, Edward Norton and Philip Seymour Hoffman in *25th Hour*.





## CHILDREN OF MEN

2006



**ONLY TRUE MASTERS SHOULD** be allowed to make dystopian dramas. In the hands of Alfonso Cuarón, *Children of Men*—adapted from P.D. James’ bleak futuristic novel—is a cautious incantation for

a hopeful future, rather than a doomy death sentence for our beleaguered planet and its inhabitants. *Children of Men* takes place in the London of 2027, in a world where humans have lost the ability to procreate. Pandemics have further decimated the population. Terrorism and war have torn countries apart. In Britain, citizens are encouraged to report illegal immigrants to the authorities, and once the offenders are arrested, they’re either imprisoned or executed. Clive Owen’s Theo is a weary former activist who’s given up on the idea of change, until his former lover, Julianne Moore’s Julian,

a radical who’s still in the fight, reemerges and forces him into action. Cuarón, a filmmaker with a gentle human touch, may seem like an odd choice to direct a pessimistic movie about a world without children. But a filmmaker so responsive to joy and pleasure is actually the perfect guide to a future in which those essentials have gone missing. If the twilight desolation of *Children of Men* is even more resonant today than it was in 2006, maybe we can take its final note of hopefulness to heart too.

► **Above:** Clive Owen in a scene from *Children of Men*.



## PAN'S LABYRINTH

2006

**FAIRY TALES ARE STORIES WITH** a million and one lives: Whether they're used to scare children into obedience or to plumb certain adult fears that aren't easily expressed aloud, they have a way of surviving, and regenerating, across centuries. Guillermo del Toro's *Pan's Labyrinth* is one of the greatest fantasy films ever made, an adult fairy tale of both twisted-root darkness and vibrant, shimmering light. It's an allegory, set in Franco's Spain a few years after that country's civil war, but Del Toro has no interest in heavy-handed symbolism. Instead, he presents us with images that reach us in a place beyond words. There's a faceless, amphibian-like creature with wrinkly alabaster skin, its eyes located in the palms of its hands instead of in its head,

a nearly incomprehensible being who, in this dream universe, seems unnervingly real. We also meet an elegant faun (played by Del Toro regular Doug Jones), with curly ram's horns and piercing, wide-set eyes, who tells the movie's troubled young heroine (Ivana Baquero) that he believes she is really a princess, though she must undertake three dangerous tasks to prove it. These are the wondrous, and sometimes fearsome, creatures of Del Toro's imagination, and he shares them with us in this somber, lovely movie—a gift so glorious and indelible that it not only tiptoes through our waking hours, but also haunts our sleep.

► **Below:** Doug Jones and Ivana Baquero in *Pan's Labyrinth*.







## MARIE ANTOINETTE

2006

**WHEN SOFIA COPPOLA'S *MARIE Antoinette*** premiered in Cannes, some of the very serious critics of the day had a major problem with it: It didn't address the suffering of the starving peasants, instead focusing on the excessive shopping habits of a lonely teenage queen. But that was exactly Coppola's point. Using Antonia Fraser's 2001 book as her source, she sought to see beyond the shallow thoughtlessness we so easily attribute to this doomed queen; she knew she would find a person there, and she did. Kirsten Dunst brings that dauphine-at-14 to life in a performance as translucent, but also as surprisingly sturdy, as a porcelain teacup. As young Marie leaves her home and family

in Austria, crossing into an uptight France full of rules and regulations, we see both eagerness and apprehension on her face—but it shifts to adolescent devastation when her little dog, Mops, is snatched from her arms. The brittle Comtesse who's overseeing this transition, played by Judy Davis, informs her frostily, "You can have as many French dogs as you like." You would cry too, if it happened to you.

It's true that *Marie Antoinette* is at least partly a whirlwind ode to beauty, pleasure and decadence, a reverie of pastel fondant colors, of silks and satins that appear to have been torn from the sky, of slippers so dainty they couldn't handle much more beyond tapping across

royal marble floors. (No wonder Coppola slips in a blink-and-you-miss-it shot of pink Chuck Taylor hightops, as if wanting to bestow upon this queen just one pair of pretty-but-practical kicks.) But much of the film's music, drawn from the 1980s catalogs of bands like Gang of Four and New Order, strikes a bleaker note. Coppola knows she's telling a story not just of pretty gowns and shoes, but also of encroaching unrest and painful change. *Marie Antoinette* takes place in the dawn preceding a very dark day, and Coppola knows it.

► **Above:** Kirsten Dunst in a scene from *Marie Antoinette*.



## HOLY MOTORS

2012

**MOVIES OFTEN HAVE MEANING** beyond their components. We stammer to explain what a film is about, only to find words drifting away from us. All we know is that a movie has picked us up, like an Oz-style tornado, and left us somewhere we didn't expect to be. That's the effect of Leos Carax's extraordinary, exhilarating and not-fully-sane *Holy Motors*, an ode to the life of the imagination as it's reflected in art, and in cinema specifically. The magnificently acrobatic French actor Denis

Lavant plays a mysterious gent named Monsieur Oscar, who's whisked off to his job every day in an elegant stretch limo. Its driver is the equally elegant Edith Scob, who, as a young woman, played the disfigured daughter in Georges Franju's *Eyes Without a Face*. Oscar's job, as far as we can discern it, is to play-act: One moment he's a killer for hire, the next he's a dying man attended by his grief-stricken niece. At another point he's the ex-lover, perhaps, of a mysterious woman in a film-noir trench coat, played

by a pensive Kylie Minogue. Then he's a raging gnome in a green velvet suit, invading a fashion shoot in Pere Lachaise Cemetery. Set in the most beautiful Paris imaginable, a city of silvery graveyards and shuttered department stores teeming with art nouveau specters, *Holy Motors* is exuberant and melancholic at once, an expression of everything movies can mean when they take us to places beyond meaning.

► **Below:** Denis Lavant in a scene from *Holy Motors*.







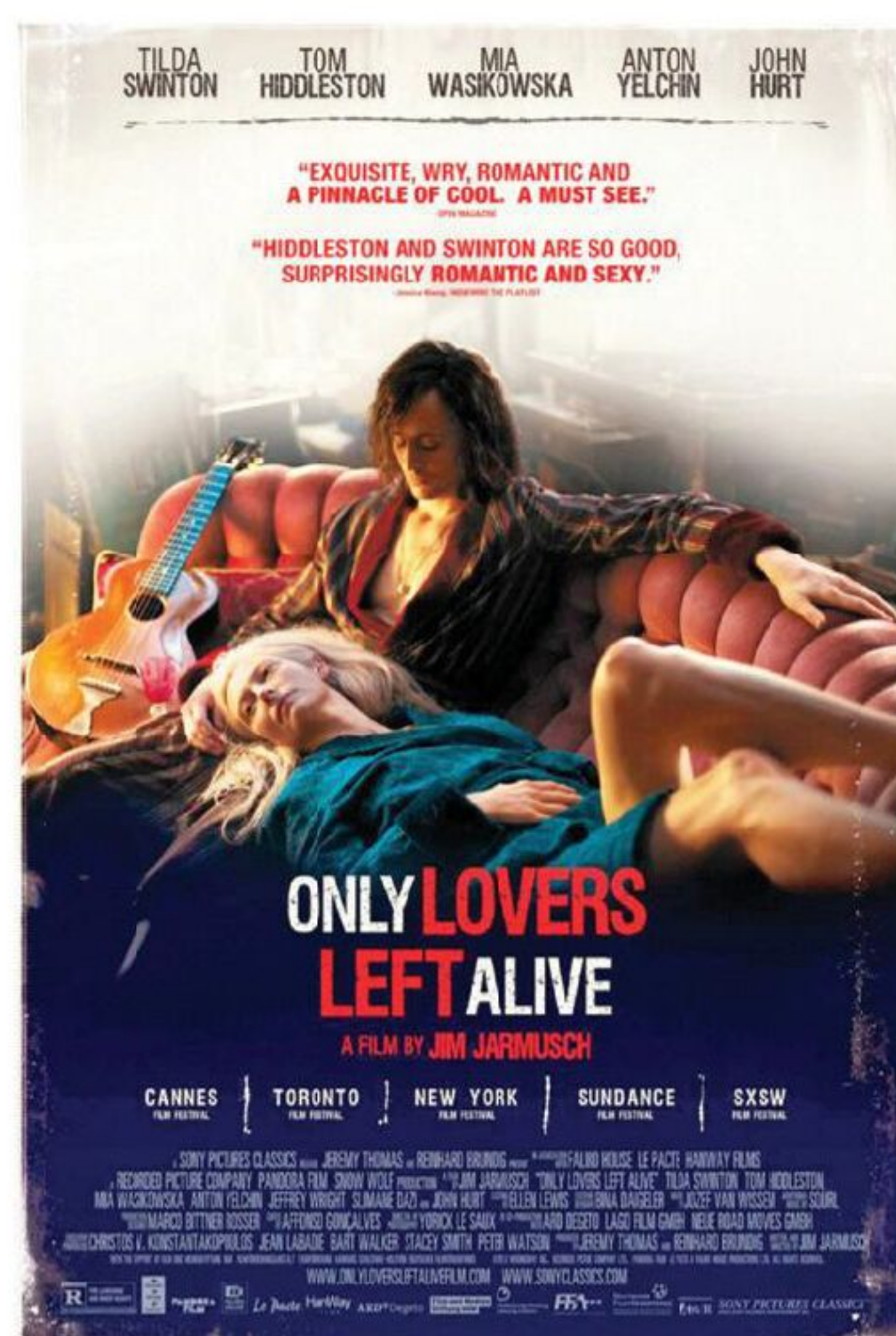
## **UNDER THE SKIN**

**2013**

**ONLY ONCE EVERY 10 YEARS OR SO DOES JONATHAN GLAZER EMERGE FROM HIS SECRET BATCAVE** of genius to bestow a picture upon us, and it's usually an unnerving one. In his shivery, unshakable science-fiction reverie *Under the Skin*, adapted from a novel by Michael Faber, Scarlett Johansson plays an alien with no name, a killer who has come to earth to prey upon men for some unspoken, sinister purpose. She seduces them not just with her amphora shapeliness, but also with her milk-and-honey voice, with eyes that say, "I'm listening to you," only to lure them—literally—into a pool of something that looks like inky black oil. They sink and disappear into a suggested erasure of the self, which somehow—Glazer never explains it—serves the needs of Johansson's alien race. Meanwhile, Mica Levi's teeming-insect score further frays our nerve endings.

And then Johansson victimizes a young man (played by Adam Pearson) with a facial disfiguration, and something cracks in her alien brain: Would it be possible for her to live as a human? It's at this point that *Under the Skin* becomes less sinister and more about some unnamable, universal longing, apparently one that stretches across galaxies. But by then, you're following Glazer anywhere he cares to lead you, with both trust and trepidation.





## ONLY LOVERS LEFT ALIVE

2013

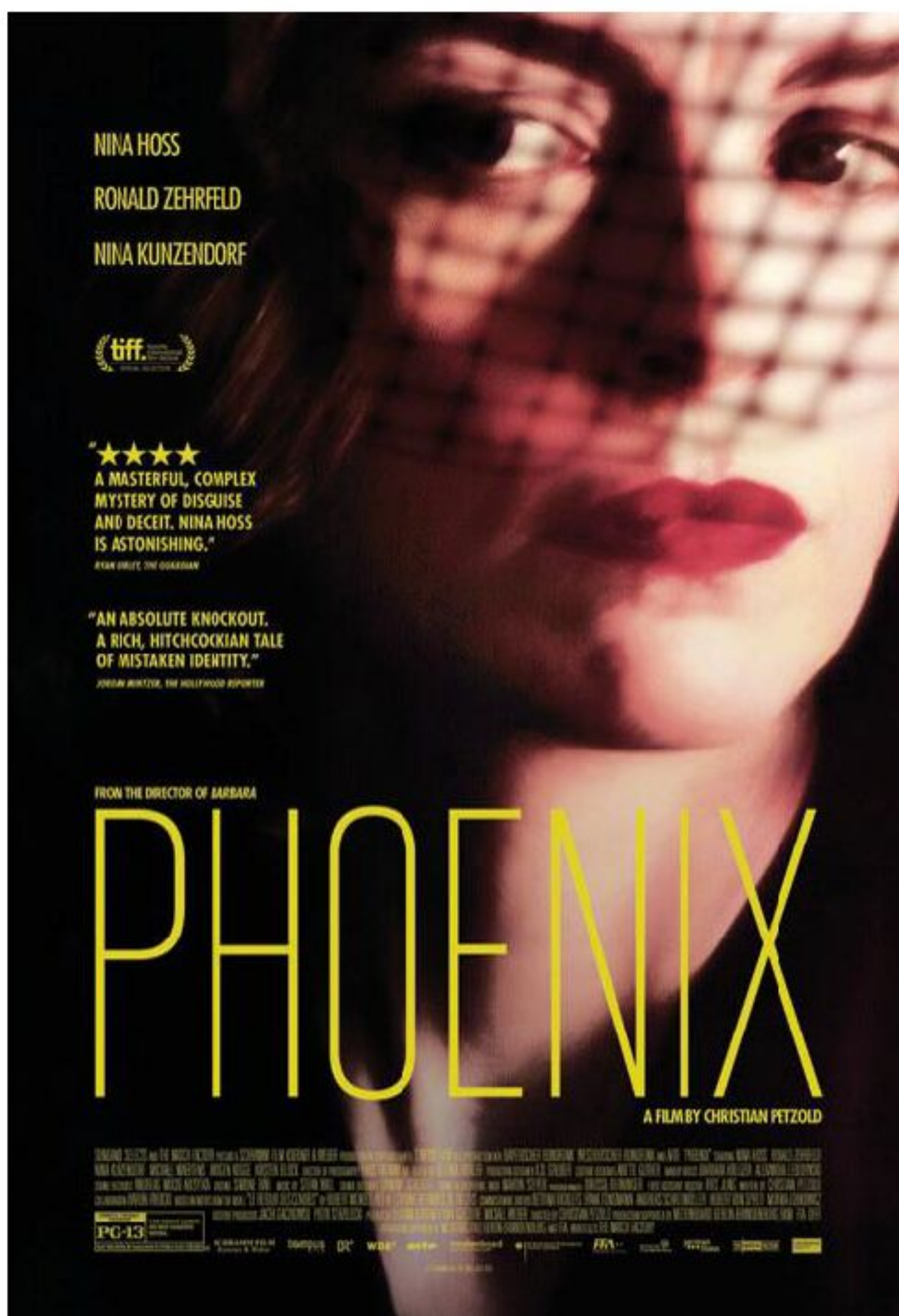
**IN JIM JARMUSCH'S WORLD,** vampires aren't opportunistic, blood-sucking ghouls—at least not all of them. Some are alert, intuitive beings who, because they've been alive for centuries, have formed certain attachments to the physical culture around them—to the papery certainty of a book's pages as you turn them, or to a record that you put on a turntable, the better to sink into its grooves, as opposed to letting it wash over you in a watery Spotify sea. In *Only Lovers Left Alive*, a morose musician named Adam (played by a wanly gorgeous Tom Hiddleston), holed up in a decrepit but stately Detroit Victorian, longs to see his wife of several hundred years, who has her own digs in Tangiers. (Perhaps separate living quarters are the key to a 300-year marriage.) She is Tilda Swinton's Eve, resplendent as a moonbeam, and in her devotion to her longtime

love, she wastes no time hopping a night flight carrying only the essentials—they happen to be books—and crosses the ocean to bring some sensible cheer to her husband, who has had it with human beings and “their fear of their own imaginations.”

Jarmusch's vampires are people who know the Latin names of flora and fauna, who see the beauty of a tattered velvet dressing gown and appreciate the stripy majesty of skunks. At age 16, Emily Dickinson wrote in a letter to a friend, “Let us strive together to part with time more reluctantly, to watch the pinions of the fleeting moment until they are dim in the distance and the new coming moment claims our attention.” She saw the modern world coming. But she would have been right at home with Jarmusch's vampires, lingering in the present as a way of keeping their bond with the past.

► **Above:** Scarlett Johansson in *Under the Skin*.



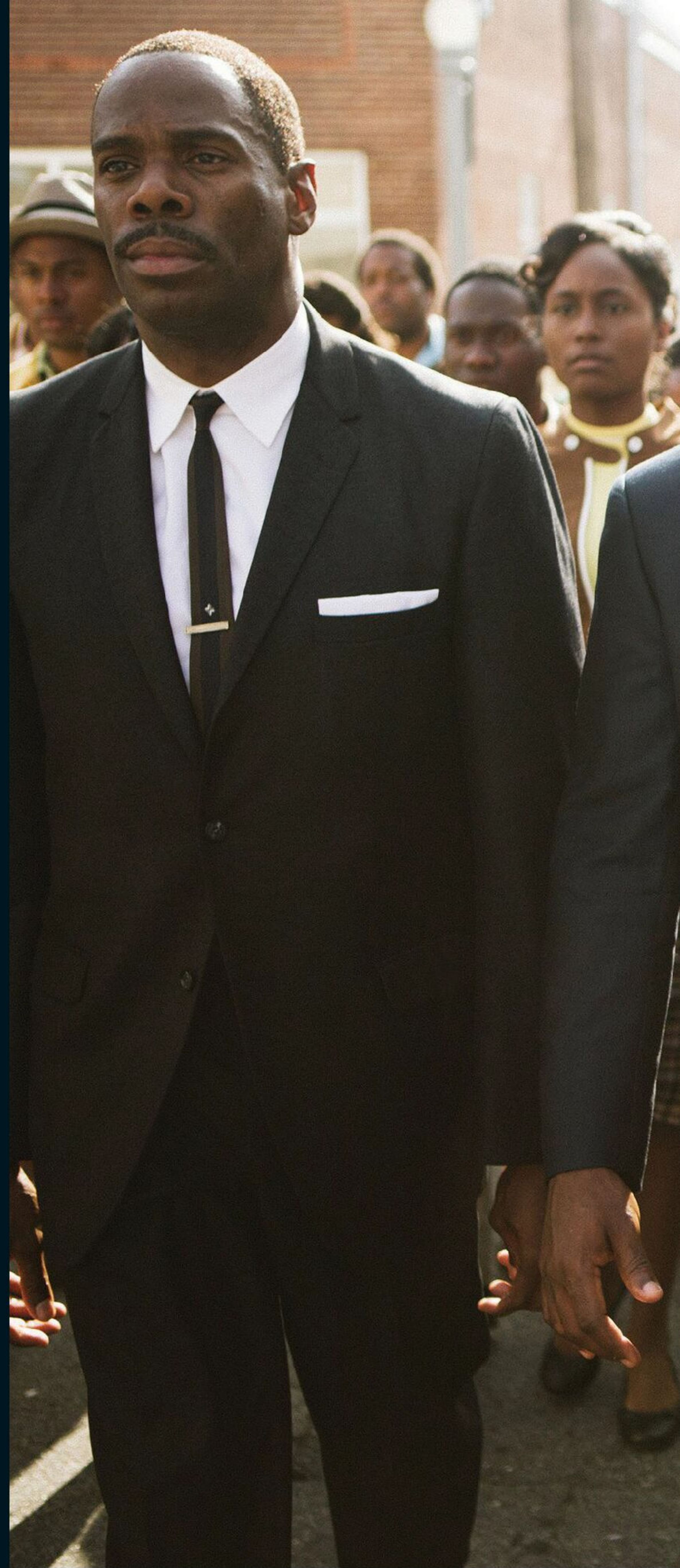


## PHOENIX

2014

**IN A STORY WHERE THE MAN** can't see the woman right in front of him—the theme Hitchcock mined so hypnotically in *Vertigo*—no one comes out a winner. The woman may suffer more deeply, but she can at least emerge with her dignity intact. In Christian Petzold's rapturous film noir *Phoenix*, based on a novel by French crime writer Hubert Monteilhet and set in a nearly demolished post-World War II Berlin, it's Ronald Zehrfeld's Johnny—a piano player who survived the war by betraying others—who's the biggest loser of all. He's blind to the woman who loves him most in the world, Nina Hoss' Nelly, a former

cabaret singer who has survived Auschwitz but whose face has been badly disfigured: Postwar, a surgeon attempts to restore it, but he can't recapture what it once was. When Nelly, after much searching, finally locates Johnny, he not only fails to recognize her but thinks nothing of using her for his own selfish ends. Hoss isn't just one of Germany's greatest actresses; she's one of the best in the world, and here, as a woman whose suffering has burned away everything alive in her except her love for her man, her gaze is itself a broken dream. Why can't Johnny see in her eyes what we do? He's pitiable, but she, in her sadness, is ablaze.



► **Above:** Colman Domingo, David Oyelowo and André Holland in *Selma*.



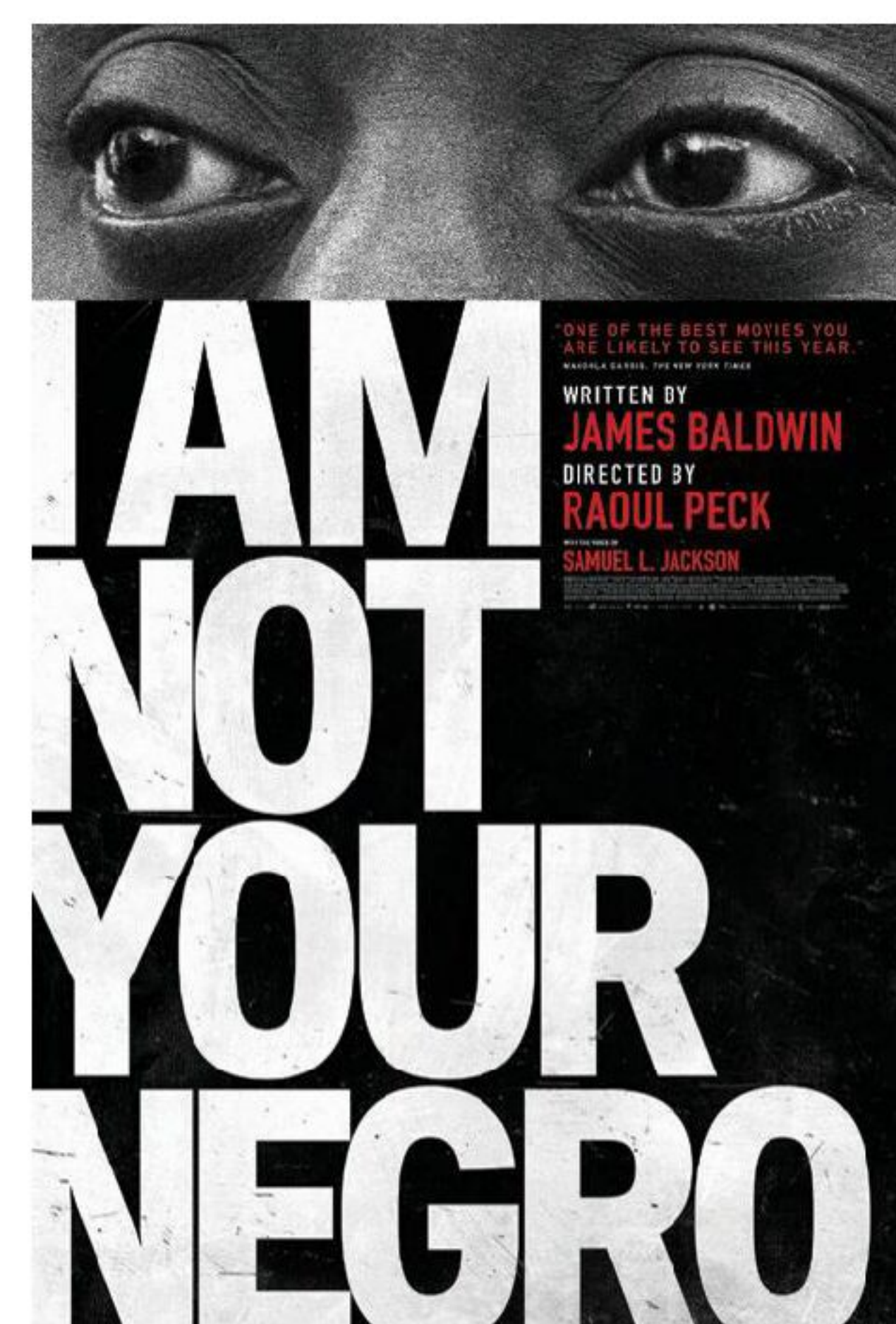


## SELMA

2014

**HISTORICAL TIMELINES TEND** to show the Civil Rights Movement as an era of the past, a chapter of American history that was snapped shut with the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. But as a way of thinking, a push toward the equality that's essential to American ideals, the movement is ongoing. With *Selma*, Ava DuVernay details the three marches—from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama—led by King in 1965 to protest restrictions that prevented Black Americans from registering to vote. DuVernay doesn't shy away from

depicting violence, like the beating of marching citizens, at the hands of Sheriff Jim Clark and a group of police on horseback, during their first attempt to cross the Edmund Pettus Bridge. But she's careful with these sequences, too, conveying the horror of the events without summoning undue trauma. And David Oyelowo, as King, captures both the man's solemn sense of purpose and his radiant charisma. His performance is part of the reason *Selma* never feels dull or dutifully instructive. It's history that breathes.



## I AM NOT YOUR NEGRO

2016

**THE BEST DOCUMENTARIES** aren't instructive vehicles stuffed with facts; they're vast wells of ideas that continue to take shape even after you've finished watching. That's the kind of documentary Raoul Peck gives us with *I Am Not Your Negro*, a reconstruction of a book that never came to fruition: Before he died, in 1987, James Baldwin had embarked on an ambitious work that was to be titled *Remember This House*, an account of the lives and legacies of three of his closest friends, Medgar Evers, Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Baldwin had completed only 30 pages by the time of his death, but Peck obtained the notes for the manuscript from Baldwin's estate, and he uses them here—combined with clips from Baldwin's public appearances—to assemble a mosaic of the work that might have been. (Baldwin's text is read by Samuel L. Jackson, who captures the supple eloquence of his language.) The result is an extraordinary and multifaceted reflection on Black racial identity in America, and a work dedicated to keeping Baldwin's ideas alive in the world.





## **MOONLIGHT**

**2016**

**THERE WAS NOTHING LIKE** Barry Jenkins' *Moonlight* when it showed up in movie theaters in 2016, and there has been nothing quite like it since, a coming-of-age story—and a portrait of fledgling adult love and sexuality—rendered with such tenderness that it practically shimmered on the screen. Set in Miami and Atlanta, Jenkins' movie—adapted from a short play by Tarell Alvin McCraney—plays out across the decades in the life of one man, portrayed at different ages by three actors: Alex Hibbert is the scrawny, bullied kid known as Little; Ashton Sanders is the reserved, watchful teenager, who at that point goes by his given name, Chiron; and Trevante Rhodes is Black, the

bulked-up, closed-off adult who won't let anyone mess with him. Little finds the attentive care he needs in an almost-father-figure, played by Mahershala Ali, who truly listens to him. As a grown man, he'll reconnect with an old friend—now a short-order cook, another kind of caretaker—played by André Holland, who's able to slip past his defenses. These performances, orchestrated so deftly by Jenkins, shifted common ideas about on-screen portrayal of Black masculinity. But they're also just deeply moving by themselves, an incandescent reflection of all the things humans seek in one another, even when they believe they're looking for nothing at all.

► **Above:** Mahershala Ali holding Alex Hibbert in *Moonlight*.



## THE LOST CITY OF Z

2016

**JAMES GRAY IS ONE OF OUR MOST** classically elegant contemporary filmmakers and, in the United States, at least, one of our most underappreciated. His films have an ambitious, sweeping vision, but they're deeply intimate, too. *The Lost City of Z*, based on David Grann's best-selling book, is the story of a man who, once he's gotten a taste of a secret world buried deep in the Amazon, no longer feels wholly comfortable either in his own country or

his own skin. Charlie Hunnam stars as real-life British explorer Percy Fawcett, who, in 1925, disappeared in the Amazonian jungle while seeking a long-lost civilization. Others doubted its existence, and scoffed at Fawcett's obsession. But Fawcett knew in his bones, and in his heart, that the place was real, and he devoted his life to locating it. *The Lost City of Z* is about the way dreams take hold of us. But it also reminds us that we, too, are adventurers,

and that we must be prepared for the everyday kinds of bravery expected of us. Gray is unafraid of intense emotions, written out in a filmmaking language that's bold yet fine-grained. His pictures are sometimes bracingly out of style. But why else do we look at them—and why do we look at old ones, made before we were born—if not to feel lost in time?

► **Below:** Charlie Hunnam in a scene from *The Lost City of Z*.





# LITTLE WOMEN

2019



**WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO TAKE A** very old and much-loved book, one that has been adapted (often very well) several times before, and breathe life into it for a new audience, all while preserving the rugged purity of its spirit?

That's what Greta Gerwig does with Louisa May Alcott's *Little Women*, a novel that has been passed with love from one generation to the next since its publication in two volumes, in 1868 and 1869. Saoirse Ronan is the teenaged aspiring writer and adventure-seeker Jo March, being raised in a family of women in 1860s New England. Older sister Meg (Emma Watson) is the sensible, conventional one; younger sister Beth (Eliza Scanlen), is the fragile, quiet one; the baby, Amy (Florence Pugh), is a brat who turns into a proper lady, learning about generosity along the way. A watchful mother (Laura Dern) presides over this small society of women, while brainy, spirited neighbor Laurie

(Timothée Chalamet, in one of his best performances) introduces some raucous but welcome male chaos. Gerwig orchestrates it all beautifully, showing family life as a peppery whirl of overlapping dialogue (punctuated by the occasional quarrel), and, of course, carving a believable path for her young heroine, a woman who must find her own way in a world where men dictate the rules. Gerwig's *Little Women* is proof that there are always new ways to tell old stories, ensuring that they live far beyond our own preoccupations and tastes, never becoming last season's outmoded gown.

► **Below:** Meryl Streep and Florence Pugh in *Little Women*.







## ONCE UPON A TIME IN...HOLLYWOOD

2019

**HOLLYWOOD ISN'T JUST A PLACE** but also a state of mind, an idea Quentin Tarantino mines eloquently in *Once Upon a Time in...Hollywood*. The film is an ode to a place with ghosts in and around every corner: They're right there in the margins of old cop shows like *Mannix* and *Banyon*, like genies in YouTube bottles; they lurk in the beads of condensation on a Musso & Frank's martini glass, happy to participate, in their own small way, in modern happy hours. Tarantino has deep affection for Hollywood, the place and the vibe, and he brings it to life through the story of Rick Dalton and Cliff Booth (Leonardo DiCaprio and Brad Pitt),

an aging TV star and his longtime stunt double who find their careers fading in the Hollywood of 1969. Their heyday was the 1950s; now Rick is relegated to playing the heavy in random TV episodes, with Cliff basically keeping him company.

But even as their careers downshift, they'll play a crucial role in Tarantino's reimagining of what might have happened in Benedict Canyon on August 8 of that year. The beating heart of *Once Upon a Time in...Hollywood* is a neophyte movie star who was murdered almost before anyone could get to know her name: Sharon Tate, the pregnant wife of Roman Polanski, was stabbed to

death in her home by members of the Manson family on August 8, 1969. Tarantino's film is both a valentine to her—she's played, with a deeply touching blend of self-deprecation and effervescent optimism, by Margot Robbie—and an artistic act of retribution against those who killed her. It takes history seriously by imagining what might have been, and by granting life to a woman who, as events played out, never got a chance to make her mark. Tenderness isn't a quality we normally associate with Tarantino, but this movie is filled with it.

► **Above:** Brad Pitt in *Once Upon a Time in...Hollywood*.



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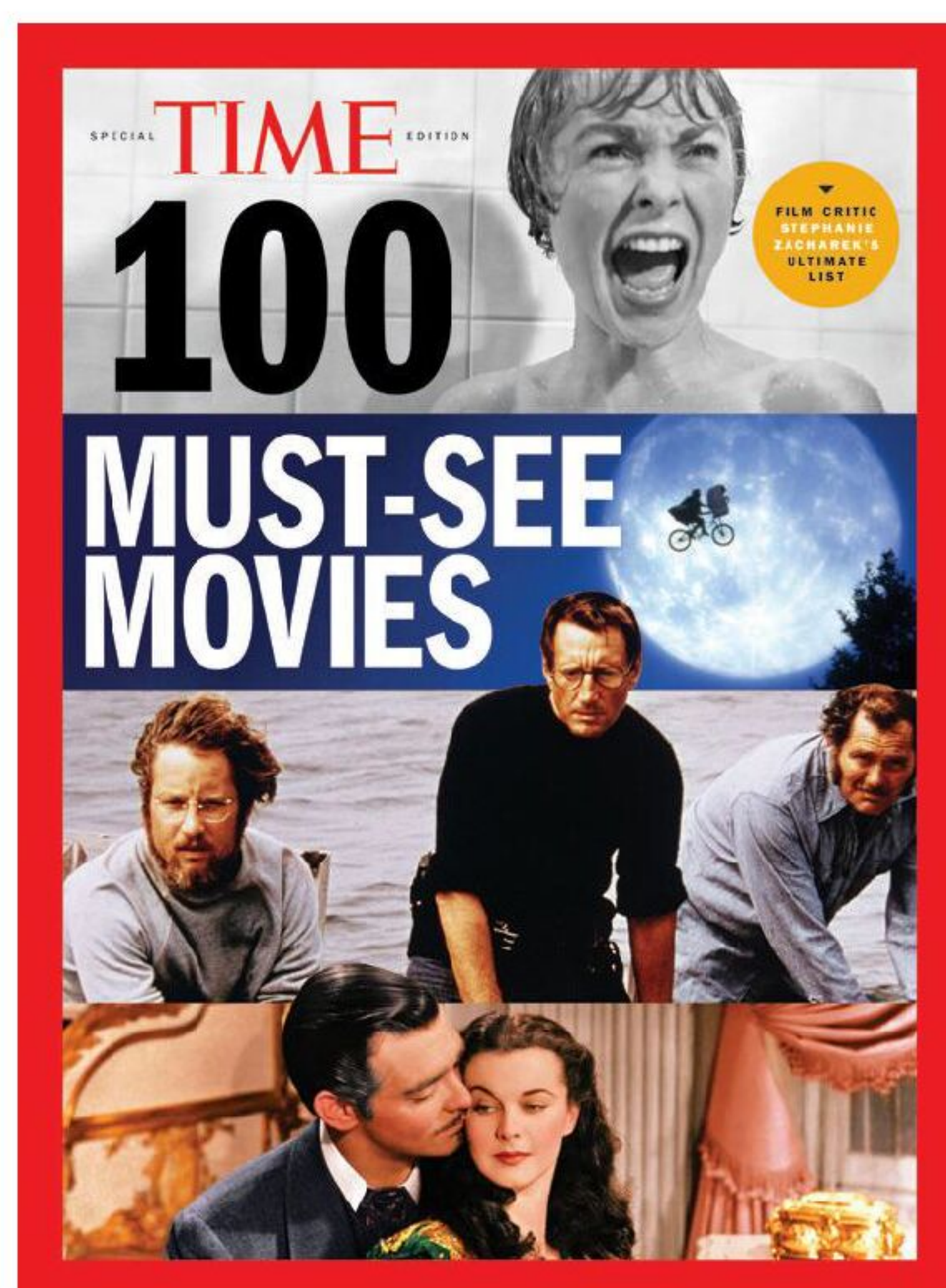
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**From top:** Psycho (1960), E.T. the Extra Terrestrial (1982), Jaws (1975), Gone with the Wind (1939)

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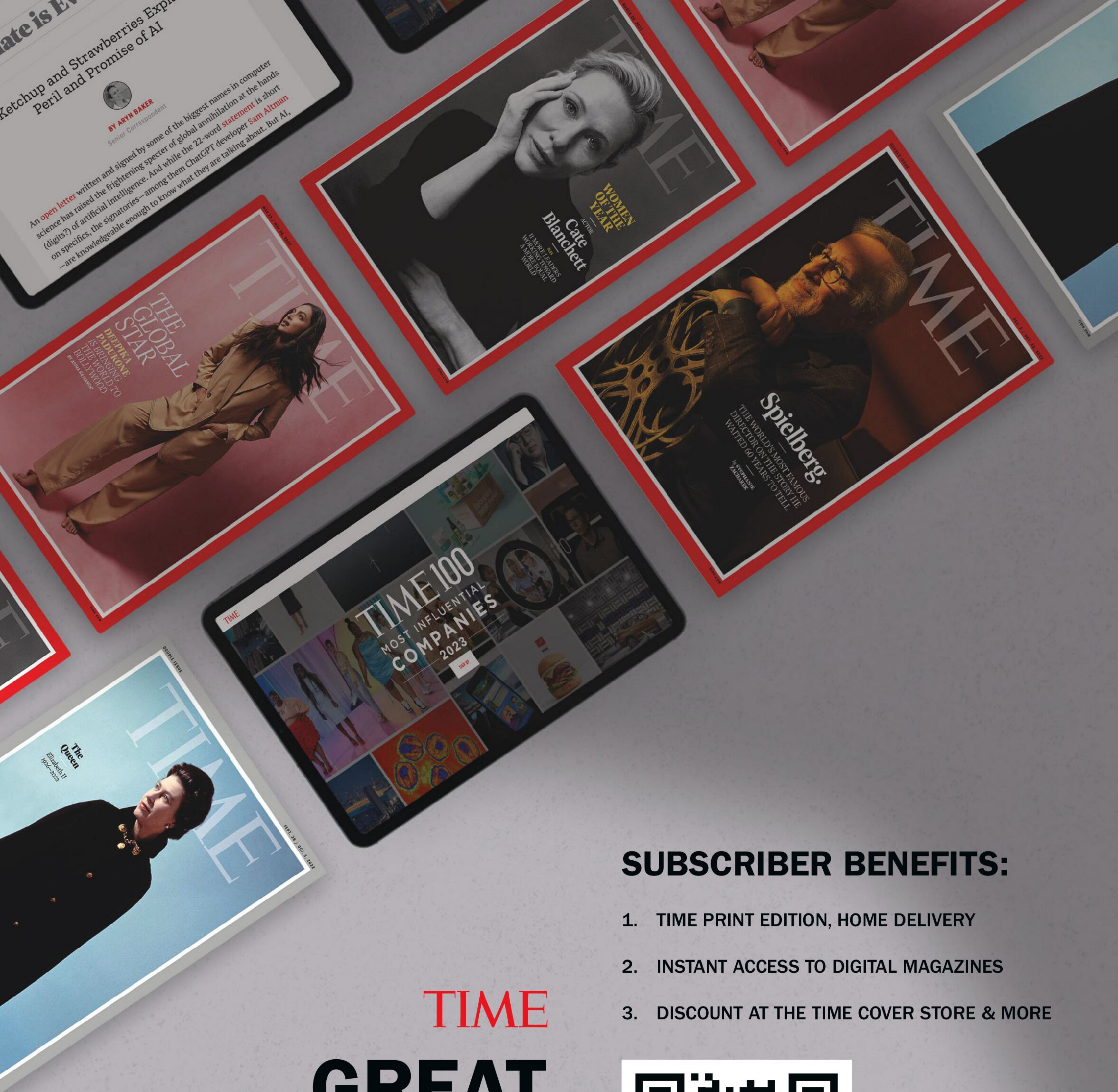
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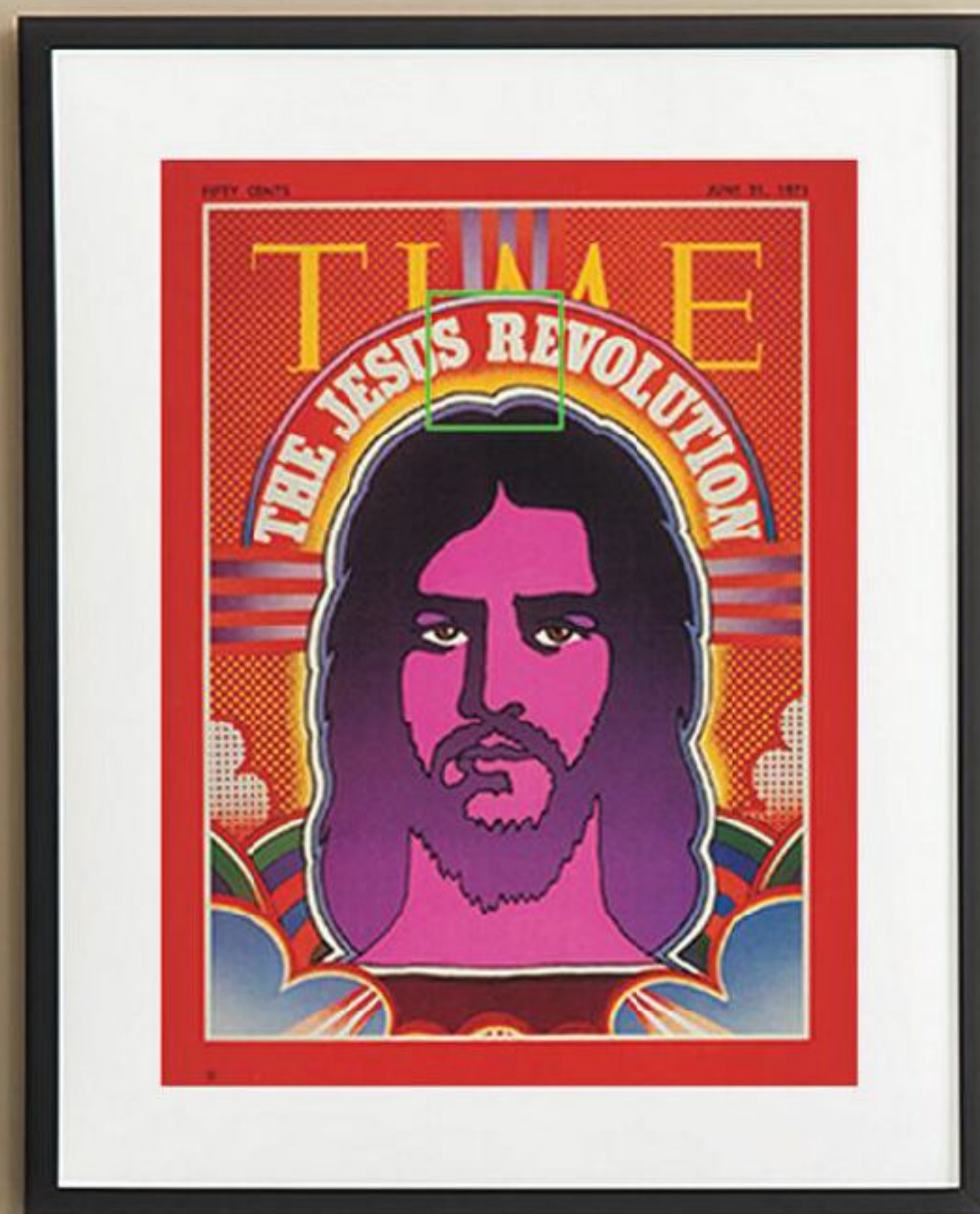
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