

Body & Soul

A personal, theoretical exercise in identifying what makes a film “great.” Ten criteria have been established, each correlated to a part of the body that illustrates how the criteria should be understood and recognized as such. These criteria are not mutually exclusive nor definitive in identifying what makes a great film.

1. **Transcendence**—*Soul*

Paul Schrader has converted me to his idea of discovering, identifying, and communing with the transcendent through film. Great films can contain transcendence as a mode of expression or as a thematic goal. There are the icons of this theory that Schrader offers us: Ozu, Dreyer, Bresson. Their work is certainly great and exemplifies the transcendent experience, however films that implement transcendent ideas don't have to be as withholding as these artists. Transcendence can appear more liberally through character arcs or visuals. For example, characters can endure transcendent experiences like in the final sequence of *2001* or we can experience it visually like in the occasional transcendent images from Stan Brakhage as he manipulates the stock itself. With these kinds of moments, we begin to cross into metaphysical ideas and experiences that bring us closer to higher powers and offer the viewer an attempt at transcendence. A great contemporary artist who utilizes this kind of approach is Kogonada whose films *Columbus* and *After Yang* would be prime examples of how great films implement transcendence without completely submitting to the theory like Ozu does.

2. **Whimsy**—*Skin*

Whimsical films are great because they build off of our ideas of the fantastic and nostalgic. These kinds of whimsical films are typically animated or intended for younger audiences, but clearly have much to show an older viewer. They aim to teach and guide us, but

with patience and mercy rather than by the crack of a whip. Studio Ghibli films are almost all incredibly great, and all possess a certain sense of whimsy (even *Grave of the Fireflies!*). The Ghibli catalog, with *Spirited Away*, *Princess Mononoke*, and *Kiki's Delivery Service* provides whimsy through its narrative and its presentation. The stories are concocted to transport us and are carefully designed to prod our imaginations. Magical realist films would also fall gently into this classification, especially as they explore the contrast between the real (usually timely and political elements) with bouts of fantasy. Guillermo Del Toro's *Pinocchio*, *Coraline*, *E.T.*, and even nonfiction films like *My Octopus Teacher*, *The Mighty River*, and *To Be and To Have* would rightly fit here.

3. **Silliness**—*Gut*

We need time to take ourselves less seriously than we should. Silly movies offer us relief from paying taxes and laying tile to remind us that life's mechanics are sometimes ridiculous and in need of some poking and prodding. Silliness is especially effective when done cleverly, through satire, parody, and self awareness. Almost the entire Muppets catalog exists in this criteria, as well as *Airplane!*, *Looney Tunes* (specifically *Long Haired-Hare* and *Hair-Raising Hare*), *Charade* by John Minnis, and a handful of sitcoms like *Parks and Recreation*, *Schitt's Creek* and *The Good Place*. The origins of this kind of classification can be found as far back as Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, who utilize physical comedy and clever storytelling in order to portray silliness, and therefore greatness. Silliness has the potential to lose its efficacy when degraded to offensive humor or potty humor that relies entirely on shock factor rather than clever set ups and executions. Adam Sandler movies from the early 2000s would fall into this later, ineffective camp.

4. **Queerness**—*Heart*

This category is more subjective, but queerness is important in film because it is something important to me as an individual. Queerness makes film great not only in explicit representation, but also through subtle and personal impressions. Not every movie needs to be *Pink Narcissus*, *Querelle*, or anything by Gregg Araki. These movies are certainly important, especially as they push boundaries and bring a sense of righteous anger and protest through their queer characters. Other times, the more subtle approach seen in films like *The Long Day Closes* or *Rebecca* is best, as these kinds of queer portrayals come through the filmmaker's own identity or through subtext. Films are also great when their queerness is used to appeal to their queer audience (although this has the potential of being harmful and reductive!). If a movie stars Judy Garland, Bette Davis, or Laura Dern, that film is almost certainly a great queer text. Films that deal with queerness typically explore the operations of the family or the lack thereof, illustrating how individuals are reinforced by their blood relatives *or* find family through friends, partners, and a larger community. Queer documentaries are also important, but would likely exist in one of our later criteria because of how reflexive and timely they can be. Lastly, queerness is greatness because of its ability to be seen and understood in this myriad of ways: through explicit representation, subtext, or its appropriation by an audience.

5. **Femininity**—*Prefrontal Cortex*

Similar to the previous criteria, when films explore femininity in multiple ways or when femininity is at the forefront, they possess greatness. Because of the complicated and often restricted role that women play in society, films have the potential to reflect and continue these conversations about womanhood, gender roles, and motherhood to inform and expand our ideas of what women are or can be. Sometimes femininity is inherent in the film's agenda, like with rom coms like *The Holiday*, or with political pieces like *She Said*. Other times, femininity is

complicated because of its presence in a male dominated work/world, especially in more classic films. Female characters like Rosalind Russell in *His Girl Friday* or Grace Kelly in *Rear Window* aren't entirely liberated, but aren't completely static either. Most of these portrayals of womanhood require conscious interpretations on behalf of the viewer, especially when coming from a sociological and psychological perspective, to allow us to understand that they hold weight even when they are demeaning. Many of Marilyn Monroe's films subject her to the male gaze and to objectifying behavior, but beyond her status as a sexualized movie star, the viewer can learn to understand her weight in the narrative *because* she's a woman. Classic films that would support this kind of approach would include Monroe in *Niagara* and *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, as well as other classic works like *Casablanca*, *Psycho* and *It Happened One Night*. Modern films have done pioneering work to dismantle these dismissive portrayals of women, but it is important for us to recognize the value of female performers from more restrictive eras of creative expression rather than disregard them altogether for their faults. This mindset can allow us to observe the greatness in a range of portrayals of femininity.

6. **Relatability**—*Eyes*

Being able to relate to a film because it reflects our experiences and truths is validating and entertaining at the same time. Nonfiction films dominate this criteria, as they offer mirrors to our times, from our greatest joys to our deepest sorrows. We need *High School* and *City Hall* to understand how we operate in communities and societies. We need *Human* and *Manakamana* to connect us with people across tongues and continents, showing how similar all 7 billion of us truly are. Another prong under the Relatable is the fictitious coming of age film. Humans all experience the pubescent state and share in this tumultuous journey of understanding the who/what/whys of the world. Being able to identify with the embarrassments, failures, and

minuscule successes of adolescence allows us to feel validated and worthy, even years down the road. *Boyhood*, *The 400 Blows*, *Only Yesterday*, *Eighth Grade*, *Petite Maman* and *Pariah* help us feel like we're not alone when the world seems to stack the deck against us. We're able to see that our flaws in our humanity balance out our successes, revealing what makes life, and therefore these kinds of films, so great.

7. **Stimulation**—*Muscles*

Something I seek through what I watch is that sense of stimulation that therefore cements a text's greatness. Genre films are excellent at offering this kind of stimulation for the viewer. For example, because of established generic conventions, horror films can be great because of the stimulating experience they provide. We know that we're going to be scared, but the intensity of our fear will range dramatically depending on how conventions are manipulated by the creator. Great stimulating horror films could include *The Invisible Man* (2020), *Barbarian*, *Black Christmas* (1974), *Skinamarink*, *Crimes of the Future* or *Malignant*. These films require not only visual cues to stimulate fear, but textures and performances that remind us of the desperation and urgency within the story. Additionally, this use of texture is important for this criteria outside of genre, specifically when we look at earlier works and animation. Oskar Fischinger's films are certainly great and certainly stimulating, using color, shape, movement, and music to hypnotize the viewer. Other experimental, animated works that operate under the stimulating mode include *A Colour Box*, *Rainbow Dance*, *Begone Dull Care*, *Jumping*, and *Mona Lisa Descending a Staircase*. These films are usually innovative in their production (more on this later) and use their resources at their maximum values. Colors are vibrant, movement is exciting, and the itch in our brains is being scratched accordingly. Genre and animation allow us to engage in great films that celebrate their medium through their stimulation of story and visuals.

8. **Connectivity or the “Experience”**—*Hands*

Sometimes films are great because of how they connect us with those around us, because of how we view them, or because of how others view them influencing our experiences. The films in this category require viewing with two or more people, preferably on a larger screen, and would seem inadequate or limiting when viewed individually and/or on a cell phone. These films are made more enriching because of an established sense of community and the format that this community experiences the film in. For example, the recent *Top Gun: Maverick* is great because of its immersive nature when viewed in a theater, on the big screen, with a collective. The nature of the film requires total stimulation, achieved most successfully in this format and further enhanced with the reaction of an audience to supplement moments of tension, humor, and romance. Other films that engage a community when viewed together include *RRR*, *Psycho*, *This is Cinerama!*, *Godzilla*, *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*, *Ford v. Ferrari* and *Star Wars*. Typically, these films will be larger in scale and seen in theaters to build on their engagement devices (monumental images, loud sounds and score, theatrics), but this doesn't necessarily mean they have to be blockbusters. Nature documentaries, comedies, and sports films can be great when viewed with more than one person because of their inherent drama that elicits reactions from the audience and can be viewed on a TV screen at home. Because of the value of the shared experience that causes us to react to one another, *with* one another, connectivity is another criteria of what makes films great.

9. **Respectability**—*Tongue*

In the vein of the tradition of quality, respectability is an approach that gives reverence to the classics and the canon, ensuring that stuffiness or formalism isn't dismissed for the sake of their antiqueness. Sometimes movies are too long or too proper, feeling more like a mass than a

Saturday excursion, but we need to understand the value of these works. We don't necessarily have to love them, but finding the respectable elements within can help us gain a deeper understanding behind the nature of film (or art in general) and how it informs our modern works. For example, films like *Lawrence of Arabia*, *The Best Years of Our Lives*, *Hamlet*, *Patton*, *L'Avventura*, and *Tokyo Story* are long, sometimes in black and white, and aren't always eager to thrill or excite us. Masterpiece and BBC productions, like adaptations of Jane Austen and Charles Dickens, don't use modern language and relish in the manners of their settings. However, we can't toss these works out simply because they're old fashioned, lengthy, or require our patience. We need stimulation, silliness, and connectivity, but we also need to learn, to read, to study, and to sit every once in a while. Doing so allows us to reflect on what we're reading, hearing, and seeing, learning how the storytelling of the past has informed our present and will inform our future. Within this category, it would be especially significant to view works that inspired many modern favorites, like how *Hidden Fortress* (although more stimulating than some of these other examples) was a major inspiration for George Lucas with *Star Wars*. We can eat our cake, but we need to make sure our diet is balanced. We need our daily greens, and long films, adaptations of classic literature and theater, and works of tradition or transcendence helps us recognize the greatness in our newer favorites, revealing the greatness within themselves.

10. **Innovation**—*Synapses*

Finally, the greatest kinds of films are the ones that show us something we've never seen before. I'm not talking solely about *Avatar* here, although it has some merit under this criteria. I'm talking more about the films of Georges Méliès or Maya Deren who used their resources to create, uninhibited by the restrictions of the medium. *A Trip to the Moon* and *Meshes of the Afternoon* are wonderful examples of how editing and composition transport us across space and

time, literally and figuratively—providing experiences that are unique to the filmic form. Other films that contribute to this criteria that offer unique, distinctly cinematic experiences because of their innovative techniques include *8 ½*, *Mullholland Dr*, *The Matrix*, *The Truman Show*, *The Sixth Sense*, *Man with a Movie Camera*, *Playtime*, *Rope*, and *The Red Shoes*. The innovation explored in these films may also dive into the possibilities offered by surrealism, of emerging visual effects, and of unique narrative structure. They're exciting because of their possibilities that expand our imaginations as to what film can be, but more importantly by how they alter what art *is*. They show us that art is malleable, willing and able to change into whatever we want it to be, and show the audience that anything is possible through the projection of a series of moving images.