

4-1-2005

## Ten Movies You May Not Know But (Probably) Should

Douglas Keeseey

California Polytechnic State University - San Luis Obispo, [dkeeseey@calpoly.edu](mailto:dkeeseey@calpoly.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/moebius>

### Recommended Citation

Keeseey, Douglas (2005) "Ten Movies You May Not Know But (Probably) Should," *Moebius*: Vol. 3: Iss. 1, Article 5.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/moebius/vol3/iss1/5>

This Essay and Article is brought to you for free and open access by the College of Liberal Arts at DigitalCommons@CalPoly. It has been accepted for inclusion in Moebius by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@CalPoly. For more information, please contact [mwyngard@calpoly.edu](mailto:mwyngard@calpoly.edu).

## TEN MOVIES YOU MAY NOT KNOW BUT (PROBABLY) SHOULD

*Douglas Keesey*

I am often asked what it is that film professors do. Our main role is to help students appreciate, demand, and make better films than the ones we commonly get. But an important secondary role is to preserve and promote quality films that were overlooked upon first release or have since been neglected. Here is a chronological list of ten movies you may not know, each from a different genre, along with some reasons why you may want to consider seeing some of them, depending on your particular tastes. I have also provided some additional recommendations within each genre. Of course, when it comes to anyone's critical opinions on film, it's worth keeping in mind producer Sam Goldwyn's warning: "Don't pay any attention to the critics; don't even ignore them."

### 1. Suspense: *The Locket* (1946, unrated but would be PG)

Film fans have a special fondness for this film due to its flashbacks within flashbacks within flashbacks—something that most movies don't dare to do, but that this film just does, without apology and with great success. This may make the movie's plot sound hard to follow, but it isn't. The flashbacks keep burrowing back in time, trying to get at "the truth" about a woman's character and her past. What is interesting about the film is not so much the psychological "solution" revealed at the end, but the amazing amount of suspicion that the male characters feel toward this woman—an almost contagious paranoia about her that reveals a great deal about patriarchal attitudes. While one half of the film seems hell-bent on defining the woman as a femme fatale, the other half seems desperate to defend her, taking her side against a world of men who would confine her to one gender role or one "truth" about femininity. There is even the suggestion that, if she

is dangerous, they made her that way and that it is only what they deserve. Unfortunately, this film—so far ahead of its time—is still largely unknown and in fact unavailable on commercial DVD or videotape, though it does show occasionally on Turner Classic Movies. Other suspenseful dramas with something to tell us about gender roles include *Rebecca*, *Suspicion*, *Secret Beyond the Door*, *Whirlpool*, and *Born to Be Bad*.

**2. Mystery: *The Last of Sheila* (1973, rated PG, DVD, videotape)**

Many of the best Hollywood mysteries are more visceral than cerebral, springing as they do from the American hardboiled tradition of Raymond Chandler and Dashiell Hammett (*The Big Sleep*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *Kiss Me Deadly*, *Chinatown*). But every once in a while Hollywood produces a mystery in the grand, puzzle-solving style of Arthur Conan Doyle (Sherlock Holmes) and Agatha Christie. Did you know that Stephen Sondheim—best known as one of Broadway’s most sophisticated lyricists and composers (*A Little Night Music*, *Sweeney Todd*)—once co-wrote a fiendishly clever movie mystery called *The Last of Sheila*? (The other writer was actor Anthony Perkins of *Psycho* fame.) A poison-pen letter to the idle rich, this is a film in which every vicious turn of phrase, haughty sneer, and change of fancy attire are not only tell-tale signs of greed, envy, and lust, but also super-subtle hints to the identity of a murderer. A version of the English country-house mystery but Americanized and set on board a yacht cruising the Mediterranean, this film is not only a complex whodunit that will keep you guessing through countless twists and turns, it is also a wicked satire on the rich and infamous that grows steadily darker in tone—less witty and more sardonic—as deadly serious emotions are revealed beneath the characters’ sophisticated veneer. By the time that Bette Midler’s “Friends” is heard on the soundtrack, you realize how fully these characters were anything but. For other brain-teasing mysteries that are also about real people and issues, see *Sleuth*, *The Conversation*, *The Midnight Man*, *Night Moves*, and *Cutter’s Way*.

**3. Horror: *Theater of Blood* (1973, rated R, DVD, videotape)**

When many people think of horror films, what comes to mind are teen slasher pics like the *Friday the 13th* or the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series. If you’ve watched any of these movies, you know that a large part of their “appeal” lies in watching a series of victims get killed in gorily inventive ways—a fishing spear through the eye, a sword slicing a body vertically in half, etc. While the shocking physicality of these killings can make us afraid, the ridiculously contrived nature of the deaths tends to protect us from that fear: they are too outlandish to be taken seriously. What most people don’t know is that the slasher pics have a much classier antecedent in three British films made by Vincent Price in the early 1970s—*The Abominable Dr. Phibes*, *Dr. Phibes Rises Again*, and *Theater of Blood*. In the third of these, Price plays a failed actor who takes revenge on a series of drama critics for their excoriating reviews; he does so by reenacting the most ingeniously

## Keesey: Ten Movies You May Not Know But (Probably) Should

violent scenes from Shakespeare's plays—thus reminding us that the Bard, particularly in his revenge tragedies, was in fact as wickedly inventive as many of today's horror writers and directors. But what is perhaps most interesting about the film is not its clever killings or its very black humor, but the curious thing that happens when Price speaks the lines from Shakespeare's plays while acting out their revenge scenes. Due in part to the magnificence of Shakespeare's language and in part to the truly surprising skill of Price's acting, an extraordinary pathos begins to develop around Price's character, whose wrongs we feel, whose hatred for the uncaring critics we grow to share, and whose love for his daughter (played by Diana Rigg, who also gives a superb performance) takes on genuinely tragic dimensions. *Theater of Blood* is that rare horror film—one with grandeur and heart along with its blood and humor. See also *Peeping Tom*, *Near Dark*, *The Reflecting Skin*, *Candyman*, and *Cemetery Man*.

### 4. Western: *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* (1973, rated R, videotape)

This film makes uncommonly intelligent decisions right from the beginning, in its opening credits sequence, which cuts back and forth between two time periods in order to make a point. Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid were once friends and fellow outlaws, both defying the big landowners who are greedy to buy up and fence in the land. But by 1881, Pat has sold out to big business and presents Billy with an ultimatum: give in to the "law" (as defined by the men in power) or be killed. This ultimatum—and the fact that Pat will indeed eventually hunt Billy down—are symbolically represented by a scene in which Pat appears to take aim at Billy's back while Billy is shooting at some chickens. This scene of Pat aiming at Billy in 1881 is cross-cut with another scene of Pat himself being shot in the future (1909), for once Pat has outlived his usefulness to big business by killing Billy, he too will be killed by another paid assassin. In this way, right from the beginning of the film, director Sam Peckinpah shows that Pat's betrayal of Billy, his selling out the cause of individual freedom, will lead to his own loss of life, his own betrayal by his corporate masters. There are few Westerns as wise or as somber as this revisionist one from Peckinpah, from the bravura opening credits sequence, to the scene where "harmless" target practice almost turns fatal when one man mistakenly believes that another is firing at him, to the scene where two men fight a duel to the death because neither one knows how to back out of it with honor. An elegy for the vanished freedom of the Wild West and the vanishing freedom of 1960s' America as it leads into the increasingly corporate seventies and eighties, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid* is a Western with tragic grandeur. Other Westerns with a social conscience include *One-Eyed Jacks*, *Welcome to Hard Times*, *Once Upon a Time in the West*, *The McMasters*, and *Wild Bill*.

5. Musical: *Pennies from Heaven* (1981, rated R, DVD, videotape)

Based on a British TV miniseries of the same name written by Dennis Potter (who also scripted the superbly scabrous *The Singing Detective*), this Hollywood version may actually be better than its British counterpart at balancing the light and dark elements of its story. The British miniseries (also available on DVD) is a true tragedy, relentless in its downward spiraling toward despair, whereas the American version, though surprisingly rough and unsentimental by Hollywood standards, nevertheless has more moments of levity and saving grace which help to make the darkness bearable. Having Depression-era characters suddenly break out in song and dance may seem artificial and gimmicky at first, but these performances give vocal and bodily expression to the characters' desires in ways that are frequently funny and unexpectedly moving. See, in particular, Christopher Walken's hilarious tap-dance seduction number—a real showstopper—and the almost superhumanly graceful “Pennies from Heaven” dance performed by Vernel Bagneris, who is otherwise a stumbling bum in the film's non-musical “real” world. Other musicals with some realistic grounding and grit include *Carousel*, *The Umbrellas of Cherbourg*, *All That Jazz*, *Tango*, and *Dancer in the Dark*.

6. Comedy: *She's Having a Baby* (1988, rated PG-13, DVD, videotape)

Most viewers know the work of writer-director John Hughes based on his teen comedies of the 1980s, particularly *Sixteen Candles* and *Pretty in Pink* (though *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* and *Some Kind of Wonderful* are even better). But Hughes also made a clever and moving comedy about young adults that still remains virtually unseen: *She's Having a Baby*. Perhaps the sentimental Paul Anka-like title put viewers off, or Hughes's reputation as a writer about teens or those even younger (*Baby's Day Out*, *Home Alone*). One quality that distinguishes *She's Having a Baby* is that it is a comedy about a newly married couple. Almost all Hollywood comedies are about young men and women who have just met and who are going through the trials and tribulations of courtship; these films usually end with the wedding. But this is where Hughes's film begins, and perhaps because it is largely autobiographical, the film deals with real obstacles to marital happiness: career stagnation, sexual monotony, interfering parents and parents-in-law, and the intrusion of a third party into the home (a baby). Though the comic moments in the film are broad and even outlandish, they are consistently surprising in ways that reveal different aspects of the characters. Elizabeth McGovern gives depth and nuance to a role that is usually just a stereotype in Hollywood films, that of the devoted wife and mother. And the extraordinary Kate Bush song, “This Woman's Work,” lends poignancy to a scene where the bottom threatens to drop out of the comedy and turn it into a tragedy. For some other comedies that have something of the bite of real relationships, see *They Might Be Giants*, *Sheila Levine Is Dead and Living in New York*, *Threesome*, *All Over the Guy*, and *Kissing Jessica Stein*.

## Keesey: Ten Movies You May Not Know But (Probably) Should

### 7. Film Adaptation of Literature: *Orlando* (1993, rated PG-13, DVD, videotape)

By trying to be too faithful to the letter of their literary source, some films fail to capture the spirit. But director Sally Potter allows herself to take liberties in her adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, and the result is a remarkably successful movie of a novel that many considered to be unfilmable. Following a single character (played by the extraordinarily confident Tilda Swinton) who "lives" through four hundred years of British history and who changes from man to woman about half way through, Potter's film finds inspired ways to translate fiction into film while remaining true to the spirit of Woolf's novel. Tactile costumes, warmly lit flesh, and ambient sounds allow us to fully inhabit each time period in all its sensations and emotions (desire, jealousy, rivalry), while each time change tends to ironize what has come before, suggesting that how we act and feel—what we think of as the most personal things that we decide—may actually depend a lot on the social class into which we are born, the gender role we are expected to play, and even the clothes we wear. The film encourages us to feel passionately, but also to gain some critical distance from those powerful emotions so that we are not trapped into playing out a script actually written by society and not by ourselves. Thus, this movie is a rare thing: a romance that is also a satire on sentimentality; a celebration of motherhood that contains within it the steely distance necessary for letting go; and a glorifying in riches, fame, and the finer things in life that is simultaneously a statement about the triviality of all material things. For other successfully cinematic adaptations of literature, see *The Swimmer*, *An Angel at My Table*, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*, *Carrington*, and *The Wings of the Dove*.

### 8. Film Noir: *Lost Highway* (1997, rated R, DVD, videotape)

Although writer-director David Lynch recently had success with a more viewer-friendly version of a similar kind of twisty tale (*Mulholland Drive*), his film noir masterpiece remains *Lost Highway*. This film's Moebius strip of a narrative finds its two halves folding in on each other and joining in a continuous loop, where the end is the beginning and vice versa. Few films are as creepy in the way that they reveal repressed sides of the male lead character, or as critical of his attempt to escape facing terrible truths about himself. This film is Lynch's deepest exploration of the male tendency to idealize and demonize women, and of how these may in fact be two sides of the same coin. Reinforced by an extraordinary musical score that expresses the most ideal love (Lou Reed's "This Magic Moment") and the most paranoid fears (This Mortal Coil's "Song to the Siren"), Lynch's film is alternately subtle and shocking, tightly wound and out of control, penetrating and unfathomable. Be advised that this film plumbs the depths of depravity and is not for the faint of heart. Other stylistically adventurous films noirs are *Touch of Evil*, *Point Blank*, *The Element of Crime*, *U Turn*, and *Dark City*.

9. Gangster: *Ichi the Killer* (2001, unrated but would be NC-17, DVD, videotape)

Gangster films allow audiences to explore extreme desires through at least partial identification with the overreaching “hero.” James Cagney in *White Heat* or Al Pacino in *Scarface* can never get enough—of money, drugs, sex, power. These films are about delusions of grandeur and sadistic dominance. They are also—for the victims in their suffering and even for the hero in his agonizing downfall—about masochistic submission. *White Heat* and *Scarface* were potent in their day (1949 and 1983), but now director Takashi Miike has gone on to depict much more naked power grabs, more openly sexualized aggression, and more graphic infliction of bodily pain. Make no mistake about it, *Ichi the Killer* shows some of the sickest acts on film, but it is also an insightful diagnosis of that sickness. A film so complicated in plot and tone as virtually to defy summary, *Ichi the Killer* is basically about the ambivalence that knots men (and women) into cycles of sadomasochistic violence. A young man, traumatized by witnessing a rape, is torn between empathy for the victim and identification with the rapist’s power to dominate. Another young man who is beaten by bullies grows up to become a hero saving others from a similar fate—or is his out-of-control punishment of wrongdoers simply another vengeful turn in the escalating cycle of violence? And what are the macho social codes and psychosexual motivations behind the acts of violence committed by gangsters? Despite all its emphasis on the body, *Ichi the Killer* is also a movie for the mind, for people who think about such difficult social and sexual issues. Other violent but insightful gangster films include *Performance*, *Once Upon a Time in America*, *State of Grace*, *The Krays*, and *Snatch*.

10. Animation: *The Triplets of Belleville* (2003, rated PG-13, DVD, videotape)

Unlike some films that employ animation or CGI to achieve an ever-closer approximation to real people, this movie by comic-book artist Sylvain Chomet wisely exploits the greater potential of animation, which is to depart from boring realism and engage in expressive exaggeration. A maniacal cyclist with overdeveloped calves the size of hams is kidnapped during the Tour de France by Mafia henchmen with shoulders so broad they combine to form one mass of brainless muscle. The cyclist’s grandmother and her dog prove indefatigable in their effort to rescue the kidnapped youth, refusing to be deterred by old age, an orthopedic shoe, or canine corpulence. Yes, these characters are comic grotesques, but the strange thing is that the exaggeration of certain traits is also what makes them seem more believably human (or convincingly canine). We all know feisty grannies with the will to survive and overweight dogs that will still give their all. Another winning aspect of *The Triplets of Belleville* is that its title characters—three aging nightclub performers who still sing scat and maintain an appetite for life despite poverty and cramped quarters—are the kinds of heroes we don’t see very often in film, which tends to worship the young, the conventionally beautiful, and the physically fit.

## Keesey: Ten Movies You May Not Know But (Probably) Should

This film gets off to a slow start, but stay with it as it meticulously builds a fully imagined world and then brings the characters within it to brilliantly animated life. Other outstanding animations include *The Point*, *Akira*, *Princess Mononoke*, *Iron Giant*, and the *Wallace & Gromit* films. 