

Are you talking to me?

A Life Through the Movies



John Walsh

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**Are you talking to me?: A
Life Through the Movies**

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Are you talking to me?: A Life Through the Movies / J. Walsh —
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A combination of wit and heartbreak in a memoir of a life intertwined with an obsession with film. A Fever Pitch for cinema lovers. 'This book will consider the influence of movies on one life, the interaction of celluloid fantasy and the growth of a personality. It's not just a film buff's record of his enthusiasm's. It's about how some films do, weirdly, change your life.' Beginning with his first cinema outing, *The Mutiny on the Bounty*, and tracing his passion through his growing up years to adulthood, Walsh will weave together his own life experiences with his rapturous dependence on key moments in film. He will write a funny, personal, loving account of the magic and drama of the silver screen and its ultimate, all-encompassing power to become larger than (real) life.

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JOHN WALSH



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DEDICATION

This book is dedicated, with fond affection,
to Giles Brody – nephew, godson, film buff,
crazed Tarantino fan, precociously talented script-writer
and future movie director – hoping it will demonstrate that
you don't have to be Samuel L. Jackson *all* the time ...

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INTRODUCTION STRAINING YOUR EYES TO SEE

‘From the movies we learn precisely how to hold a champagne flute, kiss a mistress, pull a trigger, turn a phrase ... but the movies spoil us for life: nothing ever lives up to them’

– Edmund White

You are sitting in the three-and-nine seats at the Granada cinema, Clapham Junction in 1962, with an empty carton of Kia-Ora crushed in your hand, and you are gazing into the horizon of a hazy, golden desert. Your eyes are straining to see what you think you see – what you might be able to see if you craned forward just a bit.

You are oblivious to the other people around you in this cut-price Alhambra Palace in south London. But even if you could register that 300 other people are sitting beside you, staring at the screen, you couldn’t believe they can see what you’re seeing. The experience you’re going through is wholly individual. Your eyes are – surely? – the only eyes capable of picking out the tiny dot on the horizon.

The film is David Lean’s *Lawrence of Arabia*. It’s not ideal entertainment for an eight-year-old. It’s full of men in military uniforms telling each other what’s what in the First World War, and talking about the Turks and a prince called Faisal. The hero is a pale, blue-eyed, extremely odd fellow called Lawrence whose party trick is to extinguish matches with his bare fingers without squealing with pain. He is cheeky to everyone, even to murderous-looking Arabs in black robes. He rides a camel like a ninny, though, stretching forward over the camel’s neck, waving a stick like someone trying to conduct an orchestra.

At this point in the film, he and fifty men in long skirts and head-shawls have crossed a huge desert called ‘The Sun’s Anvil’. Suddenly, Lawrence notices a riderless camel loping along the boiling sands, and decides they must go back for the fallen rider. The skirt-and-shawl brethren argue that the guy is probably dead by now, but Lawrence doesn’t listen. He sets off, bravely, suicidally, to rescue the man, while the others continue their journey to a nearby oasis. Watching them go is Lawrence’s young servant, who sticks around on the edge of the desert, waiting for his return. You are with him. You are waiting and watching beside him. Together you inspect the desert horizon, flat and shimmering and empty. The waiting servant, on the edge of nowhere, snoozes in the heat – but suddenly he is awake and alert, and can apparently see something. You look at the horizon again, flat and shimmering and – is that a fleck of something? What is he looking at? What are *you* looking at? Is that a tiny interruption in the hazy nothingness, a speck like a single grain of pepper in the soup of earth and sky? As you look at the horizon, you start to become the boy on the camel, you widen your eyes so they can see more clearly, willing the speck to become a man coming out of the desert, you sit forward in your seat as if bidding the seat to move. As the servant rides forward, picking up speed until the camel is racing along, your heart races alongside him, until you are running with him into the middle of nowhere, racing the kid to get there first, to see the unimaginable sight before he does.

The tiny speck in the distance gets larger, more defined, more vertical, until it’s a small wobbling figure – and the camera cuts away, to disclose a triumphant full view of Lawrence on his camel. They’re running at full tilt, the saintly rider waving his camel-urging stick like a magic baton, and the Arab guy he has rescued (hurrah!) has his arms round his saviour’s waist, clinging on, the way a nervous passenger might embrace a speed-crazed biker manipulating a Harley-Davidson down the New Jersey Turnpike.

It’s a brilliant rescue sequence, and one of the most visually involving scenes in film history because it makes you stretch your eyes to the horizon. It plays games with your assumptions about what exactly you can see on the screen when you think you’re being shown everything. It’s also a big moral schoolboy lesson – that going back for your fallen mates is the only right and decent thing to do, even when logic dictates that you might die as a result. But there is more to come.

Not long after the rescue, Lawrence and his Bedouin brothers are camped outside Akaba, which they plan to invade the next morning. Akaba is a distant necklace glow of light on the horizon. Lawrence and his swarthy pals discuss tactics until interrupted by a single gunshot. One Arab has just killed another Arab from a rival tribe, just at the moment when the tribes are meant to be pulling together for the attack. He must be punished, publicly, by death. But (we quickly learn) if a fellow Arab kills him, it will be the start of a terrible internecine vendetta. He must, therefore, be killed by someone from outside the tribes.

Lawrence proposes himself as the executioner and, as he adjusts his huge revolver, the camera closes in on the bowed head of the doomed prisoner. He lifts his face, and – as the camera itself seems shocked to discover – it's the man Lawrence rescued in the desert.

He can't – can he? – possibly shoot a man whose life he saved. You admire Lawrence for diplomatically offering his services, but you know he can't possibly kill the guy. Something will happen, you just know – some kindly intervention at the last moment will ...

But then Lawrence's eyes take on a cruel gleam, and you can almost see his heart hardening. He fires six times, and kills his former friend, for whom he braved certain death the day before; kills him with single-minded efficiency. And you never get over the shock that he could do such a thing.

Here were two scenes of entrancement: one a classic bit of *Boy's Own Paper* derring-do, the hero going back to rescue a stricken comrade in the teeth of warnings and mockery and the threat of the Desert of Death; the other, a moment of grown-up horror, as the hero summarily kills the man he saved. For the eight-year-old viewer, these two scenes – just five minutes apart – offered fantastically conflicting signals. One said simply: you look after your mates when they're in trouble, no matter what the odds. The other said: you may have to kill your mates if it's strategically necessary, because of some bewildering higher good called 'Akaba'.

Picture, if you will, the palpitating kid in the stalls. I remember being shocked by these contrasting moral lessons, exhilarated by the former and outraged by the latter. The five minutes of film-time that separated them represented, in hindsight, the transition from a schoolboy's to a grown-up's view of the world. I didn't care for what I saw of the latter, but I now knew it existed – Grown-up Land, a place full of stern logic and chilly compromise. And these two scenes got under my skin because they were presented in a way I'd never experienced before, on stage, book or screen. It was the use of the camera lens – one moment stretching my eyes to the horizon, the next closing in on the doomed man as if asking, 'What are you going to do about this?' – stretching, then closing in on, my awakening consciousness.

Do we learn useful lessons from the cinema? When we're young and impressionable, do we become better or worse people, less moral or more so, more civilised or more brutalised, by being exposed to two hours of celluloid dreams every couple of weeks? Crime psychologists speculate that because a murderer watched a violent film the day before a murder, it may have been a 'spur' or 'spark' that precipitated his actions – as if murder were the result of terrible how-to knowledge or dumb bovine imitation, rather than terrible will. Other people will insist that film (like poetry, according to W.H. Auden) makes nothing at all happen, apart from changing the way some people buy clothes after seeing *Annie Hall* or *The Matrix*. I've always been convinced that the cinema is a universe of mostly benign influences, and that it educates us by the simple act of showing us other lives in spectacular close-up.

Here's another example. When I was twelve, I went to see *His Finest Hour*, a glowing hagiography of Winston Churchill, made to coincide with his ninetieth birthday. I was impressed with the historical stuff, the massing of troops and the making of speeches, but it didn't make me understand about love of country, or whatever that thing is that made men go off and die for England, home and beauty. You could attend a three-hour lecture on the wonderfulness of England and Englishness, about honey for tea and pints of beer on cricket greens, about vicars and seaside vulgarity, and you might be charmed by it all, but what did it have to do with dying for your country,

with that fantastic, logical, voluntary swapping of everything the world brought you every day – the sunshine on the houses in your street, the procession of raindrops down a window, the lazy collapse of a log in the living-room fire – for some dimly-imagined ideal of patriotism?

But then you'd see *Casablanca* and understand it perfectly. It's the scene everyone remembers: the Germans in neutral Casablanca have taken to hanging out at Rick's 'Bar Americain', drinking beer and flirting with the local girls. One evening, Victor Laszlo (Paul Heinreid) is in the bar, surveying the officers of the Wehrmacht with contempt. Relaxed and laughing, the Germans start to sing an awful barrel-organy marching song, waving their steins to the rhythm. Laszlo strides over to the dormant orchestra, picks up the conductor's baton and says, 'Play the Marseillaise!'

After a nod from Rick, they do. Some barfly, a Spanish dame with a guitar, starts to sing the words. Others join in. The Germans sing their oompah marching song louder. Laszlo's baton becomes more agitated. The French national anthem gets louder still. The Germans give up and return to their beers with gestures of contempt.

Then the Marseillaise hits the chorus ('*Aux armes, citoyens!*') and glory breaks out. The beautiful prostitute, who has shamed herself for so long by fraternising with the German generals, jumps to her feet, eyes shining with tears, because of the glory of the singing. When the anthem ends, she suddenly cries '*Vive la France!*' with a kind of instinctive passion. Oh yes, you think, and you shout with her, though patriotic love of France is something wholly foreign to you. She is finding something to be proud of. After selling her soul and her body, she is rediscovering the concept of pride, and is on the way to re-finding pride in herself.

And there you find the essence of patriotism. That it isn't a simple love of your native land. It's a love of, or a pride in, yourself, only blown up to a huge, sentimental, national scale.

The irresistible martial swing of the 'Marseillaise' helps, of course, but the scene works because of the faces that the camera cuts between, aglow with longing and desperation and a gleam of resistance. You suddenly realise how the soul of a country might be seen in the faces of its people.

Even in the epic movies that you saw, it was the tiny details, the intimate human scale amid the panoramic action, that made the deepest impression on you. Take that gross, baggy, unstructured, triple-director, hundred-stars monster, *The Longest Day*, which I saw in 1962, when I was just nine. It was a three-hour attempt to make sense of the Normandy landings, but I emerged from the cinema with no clear understanding of how D-Day was meant to have worked, nor whether it had been a success or a terrible tragedy (more the latter, as far as I could see). But some key images stuck in my head.

One was the cake with which the German high command celebrated a general's birthday – the way the Germans sliced it right across the centre, bisecting the whole thing, this way and that, rather than cutting elegant wedges, as one did at English children's birthday parties. It struck me at the time as a typical example of Hunnish perversity.

More potent was the scene in which the lone German soldier discovers the invasion has started. Played by Gert Froebe, the fat militiaman is on lonely sentry duty somewhere above, say, Omaha beach. He is bored, sleepy, looking forward to his breakfast, and soporifically riding a mule up a gentle incline of Normandy cliff, when he turns and looks out to sea. Stretched across the horizon, a vast flotilla of invading landing-craft is cruising straight towards him. Instantly he is a-flurry with activity, falling off his mule, grabbing for his gun, wondering whom to call, worrying about what correct procedure you should adopt when the odds are approximately 500,000 to one against you. While the audience laughed at his panic, I felt for him. Forgetting, for a moment, that I was supposed to be rooting for the Allied forces in the boats, I sympathised with the poor schmuck on the other side, with his limited response materials and his ridiculous donkey.

I think it was this personal connection with an individual that explains why the parachute-drop scene also haunted me. As the paratroopers fall out of the sky into a French village where the German army is waiting for them, most are killed in mid-air or shortly after landing. Some of the descending

parachutists found themselves in farcical circumstances, landing in a tree, or crashing through the roof of a greenhouse. One man went straight down a well, his parachute imploding above him as it disappeared. I remember the yell of laughter that went up in the audience at this bit of slapstick – and then how the laugh changed to a pitying ‘Ohhhh’. Soon my eyes were misting up at the fate of another victim. A soldier played by the American comedian Red Buttons came to land on the side of a church, his parachute speared by the steeple. He hung there, hardly daring to breathe, watching the killing going on below him, while the church bell donged and clanged just a few feet away from his ear. Against the odds he survives, but when we meet him later in the film, he is completely deaf.

I could just about cope with the massacre of men falling out of the sky – but this poor man whom the bell had made deaf went straight to my tear ducts. As in the case of Gert Froebe on his stumbling mule, his situation posed the question how *you* would have got on in wartime, how you would have fared. In a departure from the triumphalist, us-against-them glorification of war that I encountered in just about every other war movie I saw, it was a key to understanding the sorrow and the pity.

I grew up mesmerised by the movies. My relationship with the Big Screen was more heady, more intense, more hungrily passionate than my civilised involvement with books, my light flirtations with theatre, my patronising kiss on the forehead of television. Watching films in the dark never seemed to me a passive activity. It was more like visiting a shrine,^{*} going to a great dark church for prolonged communion and prayer – even if the only prayers were that Clint Eastwood should waste the bad guys in *A Fistful of Dollars*, or that Julie Christie should find true love with Alan Bates in *Far from the Madding Crowd*, or that Kim Novak should, at some point, take her clothes off in *Vertigo*.

Cinematic shrines were everywhere when I was young. I was surrounded by them. On St John’s Hill, Battersea, down the road from our house, there were no fewer than three cinemas: the Imperial, the Essoldo and the Granada. The Imperial, despite its grand name, was a fag-reeking little flea-pit where uncouth kids ran about the stalls and there were constant rumours of mice underfoot. The Essoldo was rather grand, a rococo palace of varieties, the kind of place where Robert Donat might have seen Mr Memory in Hitchcock’s *The 39 Steps*. The Granada looked boringly municipal, like a bank only with more dramatic lighting, but it had the largest screen and showed the best new films.

Between them, the three picture-houses showed hundreds of movies every year – not just first-run features, but re-runs of old Bogart movies, James Bond double-bills, classic Westerns, Japanese Godzilla movies, cartoon extravaganzas, war films, Biblical epics and slightly moth-eaten romances starring Rock Hudson and Doris Day. The double-bills could yoke together some very odd bedfellows. Who, for instance, would have been the ideal consumer to appreciate both *The Wizard of Oz* and the new Elvis movie, *Roustabout*, back-to-back on the same afternoon in 1964?

In the pitch-black cinema, you received occasional glimpses of the grown-up, X-rated world that seemed to lie ahead of you. The Granada was where, aged eleven, I watched a trailer for *A Study in Terror*, James Hill’s energetically nasty conflation of Sherlock Holmes and Jack the Ripper. As trailers go (I’ve always loved trailers), it was a humdinger, a howling farrago of blood, screams, swollen bosoms, knives, gurning costermongers, dirt-streaked Victorian tarts in shadowy alleyways and massive close-ups of John Neville’s pinched Sherlockian physiognomy. Minatory banner headlines unwrapped themselves across the screen like a series of flung-down Biblical warning – ‘A MANIAC IS ON THE LOOSE!’; ‘TERROR STALKS THE STREETS’ – and left me badly shaken, as my trembling fingers searched for another orange cream.

My Battersea friends, my sister and I haunted the cinemas at weekends and in the school holidays. Sometimes we’d sit in the stalls without caring much what film was showing. We’d go into a double-bill of second-rate spy movies, half an hour after the first one started, blithely uncaring that we’d missed the premise of the whole movie and would have to work out the plot by ourselves. We were content in the knowledge that, in three hours’ time, the programme would have rolled round to the point where we’d started. ‘This is where we came in,’ we would whisper, although we might

perhaps stick around for another hour for the exciting bit where somebody blew up a helicopter, or the master spy got to fondle a Swedish cutie in abbreviated swimwear.

We didn't care about narrative coherence. We just liked being shown wonders, and spectacular sights, things we'd never seen before, like the plains of Africa or the lunar bluffs of Monument Valley. We enjoyed the darkness, the crepuscular excitement of the long funnel of smoky light stretching out its fat, tapering glow above our heads. We liked the Pearl & Dean advertisements, especially the stunningly tacky ones for local restaurants with their still photographs of wanly deserted curry houses: 'After the show, why not visit ...'

My world in the Sixties remained stuck in a time before the metropolis began to swing – a place of grey streets and rainy puddles and soul-destroyingly dull bus rides to Nowheresville and Loser's Lane. I travelled between school in Wimbledon and my home in the blank, unfriendly back streets of Battersea, where the biggest excitement that stealth or enterprise could buy was to visit Arding & Hobbs department store and travel up in the lift to the third-floor carpet department to ogle the gorgeous, hopelessly unattainable local beauty, Mary McCarthy, as she saucily advised the newly-married about their urgent need for Berber shagpile.

The cinema became our cultural porthole, our window on a Zeitgeist that never seemed to make its way to Battersea, our palace of shadows, our University of Life. It was there we saw Cleopatra float into Rome and El Cid ride out to battle one last time, strapped dead but upright on his horse; it was there we saw the innocent hayseed James Stewart shoot the bullying villain, Lee Marvin, in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance*, and the downfall of the enormous German howitzers in *The Guns of Navarone* ... We spent weeks, months, years watching people completely unlike us emoting and punching, going on safari, carrying out elaborate jewel heists, riding a rickety horse-and-trap through the flames of a burning Atlanta, and falling in love with each other in the middle of a war. How could we have expected to emerge from all that and not be profoundly affected?

You could regard these early movie experiences as just fleeting memories from your childhood, like Desperate Dan or Dan Dare; but some of them made a nagging, intrusive, almost pernicious claim on your consciousness long after they should have been wiped away by the stern blue pencil of time. For years I couldn't work out why, if things were going badly at work, or a threatening Final Demand arrived from the taxman, I would find the words 'Mother of mercy, is this the end of Ricco?' forming, unbidden, in my head. Nor why, as I walked to some job interview or some appearance on a radio show, my hands would twitch involuntarily, and mime the cocking of an imaginary rifle.

What was going on in my mind that hijacked the real world at these moments, and substituted some vivid otherworld in its place?

It required only a little thought to realise that it was the movies I'd seen years before bobbing up to the surface as bits of a counter-life in my mind at moments of crisis, telling me how I should feel, or think, or talk or act. They offered an alternative to the life I was living and tried to persuade me I was someone else. It was a strange form of substitution because it made no sense. I've never known anyone called Ricco, and stopped invoking the name of the mother of God when I was fifteen. I've never owned a firearm and never cocked a real rifle, but when I tried to nail down what was going on in my head at these moments, I discovered I was a) quoting James Cagney in a forgotten gangster film, possibly *The Roaring Twenties*, and b) imitating the final walk-to-glory of William Holden and the last of his gang at the end of *The Wild Bunch*.

The fact that I could still display these behavioural tics many years after seeing the films made me wonder. Were they essentially nostalgic memories of movies I had once enjoyed? Or was something more profound going on – namely, that all my life I had been storing up images and dialogue and epiphanies from the movies that had come to mean more to me than my own true-life experiences?

Much of the time, we don't realise the effect that films have on us. As we emerge from the cinema blinking into the lights of Soho, we are dragged back into the real world. Lots of movies slide

off us, like mercury off a plate, leaving no trace behind. But sometimes, when it's all worked out as the director planned, when we've seen everything we were supposed to see, have been strung out by the drama, dinned into submission by the galloping soundtrack, carpet-bombed by the special effects, made to laugh aloud or weep real tears, we make a connection with the screen that's life-changingly powerful. Sometimes we find a narrative in which we unconsciously lose ourselves, mingling with the furniture, the props, the wide-shot landscape, the medium-shot high street, the close-up faces ... It's a quality of involvement of which only the cinema is capable, when, for a while, we borrow a life from somebody else. And from the array of on-screen characters and attitudes, small gestures, behaviour patterns, bits of dialogue, revelations of personality, we unconsciously select things that will affect our lives outside the cinema.

When we are young and silly and have no distinct personality with which to confront the world, we sometimes take a screen *alter-ego* home with us. The moment, for instance, in *The Magnificent Seven* when James Coburn is harassed by a bullying loudmouth into a gun-versus-knife duel was too good not to replicate in my bedroom the following day, where I confronted myself in the mirror of a chest of drawers, and flung my puny Boy Scout knife at the woodwork a couple of dozen times, replaying the scene until the blade started to become unhinged – not unlike Travis Bickle, the eponymous Taxi Driver in the Scorsese film, whose challenging monologue in front of his own bedroom mirror* gives this book its title and sums up many years of day-dreamy adolescent mimetics. But there's a deeper form of identification that (no matter what your age) summons from your lower depths a more heroic form of the self that dumbly takes out the rubbish on Saturday morning and submits to insultingly brusque demands from the Inland Revenue. It's the alternative counter-self that's ridden along with Steve McQueen, smooched with Greta Garbo, been harangued by Jack Lemmon, spied on Janet Leigh in the shower, chased a small red PVC coat with Donald Sutherland or drowned alongside Holly Hunter at the end of *The Piano*. Sometimes, as we shall see, the shadow cast by this dim *doppelgänger* can go on and on down the years ...

The immediate spur to writing this book was a discovery one night in January 2001. It was 4 a.m. My consort, Carolyn, was away, staying with friends. The children were asleep at the top of the house. I woke up for no obvious reason – beyond the standard, middle-aged panic about money, mortgages, school fees, dwindling talent, thinning hair, dyspeptic twinges and terror of death – and lay on my back gazing at the ceiling. I couldn't get back to sleep. But as time ticked by and the room gradually lightened, I slid into a state of semi-consciousness and, looking at the end of my ancient bed, saw a great black shape looming over me. But it wasn't the figure of death, cowed, scythe-bearing and melancholy. It was just a solid black mass, a neutral rectangular object standing where no monolithic block had stood before, both alarming and obscurely comforting. As I lay half awake wondering what it could be, for some inexplicable reason the words 'Where are we going now?' ran through my head.

Then I switched on the light and all became clear. The thing at the end of the bed was the doorway of my bedroom, backlit by the sleepy dawn light from the landing window. It was new to me because we had recently taken on a cleaner, and the usual collection of discarded shirts, trousers and manly impedimenta that had habitually hung over the brass struts at the end of the bed had been tidied away. I was seeing my own doorway for the first time in ages. Ridiculous, really. But in that sleepy disarray, I had conjured up something else.

It was, of course, the climactic scene of *2001: A Space Odyssey*, in which Keir Dullea, playing Dave, the only surviving astronaut on the mission to Jupiter, wakes to find himself in what seems to be the bedroom of an eighteenth-century hotel. Kubrick fans will remember Dullea's alarmed eyes inside his futuristic space helmet, his widened stare that reflected our own wild surmise of where-in-the-universe-have-we-ended-up? In the film, Dave/Dullea walks about the elegant suite, discovers an older version of himself eating dinner at a spindly table, and ends up lying on an elegant bed. As he does, the black monolith, which has turned up throughout the movie as a cosmic emblem of progress

and education, appears like a warning, or a threat, or a portal of discovery, whereupon the astronaut dies and is re-born as the Star Child, the master of the world.

I'd been stunned by Kubrick's masterpiece when I saw it on a huge screen in 1968. Now, thirty-three years later, lying on a bed fretting about mortality in the dark watches of the night, I had conjured the film's ambiguously alarming monolith to come and loom over me and take me somewhere ('Where are we going now?') more interesting.

I sat up and looked, as though for the first time, at the bed in which I was lying, an antique divan I'd picked up in the Eighties. It was, I realised, not a million miles from the one in the film. I looked around the room. An antique gentleman's wardrobe that I'd bought in 1995 gaped open, self-consciously mimicking the one in the movie. I thought of the armchairs in yellow-gold brocade that I'd bought (I couldn't have told you why) years ago for the sitting-room downstairs. And the threadbare Ottoman sofa. And the spindly-legged occasional tables that Carolyn had often tried to throw out because she couldn't see any beauty in their false antiquity. And those heavy old hotel curtains I'd insisted on ...

Could it be true? I went downstairs, switched on the light in the living-room and stared. Yes, it bloody well could. For years, I had unconsciously been furnishing my home to look like a simulacrum of the room in *2001: A Space Odyssey* where an astronaut had fetched up thirty-odd years before, the room in which he was re-born into something infinitely grander than a mere Earthling. For years, it appeared, I had been patiently, unconsciously, nagging away at an image of transcendence in my head, one that had steered my taste in something as banal as furniture, and all to create a scene – actually *in 2001* – where, at the end of your long journey, you don't die after all.

It was such a shock that I began to wonder what other movies had sowed a corresponding seed, or how they had altered the course of my life when young. And gradually I began to isolate the films that had had a specifically moral, physical or psychological effect on me or had made me behave in peculiarly uncharacteristic ways.

Only a fool would admit that he or she has become a better person through their exposure to the cinema. It's never been the natural home of great moralists. Sentimental film buffs still go to see D.W. Griffith's *Birth of a Nation* and emerge stunned by its casual racism, its black baddies and Ku Klux Klan heroes. But the cinema screen works an insidious magic on the emergent consciousness, and leaves us *charged with feeling* in ways that we only dimly understand. Unlike books or plays or TV programmes, the movies make you do weird stuff. And it's this egregiously personal response to the key movies in your life that I try to explore in the ensuing chapters. I've included nothing I saw after I was twenty-one because it's before that age that films imprint themselves on you most deeply; after twenty-one, your life is too hijacked by work, drink, sex, family demands and all the compromises you make with the Real World to be awestruck to the same degree by the plush curtains and the massive screen.

Perhaps my youth was mis-spent in darkened cinemas, when I might have been better employed reading Hegel or Gibbon or Proust, climbing Snowdon or Helvellyn with the Venture Scouts, travelling in the Sudan or the South China Seas, helping the sick with Mother Teresa. But the movies changed my life in the Sixties and early Seventies, and this is a celebration of that heady metamorphosis. And I cordially invite the reader to raid his or her own filmic image-bank and consider what flickering presences, what seductive scenes and passionate epiphanies, made them into the people they've become.

* J.G. Ballard, speculating about Hollywood's influence on American attitudes to war, came up with a startling theory about movie-worship. 'Any dream that so endures,' he wrote, 'must draw its strength from the deepest survival instincts. The potent spectacle of bright light playing against a high wall taps into something hardwired in our brains – memories, perhaps, of the first dawn.'

* Which goes, in its entirety: Yeah. Huh? (Pulls out gun.) Huh? Huh? Faster 'n you. Go fuck yourself. (Puts gun back in holster.) I saw you comin', you fuck, shitheel. I'm standing here. You

make the move. You make the move. It's your move. (Pulls out gun again.) Huh. Try it, you ... (Puts the gun away.) You talkin' to me? You talkin' to me? You talkin' to me? Well who the hell else are you talkin' ...? You talkin' to me? Well, I'm the only one here ...

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