The New York Times
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December 21, 2008

CRITIC'S NOTEBOOK

Reality Can Be Escapist, Too

By A. O. SCOTT

One of the best things about old movies is that they're, well, old. Among other pleasures, they offer a unique form of time travel, immersing us in bygone styles of dress and speech, quaint habits and notions. Hollywood classics in particular provide glimpses of a very different America by showing us the culture and physical environments our grandparents and parents lived in, and by acquainting us with some of their fantasies and dreams.

But lately, when I've sought escape from the daily flood of cultural novelty (and the daily grind of economic bad news) by slipping an old favorite into the DVD player, I've been confronted with a disconcerting jolt of reality. Those silvery images don't seem to belong to the past, but to the scary here and now. On my recent, more or less annual viewing of "It's a Wonderful Life," I was stopped in my tracks by the run on the building-and-loan company of the hero, George Bailey, as the panicked citizens of Bedford Falls try to rescue their nest eggs. George tries to explain that the money isn't available because they've invested it in each other — one fella's savings helped to finance another's business or secure a neighbor's house — but the scene, though meant as a tableau of solidarity, seems more eloquent today as an account of moral hazard. In any case, the townspeople don't believe George, who is rescued when his fiancée empties their $2,000 honeymoon fund to provide an emergency bailout.

Or consider "The Grapes of Wrath," which I'd come to think of it as a slightly corny artifact. Early on in the film, a flashback shows Muley Graves, an Oklahoma dirt farmer, being dispossessed by a well-fed gentleman with a fine car and a big cigar who disavows any personal responsibility. He's just doing the bidding of the land company, which is doing the bidding of the bank, and on the chain goes — all the way up to the fat cats back East. That no one is to blame puzzles poor Muley. "Well, who do we shoot?" he asks. A similar question may be forming in the minds of more than a few Americans in 2008.

And then there is "Sullivan's Travels," Preston Sturges's impish tale of a Hollywood director who sets out to make a serious movie about real-life poverty and misery only to discover that real people, however poor or miserable they may be, want laughter and escapism. All three of these pictures, though they evoke the Great Depression and seem to belong to it, in fact were released after the worst of the economic crisis of the 1930s had passed.

In the case of "The Grapes of Wrath" (1940) and "Sullivan's Travels" (1941), the next crisis, World War II, was already on the horizon for Americans. And by the time "It's a Wonderful Life" came along, in 1946, the war, too, was over.

The movies themselves are central to how we remember the Great Depression. The mythology of that era includes the idea that Americans all went to the movies because the movies gave them what they needed. On every Main Street the Bijou or the Biograph showed double features that helped ease the sting of desperation and want. Hard-pressed, ordinary folks gratefully lost themselves in satiny, soigné comedies whose very titles — "Trouble in Paradise," "Easy Living" — hinted of a glamorous, alluring world. There were also tough, socially conscious pictures, a lot of them produced by Warner Brothers and quite a few starring James Cagney. "The Public Enemy," "Angels With Dirty Faces" — stories of crime, poverty and punishment delivered, especially once the Production Code came into force in 1934, with redemptive, morally affirming endings.

It was in the 1930s that the movies' hold on the popular imagination solidified and grew, and the marvelous monster known as the "studio system" took shape. It's easy to forget just how new the cinema still was back then, and how uncertain its fate. When the stock market crashed in October 1929, sound film was younger than YouTube is now. Far from being the golden age of movie going, the first years of the Depression were a time of near collapse for the industry. Attendance fell precipitously, from 90 million in 1930 to 60 million three years later.

It was only in 1934, according to the film historian Thomas Schatz (in the "Oxford History of World Cinema"), that things began to turn around — thanks to increased production, new investment from Wall Street and, intriguingly, by the intervention of the federal government under the aegis of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's National Recovery Administration.

Will Hollywood studio bosses be the next executives to come to Washington pleading for a bailout? If so, it will make an interesting movie. In the meantime there are more immediate questions: Will the movies themselves still be there for Americans, and will Americans need them in a time when other entertainments are cheaper, the double feature has gone the way of the Studebaker, and the movie audience shows signs of shrinking? However much has changed since the 1930s, it still seems that in hard times people go to the movies.

But why? To confront their troubles or to escape them? This may be the wrong question and the either/or phrasing too simple. Audiences want to be lulled by romance or tickled by comedy, but they also have a hunger to see reality depicted. Above all there seems a universal appetite to see the rawness of the world given the shapely and soothing order conferred by familiar genres.

The truth is that every movie, really, is an escape into someone else's story. Clint Eastwood's new film, "Gran Torino," which is named for an American car and depicts the frustrations of a retired

auto worker (played by Mr. Eastwood), seems to offer a grim, half-accidental timeliness — it opened on the day the Big Three bailout bill died in the Senate. But its rough, resonant emotions transcend the limitations of its immediate time and place. So, too, a harsh story of deprivation and anxiety like "Wendy and Lucy" — about a young woman and her dog drifting toward Alaska in search of something better — can lift us out of ourselves.

The movies remain a popular art, which means an art for the people. Unlike the atomized landscape of solitary iPods and lonely widescreen TV sets, the crowd in the movie theater is an image of community. This may be a legacy of the Great Depression, which we remember as a golden age of movies. Back then, everyone went to the movies because whatever else was going on, everyone was in it together.

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