

The Death of Randolph Scott, Gabby Hayes and the Canadian Pacific Railway

Hank Malone

I.

“Of the heavy losses we have sustained”, author-sentimentalist Charles Beaumont once said, “none can be regarded with more melancholy than the loss of the great movie theatres.” A generation ago they proliferated, today they exist like brontosaurus, slipping into the churning swamp of American history.

I am not talking about the Taj Mahal movie palaces of the past, resplendent with oriental tapestry, with foot-thick carpets and stone fountains in the lobby, but instead of the simple neighborhood movie theatres where, for about 65 cents until recent years, one could see two feature length films, a technicolor cartoon, a newsreel, and an endless preview of coming attractions—all this while munching and drinking oneself silly.

II.

During recent years (it has all seemingly begun with “art movies”, T.V., and suburbanization) the American film media has undergone drastic changes involving the emergence of new non-democratic “classes” of movie-goers, new class-conscious styles of movie viewing, and new kinds of economically-pyramidal theatre environments.

Instead of spawning a broader range of real choice, recent developments in film marketing have revealed that the movie industry has set up a series of separate-but-not-so-equal geographically-localized, class-accommodating theatre enclaves.

The decision to syndicate in this fashion was based upon a shrewd and important observation: that American social values are no longer universally shared by all Americans. Instead of a central underlying “American morality” pervading the last few scenes of every film (as in the past), there now seem to be several kinds of class-related moralities, appealing directly to various social elements in our midst, shown to them regularly, and separately, in their own theatres.

III.

In the past there were two kinds of typically-American film experiences—(1) going downtown to see first-run features, or (2) going to the neighborhood theatres for the second-run films. There was nothing really so special about downtown movies. It was just “classy”—you went there on your birthdays, or on someone’s anniversary. You “dressed up”. Otherwise, you went to the neighborhood movie, for about a third of the price, and saw the same film (with maybe a movie serial thrown in) about 2 weeks after it left downtown.

To a great extent the old movie regimen was an unparalleled democratic media, where one could regularly choose from among 30 or 40 movie combinations listed in the daily movie guide. The films changed twice a week, on Sundays and on Wednesdays. And everyone of every social class had the opportunity of seeing every available movie for about the same price.

More recently the veteran film viewer has had to greatly revise his habits, adjust himself to the choices of a mere handful of complex film combinations (by comparison, shown simultaneously at syndicated theatres, each syndicate aiming at a seemingly specific social class of viewer.

IV.

It doesn't take much "sociological imagination" to make certain designations about these class-oriented movie enclaves I have suggested. See if the following break-down doesn't feel about right.

At the top of the pyramid, so to speak, the highest "class" of film is The Current Art Movie. Usually limited to the productions of a small and very "in" list of "serious" European and American directors, the Art Movie has become the cultural apex of the movie media. Movie One-Upmanship utterly revolves around the Art Movie—in effect, Who has Seen the Latest Art Movie First. No doubt, such a syndrome has become a way of life for "chosen" thousands.

Just below (in fact, far below) the awesome heights of the Art Movie is the New Hollywood Suburban Luxury Production, seemingly made for audiences who reject the "seriousness" of the Art Movie genre, but who nonetheless thrive on the cult of the affluence-and-culture-associated Movie One-Upmanship. At most of the newly-created suburban and exurban movie mausoleums, one can strap himself into one of those sterile crimson and stainless steel bucket-seats and watch a single fairly-cheerful and exciting Luxury-Class Hollywood first-run cinerama technicolor production, providing of course you submit to the glamorous ticket-seller some astronomical amount of money. Going to such theatres seems to me to be not only an assertion of one's social class, but a bona fide validation of a high income.

For those less flagrantly affluent, and uninvolved in Movie One-Upmanship, there is the Neighborhood Middle-Class Production, usually showing two rather long and pointless films, one of which is invariably a western starring John Wayne, Cappuccine, and Ricky Nelson. Second-rate unless seen as semi-psychedelic travelogues, such movie fare seems intended to provide a good 4 hours worth of colorful, sleep-inducing, audiovisual chuckling mush, presumably for "killing an evening" amidst a comfortable technicolor reassertion of all one's quiet respectable dozing values.

And almost beneath the consideration of polite society, there is that vigorous plethora of neighborhood movie houses that aim their products at The Blue-Collar and sub-blue-collar groups. At these houses are seen movies never seen anywhere else, before or after. They are the genuine repository of a species of B-film almost forgotten, never picked up afterward, even by TV. Their fare consists of blood-and-guts war films, sado-masochistic horror films, and plenty of teenage fun.

Such fare is jam-packed with entrails, anger, lust, and terror, all the emotions which Hollywood deems appropriate for the underprivileged primitives. Sometimes these films are shown at neighborhood middle class theatres, but only on Saturday afternoons to the kids. The implication is that blue-collar workers remain emotional kids all their lives, where the middle class kids somewhere learn to give up Science-Fiction and glide up to the level of Rock Hudson and Doris Day.

And a brief word about the Drive-Ins.

Their sole function seems to rest providing artificial moonlight and snorting, sometimes musical, sound for adolescent seductions, as well as to throw enough light on the panties and breasts to make it voyeuristically profitable for mom, dad, and the kids in the next car.

And a word about the Skin-Flick syndicate. They deserve a Bible of their own.

And a word about Underground films. Well, O.K.

V

You will recall that this journey began in sentimentality and tears, and that is where it's bound to end. Despite all I've said, there are still some of these great eclectic palaces of yesteryear lingering, still alive, still pumping out real blood and deep pleasure in their womb-like seclusion. They are full of democratic secrets, and beauty. Locally, their numbers are few, and include names like the Atlas (one of my favorites), Riviera, Roxy (six films on Saturday/Sunday night/AM for about a buck if you've got the visual courage), Palmer Park, Berkeley Center, Esquire, Main, Royal Oak, Warren, and Great Lakes. I've probably missed some.

To varying degrees their management seems more or less free of the movie syndicates. They frequently show re-runs of fine old films, probably reflecting, somewhere in a little office, the sensibilities of some old bald guy who still likes movies the way they used to be.

In these simple movie palaces of yesteryear, there is still plenty of psychic space for slouching informality, for 5 and 10 cent candy, for huge boxes of popcorn, and on occasion even a hot dog or an ice cream bar. And it is not inappropriate to laugh out loud, or make brilliant spontaneous remarks. Alas, one cannot rise higher in the world

by going to such American opium dens, for a horror film is still shown back-to-back with a first rate comedy, and the cartoons still resurrect Tom and Jerry.

It is painfully clear to some of us that the days of these humble palaces are numbered, for the Temples are more and more overrun by unbelievers. Like the ghostly Varsity, Westown, and Tower before them, these theatres can only wait, with frayed carpets, empty balconies, and their final beautiful humanity for the inevitable Demolition.

In the meantime, farewell to Randolph Scott, Gabby Hayes and the Canadian Pacific.



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Fifth Estate #55, June 4-18, 1968

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