Welcome to A Deep Dive I'm Reggie in this episode, Why do some movies have the power to transport us to new worlds, make us cheer or plunges us into utter despair even when we know the outcome?

What role does the willing suspension of disbelief or our imagination play in expanding our sense of possibility and our empathy?

Thanks for joining me for Life at the Movies.

I wanted to this episode for a few reasons. Aside from the sheer entertainment movies have provided me over the years they have also had a profound effect on my creativity, my worldview and my sense of empathy.

The other reason is I'm a little troubled by our modern penchant for pulling a series or film apart, Reddit threads and entire YouTube channels devoted to finding gaps in a films or series logic not to mention the raging debates about the historical fidelity of a movie or a series as if authenticity heightens the viewing experiences and it might. I'm just saying art has a bigger job to do if we let it.

I know that might sound highfalutin but I believe art and film, in particular, have a transformative power. Think about your favorite movies I'm sure had a movie-going experience that lifted you out of your day today. What we're talking about is something human beings have been doing since we sat around fires listening to stories.

There's a fair amount of research into how we engage with movies, and what it is that connects us to a story. One of the more popular theories is something called the willing suspension of disbelief the other involves our imagination, our ability to dream.

When it comes to engaging an audience there is an adage that goes, "You can ask the audience to believe the impossible but not the improbable." This quote is often bandied about in conversations about the willing suspension of disbelief. The quote is rejiggered from a line that Oscar Wilde wrote for his play a Woman of No Importance, the line is, Man can believe the impossible but man can never believe the improbable.

Wild is indulging in satirical wordplay with social undertones and most likely he didn't mean it the way we use it today. But when it comes to discussions about the willing suspension of disbelief or even the role that imagination plays in our engagement with the movies the distinction between the impossible and the improbable are pretty good ways to approach it.

From Dorothy being knock out in a cyclone and waking up in OZ to The Planet of the Apes where an astronaut crew crash lands on a planet where Apes rule the earth the audience is asked give up control, to come along for the ride and in doing that the impossible becomes possible within the logic of the world we're now a part of and we do it happily.

To achieve this a director has created an internal logic and never betray it. Once betrayed that's where the improbable comes in. We'll get to the improbable in a minute but first, let's talk about the impossible.

Alfred Hitchcock is the master of creating worlds full of inner logic and emotional restraint. While the plot device term the MacGuffin was coined by the English screenwriter Angus MacPhail, Alfred Hitchcock took full advantage of it.

A MacGuffin is the thing upon which much of the action turns but has little or no meaning to the audience. Here's Hitchcock explaining the term MacGuffin during an interview.

Alfred Hitchcock was in such control of the tone of his films that he's able to elicit a depth of emotion from us without supplying a great deal of it on screen. Everything from romance to murder is presented at a slight remove. He wants us to come closer sort of like someone chatting with you in a low tone making you lean in.

Out of all of Hitchcock's films and aside from that moment of Jimmy Stewart swooning on a step latter in Vertigo my favorite Hitchcock voyage is North by Northwest. Here Hitchcock is at the top of his McGuffin game. He said that he wanted to make a fun movie after the seriousness of Vertigo and boy did he achieve it. For me, the film is a complete immersive joy.

Released in 1959 North by Northwest stars the dreamy Cary Grant at his dreamiest, Eva Marie Saint, James Mason, and Martin Landau. Grant is mistaken for another man he abducted, escapes and then is forced into working with the United States government. I know, it sounds like nonsense, but that's the McGuffin. The mistaken identity, being forced to work for the government, who cares? You don't care why it's happening because what we see onscreen is presented with such verve and vitality that you wind up watching the film living from moment to moment wondering if Grant will be able to survive his current predicament. In the middle of all of this Hitchcock creates a steamy and rather modern for the time romance between Eva Marie Saint's character and Cary Grant's character. They share a seductive conversation even as action is happening in the background.

She's in charge, she's strong while he's bewildered and confused and all it heightens the emotional stakes. So that by the time we reach the scenes in the cornfield as a crop-dusting plane tries to kill Grant we're hanging on the edge of our seats.

Towards the end of the film, there's a long sequence that takes place in a mid-century modern glass house. Hitchcock cleverly allows the audience to see the upstairs and the downstairs and much of the action better the characters see it increasing the level of tension.

So that by the time the characters reach Mount Rushmore and beyond underscored by Bernard Herrmann's insistent musical orchestration if you're anything like me you're completely emotionally wrung out and satiated.

Another great example of the use of a McGuffin is the falcon of the Maltese Falcon. The 1941 movie revolves around hunting down the carved figure of a falcon. The object itself doesn't matter it used as the goal, the aspiration, the problem to be solved for the main character. The McGuffin does one other thing, it allows the audience to attach itself to the outcome. We're rooting for Humphrey Bogart's Sam Spade to hold on to the Falcon long enough to get paid without getting himself framed or killed.

As an aside there's a scene in the Maltese Falcon that I'm always struck by every time I see it among the many scenes of Sam Spade being crossed and double-crossed there's an occasion in the film where he is beaten up by this young gangster who's doing it on behalf of his boss and then later in the film the tables are turned and Sam Spade gets to slap the six saying young gangster around in the middle of that fight the young gangster winds up on the ground looking up at Humphrey Bogart and as he does you can see tears in his eyes Bogart makes fun of him of course but I always find the scene to be poignant and strange. It's just that you very rarely saw men expressed any kind of emotion that came anywhere close to fear and it always sticks out in my head.

Now, let's talk about the improbable. Again the improbable has to do with the world of the film, not the world we live in. For many people, the improbable is all about inconsistencies. Dinosaurs fighting soldiers is alright but using world war one equipment in a world War 2 era film is for some improbable. It chafes at one's logic.

My favorite example of the improbable is from the film The Matrix Reloaded. I enjoyed The original Matrix enormously. I love the cyberpunk world, the Japanese animation influences and the fight sequences borrowed from Hong Kong martial arts films that are more like more choreographed dance. I also like the cheeky idea that the film's protagonist is a computer programmer/hacker who joins a rebellion against the machine.

The Matrix Reloaded had a similar jolting start, an amusement park ride feel to it, all the things I love in films like these, then two things happened that pulled me right. First, there's a sort of casual hyper sexualizing of a minor female character which is always annoying and then there's that endless rave dance sequence that goes on for at three minutes.

Why is it that dance in non-musical films always feels a little corny. It reminds me of the way children were portrayed on television in the 80s and 90s as if the people directing and writing the sitcoms had never actually met a child.

I think the only dance sequence I've seen in a none dance movie that felt organic was is in the film Living Out Loud starring Holly Hunter. Hunter's character goes to a women's bar where she encounters the younger freer version of herself on the dance floor.

Dancing to the song If you love me by the group Brownstone several women begin dancing together including a completely choreographed section that that feels organic and transcendent, partly because the women are dancing for themselves without the male gaze. It uplifts the entire film. I'll link a clip of it on the deep dive website anyway back to the matrix reloaded and the thing that just drove me nuts.

Neo finds himself face to face with the Architect, the creator of the Matrix played beautifully by Helmut Bakaitis. The architect holds forth for nearly 8 minutes about the source of the Matrix, it's disastrous future, and the futility of trying to do anything stop it.

The improbable in this instance is to stop an action-driven film for 8 minutes to give us expository nonsense that neither adds any value to what we're about to see or what we've seen. It's an indulgence and a break in the filmmaker's pact with the audience to show us rather than tell us. It took me a while to get back into the film. There's some cool stuff in that movie like Jada Pickett Smith's over badassery but what I recall most are those scenes.

It's not that the expository is always deal-breaker even in The Matrix Reloaded, there are moments between Neo and the Oracle played by the luminescent Gloria Foster that add if not depth, warmth to the character of Neo and his journey which draws us closer to him, ups the emotional stakes.

Being able to relinquish control and open ourselves up to a story as its being told is our superpower. In that moment of vulnerability, you can go through all sorts of emotional states, no one stops screaming in a horror movie to ask themselves, Why am I screaming? Maybe my favorite thing about being open to a cinematic experience is there is no room for cynicism.

Film can expand or restrict our idea of what is possible making representation urgent. Just think of where the cultural conversation around beauty race ethnicity might be today if in the 1940s women of color had been the lead in those women's pictures that helped save more than one studio. What would have been the impact of more positive representations of gay and lesbian people on the silver screen before and after the Hayes Code?

As I'm recording this the film Parasite has just walked away with most of the awards at the Oscars yet most Americans will have never heard of the director Bong Joon-ho's work. The conversation about representation in the US often revolves around African American and occasionally Latinx actors and actresses, but when you consider that there are 4.5 billion Asian people on the planet yet the American film industry still can't quite see it's way clear to making Asian actors romantic leads in films. Anyone who's a fan of Korean dramas or Japanese television or Hong Kong cinema will be aware of the absurdity of the situation.

Even something as small as an on-screen kiss can be deeply affirming. I think for most heterosexual folks watching a romantic clinch between a man and a woman unless you find that particular actor or actress attractive might seem commonplace even a little ho-hum but the thrill of seeing two men on a screen in a romantic clinch still takes my breath away.
There are lots of psychological studies about how film affects how we see the world. Starting with the 1916 book Photoplay by the German-American psychologist Hugo Munsterberg.

One of the more interesting fields of inquiry for me is how movie editing is very similar to how we dream. Our dreams are not woven together seamlessly they are often in sequences one episode to the next. The proximity to a dream state while watching movies is aided by a mental schema, a schema describes a pattern of thought or behavior that organizes categories of information and the relationships among them.

This schema can also contain preconceived ideas. When our preconceived notions are met with images, dialogue or stories it can work as a form of confirmation bias allowing us to process it more quickly making it easier to relinquish control and be drawn into a narrative.

Most of us in our day-to-day lives strive to be in control of our emotional state which includes trying to maintain how we react to the stuff we don't see coming. Often you hear people talk about release in watching a movie whether it's a horror movie where you can feel the stress and tension in your body released by a scream or floods of tears when events on-screen move you. That release is a relinquishing of control and it can be very therapeutic and satisfying.

When it comes to crying at the movies like most men I was told "boys don't cry.", funnily enough not by my parents but then again they didn't have to the message, what Was expected was loud and clear. Crying Publicly is one of the most vulnerable things that we can do around strangers even when it's in the dark and nobody's looking at you.

I have to say as much as I feel like I've liberated myself from a lot of that nonsense I still felt up until a few years ago a sense of embarrassment in the theater or at the movies if I got a little leaky. The first movie I remember where the tears flowed unselfconsciousness came at the end of the Italian film Cinema Paradiso, I saw it years after it was originally released. If you've seen the film you'll know exactly what I'm talking about, if you haven't seen the film I won't spoil it. It's such an emotional pay-off you should really experience it for yourself. As I say the tears flowed freely it was the first time I don't recall feeling embarrassed in the least. And now if tears come they're a part of the experience.

Over the last decade or so films based on real-life events have found themselves at the mercy of online forums and YouTube channels devoted to exposing the errors in everything from décor to as I read while researching this episode the blistering fact that music being played under a scene wasn't released until the year after the events of the film.

Once discussing the film Lincoln a pal of mine told me how much he liked the fact that the film felt so accurate to the period he enjoyed that it was based on real-life events I said to him, that's great but you know every time two of these characters go into a room to have a private conversation that it's all made up. Some of the blame can be laid at the feet of directors who love talking about their attention to detail. I'll just say if I had to choose between Hitchcock and his McGuffin and knowing that the damask on the Lincoln set was accurate to the period the choice seems clear to me.

For science fiction, this scrutiny is even more fevered. Each episode of a series like Westworld or Game of Thrones is taken apart and analyzed for plot clues, hidden meanings or Easter Eggs with a sense of purpose normally reserved for real-world events. It's clear that this heightens the enjoyment of the series or film for some people, mostly male people by the way, but does it add anything to the emotional resonance of the experience, does it extend their understanding of human nature?

Having said all of that, occasionally these excavations and post-show examinations do you have a real-world impact. After the first episode of the HBO series Watchmen many people who were unaware of the real world massacre of black men women and children in Tulsa, OK 1921 were sent scurrying down an internet rabbit hole in search of the historical facts of these pogroms as I like to call them, and that's gotta be a good thing. I just wish it happened more.
Before I end the podcast and issue a challenge to I thought I would give you a list of some of my favorite movies that have lifted me that have inspired me that have rung me out emotionally, don't worry about trying to catch them all I will post them on the deep dive website. So here goes in no particular order.

Amélie (2001) Director: Jean-Pierre Jeunet
Audrey Tautou's performance and the overtone of this film fills me with a sense of possibility. It's full imagination and magic.

Lift to the Scaffold (1958) Director: Louis Malle
Two remarkable things about this film Miles Davis's gorgeous soundtrack the other is watching Jeanne Moreau's face walking the streets of Paris increasingly anxious about the fate of her lover it's a mini acting class both tender and heartbreaking.

The Story of Adele H (1975) directed by François Truffaut
Is based on the diaries of Victor Hugo's daughter Adele. It's a story of obsessive unrequited love The image of Isabelle Adjani's Adele H haunted lost in a reverie helped cure me of my own teenage unrequited love. I wondered if this film influenced the Sondheim musical Passion.

Robert Altman's 1977 film Three Women
Starring Sissy Spacek, Shelly Duval, and Janice Rule is a breathtaking character study of personalities blending creating a Folie à deux, or as it's known in English, a puff of madness. Shelly Duval and Sissy Spacek give such gorgeous idiosyncratic performances that it makes you wonder why filmmakers bother making films with men in them at all.

Young Frankenstein 1974 directed by Mel Brooks
Starring Gene Wilder, Madeline Kahn, Terri Gari, Marty Feldman, the insanely talented Cloris Leachman, and Peter Boyle as the monster. This movie is the funniest film I've ever seen.

They Shoot Horse Don't They 1969 directed by Sydney Pollack, starring Jane Fonda, Michael Sarrazin, Susannah York, Red Buttons, Bruce Dern, Bonnie Bedelia, and Gig Young. Centered around a Depression-era dance marathon where couples dance until they break with the last ones standing winning some much-needed cash. It's an unflinching takedown of what a heartless, money-grubbing world does to the soul. I heard Cate Blanchett tell Jane Fonda at one of those Hollywood round tables that her performance in this film will haunt her on her deathbed And I tend to agree with it it's an astonishing piece of work on top of a pretty astonishing career.

Ikiru 1952 directed by Akira Kurosawa and starring Takashi Shimura. Inspired by Leo Tolstoy's novella The Death of Ivan Ilyich.
Shimura plays a salaryman in a boring city planning job who finds out that he's dying of cancer. Watching him move from sheer terror to acceptance breaks me every time.

Throne of Blood 1957 directed by Akira Kurosawa. Shakespeare's play Macbeth using the more formal stylistic elements of Noh drama. Toshiro Mifune and Isuzu Yamada play Macbeth and Lady Macbeth.

"The Killing" (1956) directed by Stanley Kubrick
The film is a late film noir heist picture with all the prerequisite elements but with the futility of life dialed up solidified by the last line in the film. There is a minor scene that takes place in a parking lot where one of the gang is staked-out. He encounters the parking lot attendant and they have a friendly chat but lookout realizes this chat might be trouble for him later so he asserts his white supremacy by calling the attendant a nigger. Kabrick puts the Jim Crow thin white line in sharp relief and it hurts.

All About Eve 1950 written and directed by Joseph L. Mankiewicz
Bette Davis plays Margo Channing a famous actress with a growing sense that she's well past her absurd 40-year-old sell-by date. Anne Baxter plays Eve Harrington, an ambitious young fan who maneuvers way into Channing's life, ultimately threatening Channing's career and her relationships. With Thelma Ritter, George Sanders, Celeste Holm, Gary Merrill, Hugh Marlowe, and Marilyn Monroe in one of her earliest film roles. It's a film about the theater with traditional and not so traditional 1950s views of women and some of the best dialogue on film ever. One of my favorites: Thelma

Swing Time 1936 Director: George Stevens
Starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers with music by Jerome Kern and Dorothy Fields. This is one of my favorite Astaire-Rogers pictures. Truth is I love them all. Talk about being transported, being inspired. Along with tons of gorgeous songs like The Way You Look Tonight and A Fine Romance there is some of the best dancing you'll ever see on film. The whole thing is marred for me by the tribute to Bill Bojangles Robinson the most famous black tap-dancer ever ruined by Astaire performing it in blackface. The film also features the song Never Gonna Dance.

Cicely Tyson. Just Cicely Tyson. I've never seen her give a bad performance and for all of her towering achievements, it is her role in the film adaptation of the Carson McCullers 1940 novel, The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter that I hold most dear.

So, there's my list and here's your challenge. The next time you see a movie or series that moves you deeply before diving into what you liked and what you didn't like and lord knows before you perform a google search about the buttons on the coat of the lead character take a minute or 10, check-in with how the film made you feel maybe even check in a week later. No need to critique the feeling just sit with it. Let that empathy and compassion grow then go and research those buttons.

If we let them stories have the ability to increase what the writer Katherine Mansfield called the warmth of human communion, and that's something I don't think we can ever get enough of.
music
Thanks to Joshua Rich for allowing me to use his song rain as the podcast theme. If you like to take a deeper dive into the movies you can find the complete list of the movies mentioned in this episode, video to some of the scenes referred to in this episode including that dance number from the Holly Hunter film Living Out Loud and Fred and Ginger and much more. You can find them all at the Deep Dive website at reggiedeepdive.com.

If you haven't already please subscribe to the podcast.

Life at Movies was researched and written by me, Reggie. Thanks for joining me. See ya next.

References:

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