

Deliver the Epiphany to the Audience 'Again'

Injecting Energy into Your Cinematic Work

by Michael Karp, SOC

There are certain great films that audiences will watch over and over. Paradoxically, these narratives become more interesting with each viewing, not less.

When we create our films, it is useful to *analyze the magic and obsession* that drives film goers to see a movie repeatedly. We can then inject that energy into our own cinematic work.

Normally, repetition is boring. But most women don't get bored with Brad Pitt or Sean Connery. Few men tire of Elizabeth Hurley or Catherine Zeta-Jones. And most cats are perpetually fascinated with waving string.

In the wild, the feline needs to hunt. Hard-wired into the brain of a cat is an obsession with shaking string (which resemble their prey), and doubtless this obsession translates into predatory prowess and the survival of kitty kind. Human attraction is more complex, but part of the process is that human romance is also related to survival. People are driven to romantically pair bond with a mate with good genes to pass on to progeny and also to an attractive partner possessing the strong social skills needed to succeed materially and spiritually.

As far as making a movie that humans will obsess over, the main attraction for audiences is the presence of *powerful*

epiphanies and wisdom. An epiphany is a sudden rush of insight, the "light bulb turning on". A philosopher might see the human love of epiphany as an example of the higher beauty of being homo sapiens. In contrast, a reductionist view would say that our attraction to wisdom and insight (the epiphany) is a basic means of human survival. The cat survives by hunting; the human survives by reason and intuition.

We will examine the epiphanies of some great movies. We will see why audiences

will watch certain scenes of a film over and over. Hopefully, we can inject epiphanies into our own movies, propel the audience to happiness and make the world a better place.

One film that audiences will watch over and over is "Home Alone." This movie is about an eight-year-old boy named Kevin, who is inadvertently left alone at home while his distracted and dysfunctional extended family travels to France. Kevin must defend his home against



inept burglars, and there is great spectacle value in that. But the real beauty of the film is when young Kevin accidentally attends Christmas service with his elderly neighbor Old Man Marley, who is allegedly a murderer called the “South Bend Shovel Slayer”

On the surface, Old Man Marley looks very scary, and Kevin foolishly judges that book by its cover. But Marley is actually a very wonderful human being, and Kevin and the old man quickly bond. Kevin has big communication problems with his family and is surprised to discover that Marley is similarly estranged from his children.

This scene is very emotionally powerful. Audiences can watch it again and again. The epiphany is that the old man is not a murderer at all and that Kevin was stupid to believe the stupid rumors spread by his young friends. Kevin and the audience are initially quite gullible in believing the story. Later, we marvel at what chumps we were to fall prey to the lies. But we have no time



for self recrimination, because Old Man Marley and Kevin now have given one another the wisdom to repair their broken families. The sudden rush of insight has a narcotic effect on the audience. In just a few lines of dialog, our very notion of reality is turned inside out and the path for the redemption of our heroes is laid out.

Again, the survival of the human species has always been dependent on the search for epiphany and wisdom. The cat hunts, the human solves problems. The kitten playing with the dangling string gets a buzz, as does the human who consumes wisdom. The successful filmmaker delivers the enlightenment of the epiphany to the audience.

The classic film noir drama “Chinatown,” like “Home Alone,” dramatically redefines our narrow idea of what reality is.

“Chinatown” is a highly fictionalized version of the water wars of Los Angeles in the early 1900s. Private detective Jake Gittes is investigating the murder of the head engineer for the Los Angeles city water system. Just when Jake thinks that he has the labyrinth crime conspiracy figured out, a new layer of corruption is revealed underneath. As smart and tenacious as Jake is in his deductions, it is an epiphany to discover just how off the mark each one of his successive theories is.

One of the most shocking epiphanies concerns discovering the actual nature of the relationship between Evelyn Mulwray and the mysterious youth Katherine Cross. Evelyn alternates between telling Jake that Katherine is her daughter or her sister. This supposed double talk enrages Jake, who doesn’t like being lied to. But the soon-to-be revealed epiphany is amazing. It never occurs to Jake that in the case of incest, Katherine can be both daughter and sister to Evelyn. Jake suffered from “in the box” thinking. In retrospect, the actual


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scenario of “Chinatown” is so simple. Part of the sudden rush of insight of the film is in understanding just how easily Jake and ourselves were fooled by the sordid deceptions of the Cross and Mulwray families.

The cult classic “Rocky Horror Picture Show” is also filled with epiphanies. The film initially appears to be silly, light weight fun, but the script is very brilliantly written. One couplet of scenes is particularly excellent.

The hedonistic mad scientist Dr. Frank-N-Furter is intent on corrupting the morals of our naïve heroes Brad and Janet. We are shocked when Iothario Frank cleverly and quickly seduces Janet. But shortly thereafter, Frank also seduces Brad. But even though Brad and Janet are of different genders, Frank seduces both of them using the *same* efficacious and penetrating pickup lines.

The epiphany is deep and below the surface. Dr. Frank-N-Furter is a bizarre, androgynous, extraterrestrial transsexual. But something primal in us accepts the reality that the bisexual gender bending Frank could actually seduce both Brad and Janet. Another epiphany is experiencing the guilty pleasure of vicariously sharing Frank’s carnal conquest. We know that deep down, we like to be bad once in a while, and we revel in Frank’s underdog but juggernaut success.

We see the same process at work in “Wedding Crashers.” John and Jeremy are wanton womanizers, who regularly pick up girls at weddings that they pretend to have been invited to. We imagine that love and romance is special and unique, but the wedding crashers use the exact same premeditated pickup lines every weekend. Just as the cat is reliably attracted to the dangling string, the women are reliably seduced by our heroes.

The wedding crashers understand the mind of women. They provide things that females love, like dancing, fun, strength and mystery, especially when their guard is lowered by the nuptials.

The wedding crashers are similar to Dr. Frank-N-Furter in their seduction technique. There is not that much distance from reality in their mutual mating methodologies. The audience experiences a sudden of rush of insight faced with the palpability that these strange romantic maneuvers actually might work. The audience also embraces the duality that as manipulative as these techniques are, everyone probably has something to learn about life from these insights. All the world’s a stage for the wedding crashers, especially the proscenium of romance. Like actors in a play, John and Jeremy say the same lines over and over. The audience understands the paradox that although the wedding crashers are liars and users, none of the resulting beautiful and deep romantic relationships in the film could exist without the crashers’ “showmanship”. Every scene is a black comedy revelation about life and the audience will watch this film again and again.

I had a friend who used to throw “Lonely Lady” viewing parties. This over-the-top melodrama was reputed to be one of the worst movies ever made. It was an epiphany to discover over and over again how overwrought and horrendous certain aspects of the film were. You couldn’t pay people to write such an over-the-top disaster. There was a certain “rubbernecking” quality to watching the film, which is what people also do when they slow down to watch horrific traffic accidents on the road.

In the 1970s, there was “Columbo,” a very popular detective show starring Peter Falk.

Lieutenant Columbo appeared dimwitted to the murderers that he investigated, but in reality, he just played dumb in order to disarm the criminals. The funny thing about “Columbo” is that the storyline was basically the same every week. The very repetition of the plot was what attracted audiences. There was a great epiphany in realizing that Columbo could outsmart the bad guys with the exact same strategy every week, just as the wedding crashers could seduce women with the same game plan. Humans possess free will, but we are also preprogrammed to a degree, programmed to love watching Columbo play out the same epiphany week after week.

In the film “Reds,” Diane Keaton’s character is at a Moscow train station, searching for her husband Warren Beatty. The Bolshevik Revolution is raging and Keaton and the audience have been fooled into thinking that Beatty has died in a battle. A corpse is carried from the train and our heroine Keaton fears the worst for her husband. But in a very anticlimactic (but devastating and shocking) piece of editing and framing, Keaton sees Beatty alive and the lovers are reunited. There is an epiphany when we realize how much we need the characters to be together. And there is an epiphany when we realize how easily we were fooled into thinking that Beatty’s character was dead.

The train station sequence in “Reds” is also an interesting counterpoint to “Doctor Zhivago.” Tragically, the lovers Julie Christie and Omar Sharif just miss being reunited, after years of pain and separation.

“Titanic” also delivers much wisdom to the audience. One of the major ideas of the film is that the heroine Rose does not have to marry a man that she does not love in order to be happy and prosperous. When Rose is rescued, she is asked what her name is and she responds “Dawson”

(her drowned lover's last name) instead of her actual name. Even though Rose's wealthy fiancé Cal is nearby, she hides her identity from him, because Cal is an unworthy mate. Hero Jack Dawson filled Rose with massive wisdom about life, so in an epiphanous moment, she takes his name, so that his spirit and insight will be with her always. The audience responds with a gasp, since the transcendent rush from her new surname is so strong. In retrospect, it's obvious that Rose would adopt Jack's last name. In hindsight, would any other action on her part even be imaginable? The brilliance and wisdom of this piece of screenwriting rolls over and envelopes us.

In the film "Music and Lyrics," Hugh Grant plays a washed up songwriter and pop star. He is a master at composing melody, but he is forced by his poor lyricist skills to hire unstable newbie Drew Barrymore as his wordsmith. At the world concert premiere of Grant/Barrymore's new song, Drew is stunned and saddened when Hugh takes undeserved credit for writing her lyrics. The audience hates Hugh as well, but we are all in for a surprise. Hugh Grant has in actuality written his own original words and music for the performance and his lyrics thank Barrymore for giving him the courage, inspiration and wisdom to transcend his own limitations. The screenwriter fools the audience into thinking that Drew has been betrayed by Hugh, and thus we feel pain. But then our world is turned upside down when the great beauty of what has actually happened becomes apparent. With a sudden head rush, we see how much wisdom has been commingled between Grant and Barrymore. Neither character could individually achieve their enlightenment. Only their partnership allows them to become better people.

Audiences crave enlightenment, transcendence wisdom and epiphany. Give them what they want, and they will return to your film again and again.

Exercise:

There are many other films that audiences will happily view over and over. Try to analyze the epiphany in each of these movies, and then come up with your own list of films to see again:

- (1) "Stepmom" (1998)
- (2) "Highlander" (1986)
- (3) "When Harry Met Sally" (1989)
- (4) "Blade Runner" (1982)
- (5) "Gone With The Wind" (1939)
- (6) "Crash" (2004)
- (7) "The Sound Of Music" (1965)
- (8) "Pulp Fiction" (1994)
- (9) "Sullivan's Travels" (1941)
- (10) "The Graduate" (1967)
- (11) "Casablanca" (1942)
- (12) "Scarface" (1983)
- (13) "Analyze This" (1999)
- (14) "Happy Feet" (2006)

Michael Karp, SOC is a twenty-five year veteran of the motion picture industry. He has worked as a Story Development Analyst and Director of Photography. Working as a Visual Effects Artist and VFX cameraman on such blockbusters as "Titanic," "T2," "Apollo 13," "X-Men 2," "True Lies," and others, Michael has pushed the state of the art in that field. Michael is a graduate of Art Center College of Design in Pasadena and longtime film instructor there. He worked on the stereoscopic "Journey to the Center of the Earth" film, starring Brendan Fraser, which premieres this summer in 2008.

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