

10 Movies to Learn From

This is by no means a complete list – only a handful of the movies I find most valuable to re-watch. Hopefully you find things to take away from some of them!

To Be or Not to Be (1942, Directed by Ernst Lubitsch)

Some would argue that all American comedy is directly descended from Lubitsch. Billy Wilder was his student. *To Be or Not to Be* is dazzling, his best, a ruthlessly complicated plot that manages to never confuse its audience. **Look for:** plot structure, narrative speed, comedic staging.

Notorious (1946, Directed by Alfred Hitchcock)

Watching Hitchcock is like learning your ABCs or eating your vegetables. He described directing as imagining the audience as a giant harp, and being able to play whatever tune he wished. Never is this more true than in *Notorious*, which – while not necessarily my favorite Hitchcock – is probably the most rigorously crafted. Look for: visual clarity, shot progression, constant use of dramatic irony.

Bicycle Thieves (1948, Directed by Vittorio de Sica)

In *On Filmmaking*, MacKendrick compares this to Cinderella. The analogy is a good one, as *Bicycle Thieves*, despite its neorealist aesthetic, is a fable at its core. **Look for:** simplicity in storytelling, unobtrusive directing, performances by non-actors.

The Searchers (1956, Directed by John Ford)

The John Ford/John Wayne one-two punch isn't for everybody. But everybody can learn from the bulletproof story-telling power of their best collaboration. Most of the movie plays out in austere Technicolor tableau wide shots – Ford's attempt to squash sentimentality. **Look for:** wide-shot staging, restrained use of camera movement, storytelling through implication.

8 ½ (1963, Directed by Federico Fellini)

The most visually complex film I've ever seen. Fellini is, probably, the best director to ever live and the closest we've come to approaching the heights of the great novels. Every scene is a revelation, every shot a surprise or an invention. You could spend your whole life watching *8 ½* and it wouldn't dry up. **Look for:** the most sophisticated camera movement you'll ever see, along with the most elegant staging of actors, subjective narrative structure.

The Godfather (1972, Directed by Francis Ford Coppola)

Yes, it's every dad's favorite. But there's a reason – this is a dense, astonishingly crafted movie that has more to give each time you re-watch it. **Look for:** nimble screenwriting, restrained but forceful directing, bold cinematography.

The Heartbreak Kid (1972, Directed by Elaine May)

Elaine May's voice was so strong that she was eventually exiled from Hollywood. This one, which is her most accessible, has one of the best "three-act structure" scripts I've ever seen. Required viewing for anyone interested in character-driven comedy. **Look for:** performance-centered directing, bold editing, narrative clarity.

A Woman Under the Influence (1974, Directed by John Cassavetes)

It is very easy to learn the wrong lessons from Cassavetes: shoot handheld, have your actors improvise, write scenes with a lot of yelling. These are all concerns with "style," a term Cassavetes detested. His biggest achievement is a dedication to the people he puts in front of the camera. No better testament to that than *A Woman Under the Influence*. **Look for:** the two best performances ever put on film, and a movie that is entirely about that.

Annie Hall (1977, Directed by Woody Allen)

Woody Allen had been a sketch comedy performer, this movie made him a director (due in a large part to Gordon Willis). Take a look at *Woody Allen on Woody Allen* and *When the Shooting Stops the Cutting Begins* (by the editor, Ralph Rosenblum) to see the amazing evolution of the movie. **Look for:** visual inventiveness, narrative efficiency, uncompromising editing.

3 Women (1977, Directed by Robert Altman)

Somehow, Altman hasn't been taught or talked about as much as his contemporaries (Scorsese, Coppola, Spielberg, etc.) This is a shame. His movies are some of the most inventive you can get your hands on. This one (my favorite) was shot based on an outline of a dream Altman had, with all of the dialogue improvised by a ridiculously good Shelley Duval and Sissy Spacek. **Look for:** on-the-fly directing, improvisational performances, use of zoom lenses.