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Movies for Adults

By Paulina Borsook
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When the movies really were better.

In the early 90s when I was getting my MFA in the writing division, School of the Arts, at Columbia University in the City of New York, I took a class in film editing (that is, how you construct narrative through editing and not on how you use tools such as straight razors or Final Cut Pro) with **Ralph Rosenblum**, who edited *The Pawnbroker* and a few of **Woody Allen's** best movies. It was the class that really beat into me that storytelling is as much about what you leave out as what you leave in, and that editing makes a story. I was in my mid-30s at the time and knew I had already seen the movies the instructor was going to screen, with the exception of the interesting failure, *Jacob's Ladder* (marking the first time I'd see the lefty thinking girl's fox, **Tim Robbins**).

I had been thinking for years that the movies of my youth were so much better than what was around at the time - but one never wants to be in that position, of shrieking about young people today and the decline of just about everything and turn down that goddamned loud tuneless music!

But it was true. The movies he screened from the 1960s and 1970s *were* better than practically anything I had seen in a decade. They were movies made for adults, even if they had been mainstream movies and/or nominally rated PG. They made presumptions about the intelligence of their audience, didn't need things to be boldly spelled out, and they were predicated on the assumption that their audience was capable of making inferences. No semaphoring! No high-concept! Satire as opposed to scatology! Shades of gray in motive and character! Minimum numbers of car crashes! No fish out of water! No hilarious mixups!

My paper for the class was basically a lamentation along these lines (that the movies of the late 60s and early 70s were movies for adults, and just generally better) - and it got me an A, probably because Ralph

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Rosenblum himself (who died a few years later of a heart attack) was experiencing the same disaffection with the work being offered to him at the time as I was with the work I was being offered to watch. The A was for solidarity, not for proof of having mastered the material.

What put me in mind of this was a flight I took recently from Newark to San Francisco. My attitude about inflight movies is that watching them is part of the touristic experience, and normal standards don't apply, and what gets watched on the plane, stays on the plane. No expectations of anything other than dipping into popular culture and enjoying the quaint natives in their colorful costumes.

The movie on offer was *The Interpreter*, and since I generally loathe **Nicole Kidman**, and the reviews I'd read called the thing "old-fashioned," my expectations were along the lines of, "If I can suffer through an **Adam Sandler** vehicle on a transcontinental flight, I can put up with almost anything."

But here was a movie like the ones I miss, in that...

- The female characters didn't simmer, and didn't seem like 30 going on 13 (hey, wasn't there...). They were about themselves, subject rather than object.
- The male characters had interior lives that made them seem human, creatures capable of emotional nuance.

In short, the characters were like adults we know but almost never see in movies.

- The plot was complicated, not overly telegraphed, and required some understanding of contemporary geopolitics and an understanding that there are different orders of villainy.
- There were different kinds of true emotional connection (between friends; between colleagues; between family members; and between the male and female protagonists) - but people acting outside of who they need to be in terms of their own lives? Either women or men giving up their careers and identity in order to chase a shiny-covered airport-novel idea of True Love? Nah. We're in the realm naturalism here, and not in the nasty hyper-gendered world of either action or chick flicks.
- I learned something of the world I hadn't known, and a bit on how people make interesting choices - and the choices weren't between the heart-warming or the whipping-out of a Glock.

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So yes the movie was old-fashioned, but in the good sense. And that felt great.

It got me thinking that what I'd love to see again, my favorite movie of all time, is one from that era of my youth. It's from the time when old standards about what could be shown in movies were falling away but old protocols of character development and the idea that movies were adult entertainment and not for 14-year-olds (or those who have the emotional development of 14-year-olds) still held. And the two choices for movie-making weren't between formulaic star vehicles designed for export with less character development than you might see in an ant farm on a day when the ants have been given a surfeit of sugar water and studiously outtransgressive gross-out grotesqueries which, in their own way, ring as false as the movies that feature male acts of retribution or female tearful reunions.

That movie, which I can't say is the most adult movie ever made, because what seems adult at age 19 might not so much at age 51, is ***Play It As It Lays***, about bad behavior among the Hollywood elite. With a screenplay written by **Joan Didion** and based on her **novel** of the same name, it is perhaps forever lost in some entertainment industry rights squabble, available neither on VHS nor DVD, making it about as accessible as the art the Nazis looted from all over Europe.

What made *Play It As It Lays* adult is that the moral compromises, betrayals, lost love and the horrifically bounded universe it depicted were all subtle and couldn't have been



predicted from its opening shots. Lots of jump cuts and atmospherics, befitting the movie-making of the times, but mostly it's these two scenes I remember:

- **Tuesday Weld** pulling over her car on the freeway, as if to fix a flat, and a friendly California Highway Patrol officer pulls up, offering to help, saying, "We just want to help you get where you are going!", and she responds with a mad, heartbreaking smile, "I don't know where I'm going."
- Tuesday Weld cradling the shoulders of her best friend **Tony Perkins** and crooning "You Belong to Me" as he downs the reds and alcohol he needs to commit suicide. It's one of the purest acts of love I've ever seen on film - or maybe in real life, too.

So until *Play It as It Lays* emerges from some legal purgatory, here's a list of movies for adults from that era: "**Paulina Borsook's 'Movies for Adults'**."

Paulina welcomes feedback: loris at well dot com.

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