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**ROGER EBERT'S  
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by Roger Ebert

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## Judging the Classics

Are these the sixteen greatest films of all time, or do 122 of the world's film critics only think they are?

1. *Citizen Kane* (Orson Welles, U.S.)
2. *The Rules of the Game* (Jean Renoir, France)
3. (tie) *The Seven Samurai* (Akira Kurosawa, Japan)  
*Singin' in the Rain* (Stanley Donen and Gene Kelly, U.S.)
5. 8½ (Federico Fellini, Italy)
6. *Battleship Potemkin* (Sergei Eisenstein, USSR)
7. (tie) *L'Avventura* (Michelangelo Antonioni, Italy)  
*The Magnificent Ambersons* (Orson Welles, U.S.)
9. (tie) *Vertigo* (Alfred Hitchcock, U.S.)  
*The General* (Buster Keaton, U.S.)  
*The Searchers* (John Ford, U.S.)
12. (tie) *2001: A Space Odyssey* (Stanley Kubrick, Great Britain)  
*Andrei Rublev* (Andrei Tarkovsky, USSR)
14. (tie) *Greed* (Erich von Stroheim, U.S.)  
*Jules and Jim* (Francois Truffaut, France)  
*The Third Man* (Carol Reed, Great Britain)

Those sixteen films were the 1982 winners of the fourth International Critics' Poll, conducted every ten years by *Sight & Sound*, the authoritative film quarterly published by the British Film Institute. The magazine's instructions to critics voting from all over the world were simple: "Personal choices of the films which have seemed most significant or relevant to you, which you have enjoyed or admired most. Ten titles only, please, in alphabetical order or in order of preference, of films made anywhere, at any time."

The *Sight & Sound* poll is to movies what the wire service polls are to college sports and the Dow Jones average is to the stock market. It represents an imperfect, subjective, unscientific, and highly influential sampling of the critical stock of the great films and filmmakers of the world. And when the 1982 results were announced, they created shock waves, at least in that little corner of the world where such things matter.

The big news in the 1982 poll was the surprising critical devaluation of the work of Ingmar Bergman, the great Swedish filmmaker whose name seems

almost synonymous with cinematic art. In the 1972 poll, Bergman and Orson Welles were the only directors to place two films on the list.<sup>1</sup> This year, Welles's *Citizen Kane* and *Magnificent Ambersons* remain, but Bergman is missing; his *Persona* (tied for fifth in 1972) and *Wild Strawberries* (tied for tenth) dropped off the list altogether, and his more recent contenders, especially *Cries and Whispers* and *Autumn Sonata*, failed to place.

Maybe that was just a statistical aberration? Perhaps Bergman's support was so widely distributed among his more than forty films that no single Bergman movie had the votes to make the list? Not so. In a separate compilation, *Sight & Sound* totaled all of the times any film by a director was voted for. In 1972, Bergman placed a strong third on that list; his thirty-seven votes were close behind Welles's forty-six and Jean Renoir's forty-one. By 1982, Bergman's total vote didn't even qualify him for the top ten!<sup>2</sup>

Why did Bergman drop so suddenly from the pantheon? My guess is that the jury changed. In 1972, a majority of the voters would still have belonged to what science-fiction fans call the "sercon" party; they would have been serious, constructive critics looking for meaning, significance, and Art. By 1982, the film generation of the 1960s would have joined in the balloting, probably with a preference for "movies" over "cinema." Perhaps Bergman seemed too heavily laden with symbolism and angst for them, and they wanted to make room for a Western or a musical. Bergman is gone, but not forgotten; look for him on the 1992 list.

Other conclusions from the 1982 balloting:

—Orson Welles continues to stand astride the world of film as an undisputed colossus—at least, as far as the film critics are concerned. Despite the fact that his most important work was done more than forty years ago (*Kane* and *Ambersons* are his first two films), he has strengthened his position since 1972; both times, Welles and *Kane* placed ahead of Renoir and *Rules*, but in 1982, it was a landslide.

*Citizen Kane* is, of course, widely described as the greatest film ever made—so frequently, and by so many different people, that it has moved into the same quasi-official stratosphere as *King Lear* or Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. What is remarkable is that in 1952, when *Sight & Sound* first conducted its poll, *Citizen Kane* didn't even make the list!<sup>3</sup> In 1952, *Citizen Kane* was a masterpiece much talked about but rarely seen, after its original 1941 release was botched. (Because the Hollywood establishment feared to offend publishing tycoon William Randolph Hearst, whose life inspired *Kane*'s, the major theater

<sup>1</sup>The top ten, 1972: *Citizen Kane*, *Rules of the Game*, *Battleship Potemkin*, 8½, *L'Avventura* tied with Dreyer's *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, *The General* tied with *The Magnificent Ambersons*, *Ugetsu Monogatari* tied with *Wild Strawberries*.

<sup>2</sup>Voting by directors, 1982: Orson Welles, 71; Jean Renoir, 51; Charles Chaplin, 37; John Ford, 34; Luis Bunuel and Akira Kurosawa, both 33; Federico Fellini and Alfred Hitchcock, both 32; Jean-Luc Godard and Buster Keaton, both 30.

<sup>3</sup>The top four films in 1952, according to both the magazine poll and a vote of filmmakers at the Brussels World Fair, were De Sica's *Bicycle Thief*, Chaplin's *City Lights* and *Gold Rush*, and Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*.

chains wouldn't touch the film, and it got scattered release; not until 1957, when a new print was widely distributed, did the film win really wide audiences.)

Why is the film so widely admired? "Citizen Kane is perhaps the one American talking picture that seems as fresh now as the day it opened. It may even seem fresher," Pauline Kael wrote in the opening words of her landmark *The Citizen Kane Book*. If you do not believe her, see it for yourself. The film is endlessly inventive as it circles closer and closer to the mystery of a man's life, a mystery that seems to be summed up by his dying word, "Rosebud."<sup>4</sup> One reason the film always seems fresh is that we never know what's coming next; the film has such an unpredictable structure, leaping about in Kane's life and from flashback to flashback, that it is all but impossible to remember what will follow. I have seen *Citizen Kane* at least thirty times, and yet when I walk in on the middle of a screening, or start my tape at random, I am unable to remember for sure what will come next.

—*The Seven Samurai* and *Singin' in the Rain*, were not even also-rans in 1972; this time, they tied for third. *Seven Samurai*, a saga about medieval warlords that introduced Toshiro Mifune to world movie audiences and inspired the Hollywood remake *The Magnificent Seven*, became the only film on the list from Japan, one of the great centers of cinema; last time, Japan was represented by Mizoguchi's *Ugetsu Monogatari*, the story of a poor man's infatuation with a dreamlike geisha. *Singin' in the Rain* is routinely called the best of the Hollywood musicals, and its high place is a tribute to the whole genre.

—Two veteran Hollywood filmmakers who died in the decade between the polls made it into the top ten. Alfred Hitchcock's *Vértigo* and John Ford's *The Searchers*, were runners-up in 1972, possibly because both directors had been so prolific and made so many great films that no single title could gather a following. By 1982, the consensus was in.

Many movie buffs would name *Rear Window*, *Psycho*, or *Notorious* as Hitchcock's best picture, but *Vértigo*, starring James Stewart and Kim Novak in the story of a man obsessed with a woman he thinks is dead, has been named by Hitchcock's biographers as perhaps his most personal work. Because the copyrights to *Vértigo* and four other Hitchcock titles (*Rope*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much*, *Rear Window*, and *The Trouble with Harry*) were owned by Hitchcock's estate, they had not been publicly screened for years when the 1982 poll was held. In 1984, however, they were bought from the estate by Universal, and are all now available in video.

*The Searchers* is not everybody's favorite film by the man who once said "My name is Ford. I make Westerns." Some viewers would name *Stagecoach*, *My Darling Clementine*, or *Three Godfathers*. Many critics have questions about the plot of *The Searchers*, which has John Wayne so appalled when his niece is kidnapped by Indians that he spends five years in the wilderness on a relentless,

<sup>4</sup>But who heard him say "rosebud"? Although Kane's butler claims late in the film that he heard it, the death chamber seems empty except for the lonely tycoon. A nurse enters after he drops the paperweight.

obsessive search for her. They see the film as a racist portrait of Indians and a male chauvinist story, in which the real importance of the girl (played by Natalie Wood) is as a pawn for the men in the film. Still, *The Searchers* has inspired the stories of many other films, notably Martin Scorsese's *Taxi Driver* and Paul Schrader's *Hardcore*.

—The battle of the two greatest silent clowns continues in the 1982 results. Buster Keaton's *The General*, an amazingly ambitious epic in which he played the engineer of a legendary Civil War train, slipped from eighth to ninth. Chaplin failed to place any titles on the list, but in the closely bunched vote by directors, he placed somewhat higher than Keaton—third, with thirty-seven votes, to ninth, with thirty. Perhaps the totals reflect the consensus that *The General* is Keaton's greatest film, and an inability to choose among such Chaplin masterpieces as *The Gold Rush*, *City Lights*, and *Modern Times*. Since most silent films are out of copyright, they can be purchased fairly cheaply in video, often under \$20.

Is the *Sight & Sound* poll all that important? It's like the football coaches' poll: Everybody cares when it comes out, nobody can remember it by next year. The real importance is that if you set out to see every film on it, you will see sixteen great films, and each one will suggest avenues for further investigation, a few of which I cheerfully outline below, only occasionally venturing from the sublime to the ridiculous:

AFTER SEEING	THEN VIEW	BECAUSE
<i>Citizen Kane</i>	<i>Providence</i>	Similar opening shots, narrative ideas
<i>Rules of the Game</i>	<i>The Grand Illusion</i>	After and before
<i>The Seven Samurai</i>	<i>The Magnificent Seven</i>	The remake
<i>Singin' in the Rain</i>	<i>An American in Paris</i>	Gene Kelly
8½	<i>Day for Night</i>	Lives of a director
<i>Battleship Potemkin</i>	<i>Das Boot</i>	Under pressure
<i>L'Avventura</i>	<i>Blow Up</i>	Missing persons
<i>The Magnificent Ambersons</i>	<i>Breaking Away</i>	Family life in Indiana
<i>Vertigo</i>	<i>Body Double</i>	De Palma's homage
<i>The General</i>	<i>Modern Times</i>	Man over machines
<i>The Searchers</i>	<i>Taxi Driver</i>	Same underlying story
2001	<i>My Dinner with André</i>	"If we could really understand the cigar store next door—wouldn't that be as amazing as climbing Everest?"
<i>Andrei Rublev</i>	<i>The Seventh Seal</i>	Medieval legends
<i>Greed</i>	<i>Sunset Boulevard</i>	von Stroheim
<i>Jules and Jim</i>	<i>Two English Girls</i>	Same author, same director, two approaches

*The Third Man**Night and the City*

Postwar locations, similar feel

I'm not sure this chart has the slightest significance, but drawing it up was amusing, and it duplicated one of the pleasures that the VCR has brought into my life—the random walk through movie history, with one film leading to another, one vision suggesting another. It is probably true that some of the films on the list are not available in most video stores; this might be the occasion for a call to Home Film Festival (1-800-258-3456), which rents hard-to-find classics by mail. Or it might be an occasion for a random walk in another direction altogether. Have fun.

## My Ten Great Films, and Why

What are my own nominations for the ten best films of all time? Making such a list is, of course, a form of gamesmanship, and the list is sure to change from day to day. On the day in 1982 when I drew up my list for *Sight & Sound*, these were the titles I decided upon, listed alphabetically:

*Aguirre, the Wrath of God*. Werner Herzog believes we are starving for images in these modern times, and that without them, we will die. His *Aguirre*, one of the great, mad, passionate, foolhardy masterpieces—as reckless and as brilliant as *Greed* or *Apocalypse Now*—stars Klaus Kinski in the story of a member of Pizarro's expedition to find the lost El Dorado. After the main body turns back, Aguirre presses on with a small band of followers, all of them weighted down by the armor which is suicidal in the rain forest. Among the film's great images, are the first, of a string of desperate men winding their way down an unimaginably long mountain path, and one of the last, of Aguirre on a raft overrun by chattering monkeys. Herzog believes in the voodoo of locations, and shot this film deep in the Amazon jungle. There is a legend that Kinski threatened to walk off the film, and Herzog held a gun to him and said he would shoot him if he left. It is probably only an apocraphal story, but neither Herzog nor Kinski denies it.

*Bonnie and Clyde*. Arthur Penn's film still seems to have the same freshness, after twenty years, that Kael talks about with *Kane*. It works as comedy, as tragedy, as entertainment, as a meditation on the place of guns and violence in American society. And it was perfectly cast; Warren Beatty and Faye Dunaway have become icons as Clyde and Bonnie, but remember, too, Michael J. Pollard as C. W. Moss, Gene Hackman as Buck Barrow (his first major role), Estelle Parsons as Buck's wife Blanche, Gene Wilder as the hapless undertaker taken along for the ride, and Dub Taylor as C. W.'s greedy father. Scene after scene plays with perfect, almost dreamlike, emotional control: Clyde and the tenant farmer shooting out windows, the cloud passing in front of the sun and shadowing Bonnie and Clyde in the wheat field, Bonnie's farewell to her mother, C. W. parking the getaway car, Blanche screaming and running across the lawn with a spatula in her hand, Buck's dying delirium, and of course the final scene, which has been copied in so many other movies it has become a cliché, except here, where it retains all of its power.