

MONTHLY MOVIES

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Aging affects movies in many ways

By T. Rob Brown

Age affects the motion picture business in many ways—from the age of films to the actors who star in them to the themes, plotlines and subplots that center around aging.

As I mentioned before, mythic structure is one of the ways narratives in films mimic our own life's journey—the hero's journey. It follows cycles of growth and learning as we adapt to various roles throughout our lives. Growth can lead to maturity. Experience can lead to wisdom.

There are two ways to consider the aging effects on a film itself: technical aging and thematic aging. I'm going to get a little technical here for just a bit.

First, we must consider the age of the film stock—the archival master footage, which can be affected by improper film processing (such as insufficient fixing or washing), improper temperatures for storage, too much moisture, or other harmful effects. Some older films changed colors with age or have a certain look due to the time period when that film's emulsion was manufactured. This is important for reasons including remasters, grain levels and the overall look of the film stock.

This form of aging even affects digital movies. Films mastered during the early age of digital might only be 1080p (Blu-ray resolution or HD), with more recent films shot in 4K, 8K or other ultra-high resolutions. Trying to remaster a film from a 1080p digital master for a 4K cinema presentation is not as simple as just upscaling. Newer cinema cameras also shoot with more dynamic range, allowing better details in the shadows and highlights of a scene. Digitally, this also applies to the special effects—

especially computer-generated images. CGI from early films can look quite dated when we watch them in the present day.

Now that we have the technical aspects out of the way, let's consider the thematic age of a film. Some films, like *Casablanca* (1943), seem timeless and age like a fine wine. Some films are very much a product of their time—they have a shelf life. Certain older films are quite difficult to watch today, especially if they are filled with outdated tropes and stereotypes.

For example, I've heard people say numerous times something to the effect of, "You couldn't make *Blazing Saddles* today." There was even a rock song that featured that expression in the lyrics. The 1974 Mel Brooks classic is filled with racial slurs and racial situations that many might find offensive in today's political climate and public discourse. As a satire, though, it poked fun at Hollywood and how it handled the Western genre and ended up bringing about some change. People were tired of the same old tropes and the same old stereotypes.

Though, some might argue those aren't the only reasons you couldn't make the film today—the main one being that wholesome Westerns died off. In the YouTube video "You couldn't make *Blazing Saddles* today," by Infranaut, he states, "[The old Westerns] ended up presenting a thoroughly white-washed, sanitized, child-friendly and dishonest depiction of the American frontier ... [*Blazing Saddles* was] a film that not only featured a black main character, but depicted the cruelty, ugliness and hypocrisy of the Old West." He further adds that this film "broke the Western genre." Basically, people couldn't take a wholesome view of the Old West seriously anymore. After this, although they previously existed, is when revisionist Westerns took off.

As if to prove the "You couldn't make *Blazing Saddles* today" statement incorrect, Brooks returned to cinemas on July 15 to do just that. Wait, there was a new Mel Brooks movie? *Paws of Fury: The Legend of Hank* is an animated film that is a reimagining of *Blazing Saddles*—including Brooks as executive producer, a story credit and the voice role of the Shogun. Set in a feline feudal Japan, a young dog wants nothing more than to become a samurai. Hank (Michael Cera) gets appointed as the samurai for a small town to the dismay of its feline inhabitants.

Swapping the racial situations for species like cats and dogs, the animals of the film go through many of the same narrative and comedic moments as in *Blazing Saddles*. If you're looking for an original story, this isn't the film for you. If you're looking for a version of *Blazing Saddles* that you can watch safely with your children, this might be the film for you.

Paws of Fury: The Legend of Hank, rated PG, was directed by Mark Koetsier, Chris Bailey and Rob Minkoff and stars Cera, Samuel L. Jackson, Ricky Gervais, Brooks, George Takei, Gabriel Iglesias, Djimon Hounsou and Michelle Yeoh. It received a 55% Tomatometer score and a 66% audience score on Rotten Tomatoes, plus a 5.5/10 on IMDb. It runs for 1 hour and 38 minutes. I give it one thumb up and one thumb down.

Sometimes, the theme of the film deals with aging and coming to terms with our own life decisions. Characters either learn and grow to become heroes or they fail and become anti-heroes or fallen heroes. Aging and life cycles can bring about regrets.

In this summer's *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, we embark on a strange, wild journey through the multiverse—not to be confused with Marvel's multiverse. Evelyn Wang (Michelle Yeoh) must

deal with her upset world as things go crazy all around her, an infinite number of possible realities colliding. At the heart of all this chaos (one of the themes of the film), silliness and confusion, is a story about family and coming to terms with one's own life choices. Sometimes people regret the choices of their youth, but sometimes they just need perspective to see if they've lived their best possible life.

Everything Everywhere All at Once, rated R, was directed by Dan Kwan and Daniel Scheinert and stars Yeoh, Stephanie Hsu, Ke Huy Quan, James Hong and Jamie Lee Curtis. It received a Certified Fresh 95% Tomatometer score and an 89% audience score on Rotten Tomatoes, plus an 8.2/10 on IMDb. It runs for 2 hours and 12 minutes. I give it one thumb up for originality.

One strong film about aging comes in the form of *Big Fish* (2003). Ewan McGregor (young Ed Bloom) leads the cast in the cinematic version of author Daniel Wallace's novel *Big Fish: A Novel of Mythic Proportions*. Dying of cancer, an older Ed Bloom (Albert Finney) tells the stories of his youth, which seem like tall tales, to his son.

This fantasy brings us down the road less traveled and is a true "fish out of water" story. The son must come to terms with whether he believes his dad's fish stories or not. Do we truly know the people around us as well as we think we do?

Big Fish, rated PG-13, was directed by Tim Burton and stars McGregor, Finney, Billy Crudup, Jessica Lange, Helena Bonham Carter, Steve Buscemi and Danny DeVito. It received a Certified Fresh 75% Tomatometer score and an 89% audience score on Rotten Tomatoes, plus an 8.0/10 on IMDb. It runs for 2 hours and 5 minutes. I give it two thumbs up.

Recently, I wrote about the power of nostalgia in films and the new *Elvis* film. Another Elvis-related film came out back in 2002: *Bubba Ho-Tep*. Set in an elderly facility, aging residents Elvis Presley (Bruce Campbell) and a Black John F. Kennedy (Ossie Davis) must save the other residents from an ancient Egyptian mummy that feeds on their life force.

The premise of this B film centers around one of the conspiracy theories where Elvis might not have really died, but instead traded places with an Elvis impersonator and the Elvis who died on Aug. 16, 1977, was really an impersonator.

This film is a fun romp with the king of B movies going up again against the supernatural, as he did in the *Evil Dead* franchise. None of the orderlies believe the two main characters since they think they suffer from mental instabilities. One claims to be Elvis Presley and the other claims to be JFK. Put that together with ramblings of an Egyptian mummy in East Texas and no one's bound to believe a word of it.

Bubba Ho-Tep, rated R, was directed by Don Coscarelli and stars Campbell and Davis. It received a Certified Fresh 79% Tomatometer score and a 79% audience score on Rotten Tomatoes (for once, both agreed), plus a 6.9/10 on IMDb. It runs for 1 hour and 32 minutes. I give it two thumbs up as a cult classic.

The final concern with aging for the film industry, and streaming services, comes in the form of its actors. Whether it's the 60-year-old Tom Cruise portraying a U.S. Navy captain—though it's hard to believe he's 60 by looking at him—in *Top Gun: Maverick*, older women fighting to keep landing acting roles due to Hollywood's bias toward younger actresses, or the simple fact that most of those "kids" on *Stranger Things* are in their 20s and 30s. Lucas Sinclair is supposed to be 14, but Caleb McLaughlin is 20. Nancy Wheeler is supposed to be 18, but Natalia Dyer is 27. Jonathan Byers is supposed to be 18, but

Charlie Heaton is 28. Finally, Steve Harrington is supposed to be about 19, but Joe Keery is 30. Suspension of disbelief is pretty important, right?

“The show must go on.”