

# MONTHLY MOVIES

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## Christmas films: just nostalgia or something more?

*By T. Rob Brown*

**A**s I grew up and anticipated the festivities and presents each year, I felt like Christmas existed in the present. As I grew older, I began to realize that even the childhood Christmases I experienced in the '70s and '80s were derivative of the '40s and '50s. I began to believe that Christmas exists in the past.

My parents grew up in a poorer time where many went without because they simply could not afford luxuries. They always dreamed of giving us the Christmases they imagined as children in the '50s and '60s. Their ideas stemmed from my grandparents on both sides of the family. So when my siblings and I were young, our parents made Christmas one of the biggest events of the year.

Instead of dreaming of Ralphie's "official Red Ryder, carbine action, 200-shot range model air rifle, with a compass in the stock and this thing that tells time," from "A Christmas Story" (1983), I longed for the newest Star Wars action figures and playsets. But it's not the gifts that felt classic.

It was the spirit and feel of Christmas that I realized was old-fashioned—handed down to us through Christmas films and TV specials. This became nostalgia for a time in U.S. history when people

thought life was like “Leave it to Beaver” or other sitcoms of the time. It seemed so unrealistic to long for a time that is long past.

But it’s these Christmas traditions and feelings that tie the holiday to us and our families year after year. Sure, it’s nostalgia and it comes from some idealistic time that we believe, as a society, existed by maybe wasn’t quite the way we recall it. Just perhaps, that’s part of the magic of Christmas. Like in the movies, we suspend our disbelief just long enough to lift our spirits and lower our stress, share time with our families and loved ones, and remember what it felt like to be that little kid again—eager for what may be concealed under the decorated evergreen—or hopefully, things that matter much more than toys or gifts.

For this journey, I’ll be your ghost host—the Ghost of Christmas Movies Past. Let’s wrap ourselves in some gaudy Christmas sweaters, grab a cup of hot chocolate with some of those tiny marshmallows, stir it with a peppermint stick, then step up into my sleigh pulled by eight reindeer. This trip travels through time to review some of the best and worst Christmas movies ever made.

Aside from all the Christmas TV specials I watched growing up, the first serious Christmas movie I remember watching as a child in the ‘70s was “It’s a Wonderful Life” (1946). This film is often considered to be one of the staples of the genre. If any film might receive credit as the grandpa of the Christmas film industry, it’s probably this one.

The very next year, “Miracle on 34<sup>th</sup> Street” (1947) hit cinemas. Perhaps that’s why our idea of Christmas tradition in the U.S. stems from the 1940s. Two back-to-back Hollywood classics set the tone for generations to come. Both still get played on TV stations and on cable networks every Christmas.

When I was a kid, my siblings and I eagerly waited for the Arthur Rankin Jr. stop-motion animated TV specials for Frosty, Rudolph and Santa Claus. “A Charlie Brown Christmas” (1965) was another popular annual presentation. Of all the animated Christmas films, my favorite was “How the Grinch Stole Christmas” (1967). I even enjoyed the Jim Carey live-action version in 2000 and the 2018 animated film simply titled “Dr. Seuss’ The Grinch.” Though the latter is the least of the three, despite the vocal presence of Benedict Cumberbatch as the Grinch.

The 1970s, though, felt devoid of impactful, great Christmas films. Growing up, I don’t recall any new Christmas-defining films aside from “A Christmas Story,” which despite being a 1983 film, features a story that takes place in December 1940. Again, adding to that 1940s Christmas nostalgia. That film, of course, became a Christmas classic. It should have received “a major award.”

Among the list of worst Christmas-related TV specials had to be “The Star Wars Holiday Special” on Nov. 17, 1978. I was already a huge fan, action figure collector, and remember talking my parents into letting me stay up late to watch it. I also remember feeling bored through most of it and falling asleep before it was even over. Years later, I would finally see a bootleg VHS copy and understand at least 20 reasons why, despite being the first appearance of Boba Fett—though in an animated form—it’s absolutely the worst. I mean, whoever thought Jefferson Starship and Bea Arthur had any place in the Star Wars universe should “be taken to the Dune Sea, and cast into the pit of Carkoon, the nesting place of the all-powerful Sarlaac.” (C-3PO, “Return of the Jedi”)

Its only saving grace came recently when showrunner Jon Favreau and producer Dave Filoni decided to include some small nods to that special in the hit Disney+ show, “The Mandalorian” (2018-

present). The life robes from the Wookiee Life Day (their version of Christmas) make an appearance in the series, as well as the animated Boba Fett's Amban phase-pulse blaster—a sniper rifle—used by Din Djarin, the Mandalorian himself.

Sure, there were Christmas-related films that we associate with the holiday like “Gremlins” (1984) and “Die Hard” (1988). What I’m referring to are instant Christmas classics that you come back to again and again to feel the Christmas spirit. Not that there’s anything wrong with an advent calendar that shows Hans Gruber falling off the Nakatomi Plaza, inch-by-inch as the days close in on Christmas Eve. Yes, that really exists—I dare you to Google it. No, “I double dog dare you.”

In my high school years of the late ‘80s, we experienced several new Christmas films in addition to “Die Hard.” 1988 also brought us “Scrooged,” another Bill Murray masterpiece—my favorite retelling of the old Charles Dickens “A Christmas Carol” story. The film ranges across the board looking at love lost, the price of career life, materialism and what Christmas should really mean to all of us—all done in Murray’s dark humorous tone.

The very next year, we got “National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation” the third of five films in the Vacation series. Chevy Chase gives another hilarious performance as Clark “Sparky” Griswold, the family man who wants a perfect Christmas. Of course, anything that can go wrong, will go wrong in this film. Cousin Eddie’s antics impact with Clark’s and all hilarity ensues. Several later Christmas films, like “Deck the Halls” (2006), felt like they pulled a lot from “Christmas Vacation.”

In the 1990s, we got two big Christmas films as well: “Tim Burton’s the Nightmare Before Christmas” (1993) and “The Santa Clause” (1994). Do these things always come in back-to-back years? Did I just discover a Christmas movie secret that I’ve never noticed before? Surely, it’s just a coincidence. I mean, Hollywood demands to make an impactful Christmas movie happen every year—unlike the Hallmark Channel and Lifetime films, which seem to release almost daily around the holidays.

Speaking of which, every Christmas we scroll through the streaming services and you see the same list of cheesy, low-budget overly romanticized holiday films that mostly begin with, “The Christmas ...” with titles so similar that we can never remember if we’ve seen them before or not. One of the few streaming-service Christmas franchises I really enjoyed is Netflix’s Kurt Russell- and Goldie Hawn-led “Christmas Chronicles” (2018) and “Christmas Chronicles 2” (2020). These fun films make the rewatchable list.

In the 2000s, we got two great ones in the same year. You can almost smell the aroma like a wine connoisseur. Yes, 2003 was a good year for Christmas films. It gave us one of the best romantic comedy Christmas films ever made, “Love Actually” (My apologies to Ryan Reynolds, “Just Friends” (2005)) and one of my personal all-time favorite Christmas classics, Favreau’s “Elf” starring Will Ferrell.

After “Elf” came out, I remember trying to show it to my parents. At first, they didn’t like it because—as my mom would say, “It’s so ridiculous. He’s a grown man in an elf suit.” After multiple viewings, it (and Ferrell) grew on them and now it’s a holiday staple for our family get-togethers.

Some of the worst Christmas films ever made were sequels. I’m saving the worst of all for last. What do you think it’s going to be?

While we really enjoy “A Christmas Story” each year, the sequel—yes, they made a sequel in 2012—just falls so short of the mark that it barely registers on the Clausometer. I remember picking this up on Blu-ray when it released and had such high hopes. What a letdown.

“Jingle All the Way 2” (2014) shows us another major disappointment in the Christmas sequels department. While the original “Jingle All the Way” probably doesn’t top anyone’s favorite Christmas movie list, it contains some fun moments. The sequel, on the other hand, is pretty much forgettable.

“Jack Frost 2: Revenge of the Mutant Killer Snowman” (2000) ... need I say more?

If there’s anything worse than a Christmas sequel, it’s usually the sequel to a sequel. Both “Home Alone 3” (1997) and “The Santa Clause 3: The Escape Clause” (2006) are some of the worst third films in this genre. Though Martin Short’s makeup, as Jack Frost, does make the latter an unforgettable film.

Oh, my. Will you look at that? The Clausometer’s nearly running on empty from all the poor Christmas spirit. Before I pull the reins on this sleigh ride, we need to talk about the worst Christmas film of all time. Have you guessed what it is yet?

Back in 1964, some “geniuses” decided to pair up the holiday spirit, the magic of Santa Claus, science fiction, alien invaders, a horribly written script, bad acting, even worse child acting, cheesy Christmas stereotypes and let’s not forget—some of the absolutely worst costumes in the ‘60s (and that’s saying a lot).

Have you seen the polar bear and the robot from that film? You will laugh, you will cry and you will say to yourself, “Why am I watching this?” But hopefully you’re watching Season 3, Episode 21, of MST3K and laughing along with Joel Robinson, Crow T. Robot and Tom Servo as they make fun of “Santa Claus Conquers the Martians.”

I hope you enjoyed this little journey through Christmas movies past. Watch your step; it can be tricky climbing out of the sleigh. Here, you forgot your festive sweater. Oh and remember, Christmas doesn’t just exist in the past or in the present. It exists across time and holds special meaning for each of us.

“The show must go on,” and happy holidays!