

The First Cut is the Deepest

From the thrill of early martial arts movies to falling for a bronzed Charlton Heston, three Soho House members – Jonathan Ross, Barry Jenkins and Jany Temime – remember the films that shaped them

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Jonathan Ross, the film critic and broadcaster, remembers kung fu blowing his mind at a Walthamstow cinema.

I grew up in the 1970s in East London, when they still showed films that were far from studio fare at your local high street cinema. You could see kung fu movies, soft-core porn and exploitation films as well as the big budget blockbusters of the day.

When I was about 13, I went to a double bill of *Black Emmanuelle*, *White Emmanuelle* (1976) and *When Taekwondo Strikes* (1973) – my first kung fu movie experience. I came out of the Walthamstow Odeon thinking it was the best thing ever. It was the first time I'd seen what they call 'wirework' in the martial arts world; where someone does a kick and it looks as if they're jumping 30ft in the air. They are, of course, suspended from a wire harness that you can't see, but I genuinely thought they could jump that high.

I remember there was also a chase scene where the character manages to jump over two walls before he's caught, which is exactly the kind of thing a 13-year-old boy dreams of being able to do. I became something of an enthusiast and very knowledgeable about Asian cinema, probably as a result of seeing that film.

Years later, I'd buy VHS movies that I'd read or heard about from a weekly newspaper called *Exchange and Mart*. You could buy American exploitation and kung fu movies that never got a UK release by sending a postal order for about £2, all the while hoping you weren't going to get ripped off. It was amazing because you just knew you were watching something that maybe only half a dozen people in your city had ever heard of. Inevitably the films were pretty terrible, but there was something about the quest of tracking them down that was so exciting – they were very rare – like forbidden fruits.

I watched *When Taekwondo Strikes* again recently to see if it was as good as I remembered and I'm delighted to tell you the answer is... no, it's about as bad a film as you can ever sit through, it's appalling. My favourite kung fu film of all time is probably *Drunken Master II* (1994) with Jackie Chan, who I've had the pleasure of interviewing many times. I was actually the first person to interview him for a Western television audience.

I still love to watch all those films and marvel at the plots as much as the impressive high kicks. I never learnt any martial arts myself but I did, rather late in life, buy myself some nunchaku [karate sticks]. I had a set in the garage and I severely damaged the side of my face practising with them, despite the fact that I spend more time than most people watching videos of Bruce Lee using them to play table tennis. Maybe I'll eventually learn how to master them. You see, there's still something to shoot for, even later in life.





The Oscar-winning writer and director of *Moonlight* (2016), Barry Jenkins, on the film that kept him glued to his seat.

When I was still a student in Tallahassee, Florida, I went to see a film called *Heaven* (2002) at the Miracle 5 Theatre because at the time we were studying the director Tom Tykwer's short film, *Epilog* (1992).

I knew nothing about *Heaven* and had no idea it would hit me the way it did. I was absolutely stunned by the emotions in the film. So stunned, in fact, that when the credits started to roll, I carried on sitting there long after the five other people in the cinema had left.

The lights came up, and the usher came in to collect the trash, and I looked over at him and I said, 'Hey,' – and remember, I was a broke college student so I didn't have much money – 'do you mind if I watch it again?'. He looked around and he said, 'Sure man, whatever you want.' So I sat in my seat and I watched that movie again. I had never done that before and I've never done it since. I'd seen films that I thought I'd had an emotional attachment or connection to, but this was different. I don't know if it was the mood I was in, or just the tone of what I was studying, but it stayed with me.

Maybe five or six years later, after I'd graduated film school, I made my first feature, *Medicine for Melancholy* (2008). I made it for no money – I think it was \$13,000 – but it caught on and it screened at the London Film Festival, and I had meetings with all these Hollywood producers. This is between maybe 2008 and 2009, so technology wasn't what it is today. I had a DVD of *Heaven* that I'd ripped scenes from and put clips from the movie on my iPod. Anyway, I was in a meeting with a producer named Bill Horberg and I suddenly realised as I was talking to him that he had produced *Heaven*.

I told him I'd seen it at theatres and he said, 'Yeah, you and three other people,' because that movie did not do well. So I got my iPod out and pulled up a clip to show him, and I said, 'I carry this movie around with me, that's how much it meant to me'. Bill Horberg, he's a nice guy, he's like an older, very business-proficient gentleman, but in that moment he just became like an eight-year-old boy. He didn't know there were people out there that felt that way about that film.

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It's interesting to me, because *Moonlight* got a lot of love, but I try to say as often as possible, there are a lot of films I think are extraordinary that not enough people see, and I think *Heaven* is one of them. I think it's about the fullness of what it feels to be human and that's why I watch it as often as I do – I watched it again six days ago – it's one of those movies I keep coming back to. So I can't say that it's the perfect film for everyone, but it's the perfect film for me.

Jany Temime, the costume designer behind *Skyfall* (2012), *Gravity* (2013) and the Harry Potter franchise, fell for Charlton Heston on the Champs-Elysées.

It was the 1960s and I'd just arrived in Paris from Algiers. It was a strange time in my life; my childhood home was gone and I had to get used to this new city. I remember we'd walk past a grand cinema on the Champs-Elysées that had been showing *Ben-Hur* (1959) for weeks – it felt as if it had been showing it for years – and then finally my parents took us along.

The chariot scene was beyond anything I'd seen in my entire life. It was beyond what I could even imagine. They'd been advertising the film as a *grand spectacle* in bright lights outside and they certainly delivered. It was shot on a scale that only Hollywood could pull off and it meant that cinema somehow took on that scale in my mind. It left an impression that still hasn't dimmed.

There were chariots flying by and cheering crowds and screaming horses, but all the while I couldn't take my eyes off that gorgeous man at the centre of it all. Sleeveless. Brown. I had such a huge crush on Charlton Heston, I had pictures of him on all of my school stationery.

It was the colour of the film that is really seared into my memory. This was the early days of Technicolor so they were incredibly vivid, almost acid. You had Haya Harareet in a dark red dress and turquoise shawl – the very embodiment of glamour – and then you had beautiful, beautiful Charlton with his deep, Essex tan. It was all just magnificent. The sound, the colour, the movement, it hit you like a wall. The content was biblical and so was the scale; it was somewhere close to the divine for me.

I don't think you can have that same impact today. People have seen too much. And anyway, it would all be done with

computers, as it was when they remade the film in 2016, which means you lose the physical impact of the crowd and the pounding hooves and the clashing metal. It was a form of cinema that was all about scale and grandeur, where it wasn't about the acting or the subtlety of a certain pose; it was just about the sheer muscle of the thing.

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These films sold a vision for me. They may have been shot on location in Italy or wherever, and based on stories from ancient Rome, but they sold a dream of America. It was all so powerful and it came to represent a new start for me.

That sense of grandeur in *Ben-Hur* is something that I've probably been trying to recapture for my whole career. I did a film called *Hercules* (2014) a few years ago starring Dwayne 'The Rock' Johnson and I obviously put him in that same leather singlet that I remembered from all those years ago on the Champs-Elysées. Dwayne must be twice as big as Charlton Heston, but I have to admit I was still thinking about him. In my heart, there can only be one Charlton. ■■

