Movies

Movies I see in theaters or at home

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The Order

I saw this last night, December 17, 2024. An action/thriller based on true events. An FBI agent investigates a series of robberies which turns out to be organized by a neo-nazi group led by Bob Matthews (a real life figure). I was interested to see this because the real events took place in the Pacific Northwest, where I live. If you didn't know, the urban areas of the Pacific Northwest lean liberal, but the rural areas are a haven for far right extremist groups, and there are a lot of nazi-types who move to eastern Oregon and Idaho specifically to try to start communes or militias. Bob Matthews was one of them, who tried to start both a commune and a militia in the 80's.

This movie definitely falls into the trope of the main male cop-type character who has been through some trauma and is largely stoic and unable to express and process his emotions, except with occasional outbursts of anger. These kind of character arcs tend to disinterest me. If I can't see someone's emotions on screen, then it becomes hard to be immersed. Indeed, I found myself checking my phone a few times to see how much time was left in the movie. However, there was a side character that was more compelling for me than the stoic main character, and even nearly brought me to tears at one point. In fact, this movie, even though it ends with the "good guys" largely winning, the film to me reads as a tragedy which is at least somewhat novel to me for an action thriller. The main character (I can't even remember his name now) has seen so much violence at the hands of organized crime that he becomes obsessed with stopping it, even to the point of putting people he cares about in danger. Because of this obsession, he does eventually stop the crime organization, but at the cost of hurting the people he loves. Was it worth it? Probably not, just like the movie itself probably isn't worth it. Please give me a compelling character who actually learns from his mistakes, or at the very least, one that I can see is visibly tormented by these character flaws instead of bottling up his emotions presumably forever after the movie ends.

However, the movie was certainly watchable, and the few action scenes did in fact have me at the edge of my seat. There was blood and gore, which I tend to not like, but I felt it enhanced the story, and wasn't there just to evoke a reaction for no reason. The acting was good, and the characters were likeable, though I would have liked to see them be a bit more dynamic. As far as I could tell, the movie followed real events relatively closely, at least matching the Wikipedia page for Bob Matthews. There were several times towards the end that I just had to laugh as I was brought out of immersion by how events went down.

Overall, 3 out of 5 stars. Wouldn't recommend, wouldn't see again, but wouldn't leave the room if it were playing.

The Wizard of Oz

After watching the excellent Wicked, I just heard that they already made a sequel, The Wizard of Oz! I had to watch it immediately. But seriously, the Wizard of Oz was one of my favorite book series growing up. Yes, a series. There are so many. When I reread them, I will also give them a review! L. Frank Baum was apparently pretty racist, so does that come through in the books or the movie? Probably, but I hope some of it is salvageable, especially my favorite character, Ozma the trans girl princess! But I think this movie is far enough removed from the author not to show signs of racism. We will see about the books.

Unfortunately, I would say that the story in this movie does not in fact live up to the book. I enjoyed the book characters really showing how they already have the attributes they want from the wizard, especially the Scarecrow. The Scarecrow is constantly coming up with plans that save the crew from various perils. The movie certainly does show the Tin Man's heart, but the Cowardly Lion seems to be exactly that, a coward, whereas in the book he shows off his courage while thinking he is a coward the whole time. In the movie, the poppies are waved away by the magic of Glinda, where in the book, the Tin Man and the Scarecrow have to work together to get the flesh-havers out of the situation. I think it involves previously befriended mice? I will report back after I reread the book. The point is, the second half of the movie suffers from feeling as if things happen and characters do things just to get from one scene to the next.

But who watches this movie for the story? Isn't it all about the costumes, sets and songs? Yes, the sets are amazing! And the costumes are perfect. It's wonderful to watch, like watching the most expensive stage production you've ever seen. And the songs—Somewhere over the Rainbow, Follow the Yellow—no that one is actually pretty annoying. The song the munchkins sing is—oh my god make it stop! But, If I Only Had a Brain is quite enjoyable, and the choreography is very fun. The Scarecrow does an excellent job making the audience feel that he actually is stuffed with straw. And then—wait, the Tin Man sings the same tune? And, oh no, so does the Lion? This is where I really felt the movie losing its momentum and pacing, which is not helped by the lion's dumb voice and honestly the worst costume out of the main characters. There is absolutely no good song after this. Do you remember the song they sing in the Emerald City? Neither do I. And do you remember that the Cowardly Lion has a song about becoming king of the jungle that he sings in the Emerald City? Why does the character with the absolute most annoying voice get a song that contributes nothing to the story?

Okay, but there are definitely good reasons to watch this movie. Every moment that Dorothy is in the spotlight is an absolute delight. Her face and demeanor are immensely expressive, and somehow she has chemistry with every character she meets. I feel for her plight as she fights for Toto in Kansas while everyone around her dismisses her concerns and gives in to, um, the witch, and "The Law." And her singing is out of this world. Holy shit I think this movie only made it big because of Somewhere Over the Rainbow. And it deserved that. If it's been a while since you've heard it, you should listen to it real quick. She definitely doesn't sound 16, let alone any younger, but nobody cares about that.

The Wicked Witch of the West is the other character to watch in this movie. So campy, so perfectly evil and wicked. And as a sequel to Wicked, watching the first scene with her and Glinda honestly works really well with that additional extra-canonical context. Which brings me to the politics of this movie. Wicked didn't just take an innocent story and twist it into making the witch the heroine. The political commentary was here from the start, and from that starting point, it's easy to start questioning the cracks in the story we are told. Should we really take the story at face value? I think it works well thinking of it as a propaganda piece to prop up Glinda, the Wizard, and the new illegitimate regime of the Scarecrow as ruler of Oz (Where is our favorite trans character and the rightful ruler of Oz, Ozma?).

Overall, I think this movie deserves a watch, but you might start to nod off at around the halfway point. But really, we should forgive this movie its faults. It's just a kid's movie, after all, and—oh my god, the monkeys! That is the creepiest thing I've ever seen! And we all watched this as kids? No wonder my childhood was so fucked.

4 stars out of 5. You have to watch it at least once in your adult life. Worthy successor to Wicked.

Sonic 3 ????? (and Sonic Adventure 2 ?????)

I did not re-watch Sonic the Hedgehog 1 and 2 before seeing Sonic the Hedgehog 3, so it's been a while since I've seen them. But I remember enjoying Sonic 1 as a fun but kind of forgettable jaunt and 2 as fairly mediocre. So my expectations of 3 were not very high, but I wanted to see the movie, for the simple reason that the movie introduces Shadow the Hedgehog.

Shadow is like if Sonic were edgy and dark, and he's one of the best things that happened to the Sonic franchise. In the games, Shadow makes his first appearance in Sonic Adventure 2 from 2001, which was the second 3D Sonic game to be released, and also, the first Sonic game I ever played. Yes, I am a dirty heathen who played 3D Sonic before 2D Sonic, and I loved it. I still love it. It's hard for me to explain my love for this game, because this game is, in my opinion, both the best 3D Sonic game ever released, and a hot pile of garbage. But for this essay, I'm concerned mostly with its story.

The story, as it's presented in the game, is full of cliches and tropes, plot holes and nonsense, characters showing up at random places, and scenes that don't quite follow from the last. This is a story where Tails realizes that the president is on a video call with Dr. Eggman, so Sonic and Tails race to intercept the President's limo, jump in, interrupt delicate negotiations involving the lives of everyone on earth, trace the call to find out where Eggman is, and leave without so much as a thanks. And at least in the version I played, Sonic Adventure 2 Battle for the GameCube in English, the characters have awkward pauses or interrupt each other in hilarious ways that were clearly not intended by the developers. Underneath the bad acting, timing problems, and awkward shaping of the plot to fit gameplay, however, is surprisingly deep lore that is only hinted at during the game and its cinematics. I myself had to watch a Youtube video to understand the full backstory. But the mystery and ambiguity in the way that Shadow's origins are presented is part of the story, not a flaw in the storytelling. Shadow himself does not have a full memory of his own past, and struggles to figure out who he is.

In fact, the whole structure of the game supports the story of Shadow struggling to understand his own nature. The game is organized into two main campaigns: the good campaign where you play as the archetypal good guys Sonic, Tails, and Knuckles, and the evil campaign where you play as the "bad" guys Shadow, Dr. Eggman, and Rouge the Bat. Once you beat both campaigns, the two stories merge into one for the finale campaign, where the good and evil characters have to work together to defeat the true final boss.

The plot hinges on events that happened 50 years ago, which Shadow keeps having flashbacks to. Shadow was an experiment created on the research facility and space colony ARK by Gerald Robotnik, the grandfather of Dr. Eggman. Gerald was attempting to create the "ultimate lifeform"

through Project Shadow. Gerald also had a granddaughter, Maria, who had a close bond with Shadow. But eventually the government's military, G.U.N., "shut down" the research by murdering everyone on ARK. Maria helped Shadow escape, but died in the process. Her last words to Shadow ring in his memory, but his memory isn't complete, and he thinks she wanted him to exact revenge on all of earth for her death. Shadow is captured and put on ice for 50 years until Dr. Eggman frees him, not knowing Shadow's full history. Together they start collecting chaos emeralds to power ARK's planet-busting weapon, the Eclipse Cannon. Rouge the Bat is also here, ostensibly helping them collect Emeralds, though secretly she is actually a spy working for the President. Eventually they have 6 out of 7 emeralds, enough to make a display of the Eclipse Cannon's power by destroying half of the moon.

Meanwhile Sonic has been mistaken for Shadow since they look alike, and is running from G.U.N., and he and Tails, Knuckles, and Amy (Sonic's wannabe girlfriend) are trying to find Dr. Eggman. Eventually they locate him on ARK, and Tails creates a fake Chaos Emerald that has the same properties as a real chaos emerald, but with less power, which for some reason means that it will backfire and destroy the Eclipse Cannon if it is used to power it.

But unwittingly, all of them are playing into the hands of the long dead Gerald Robotnik, who "went insane" after years in the custody of G.U.N. and while pretending to work for G.U.N., programmed the station to crash into Earth, completely annihilating the planet, whenever the 7 chaos emeralds were used to activate the weapon. So when Sonic places the Chaos emerald in the Eclipse Cannon, the Cannon is destroyed, but ARK begins to plummet to Earth, guided by a creature who may be the actual "ultimate lifeform" instead of Shadow. Until the discovery of this creature, Shadow found purpose and identity in being the ultimate lifeform, but now he questions even his own identity. In the end, Shadow properly remembers that Maria wanted him to protect earth, not destroy it. He (seemingly) sacrifices himself to save earth, finally feeling that he has achieved his own self made purpose, born out of his love for Maria.

Because of the awkward way that the story is told, I didn't take Shadow seriously at first. He seemed melodramatic and emo for no reason to me. It was only after multiple play-throughs that I started to appreciate the melodrama and look past the polygonal animation and voice acting to see that Shadow is not a one dimensional character. His motivations make sense, and he grows from feeling anger and wanting revenge because of the pain in his past to letting that pain be a motivation to help others. There's a scene in the middle of the game where Rouge is trapped in a building that is about to blow up, and we see Shadow experiencing a flashback to Maria's death cut together with the image of Rouge about to die. Shadow then decides to save Rouge to spare her from the same fate as Maria. He plays it off as if he did it for selfish reasons, but the cracks are already starting to form in his bad boy persona. Shadow is not an evil character, he's just in pain, and honestly, he has good reasons to rebel, at least against the government that killed his friend.

Sonic also has an interesting character arc, or at least is set up to have one. He is mistaken for Shadow, who is just as fast as he is. Sonic finds himself fighting against the authorities, even though he is usually thought of at the "good guy." Sonic accuses Shadow of being a fake hedgehog, but the truth is that Shadow was created 50 years ago, and presumably Sonic is not 50 years old. Sonic, just like Shadow, needs to let go of the story he tells about himself that he's the fastest

hedgehog in the world, and Shadow is just a fake hedgehog, and instead work with Shadow to save earth.

With all of this story, it seems that it would be easy for Sega to make Sonic the Hedgehog 3 a great movie. Or just a good movie. Alas, it was not to be. Three major things hindered this movie from being great, or honestly, even watchable. First, the previous two movies set up human characters not found in the games, namely Tom and Maddie Wachowski. The movie is constrained to the previous canon, and the idea that these humans need to be main characters. They just get in the way, and a whole unnecessary, campy subplot has to be created to have something for them to do.

Second, the movie tries to be about a theme of teamwork, and how badly things go when you try to do things on your own. The lesson falls flat and feels preachy. Sonic Adventure 2 was not about teamwork, though there was plenty of teamwork in it. It was about identity, and about the nature of good and evil. Teamwork featured in the game as a result of figuring out how one's identity works to enhance a team's capabilities. And the third reason this movie fails, is Jim Carrey.

Jim Carrey is the worst thing that happened to this movie. He takes up an inordinate amount of screen time, and reduces the characters of both Dr. Eggman, and Gerald Robotnik into mere slapstick humor. It was painful to watch. I did not want to see Jim Carrey slap his belly around for a minute straight, or break the fourth wall by looking at the camera and tell us that he's one actor playing two characters, or have a fight with his grandfather that references the Green Lantern movie. I crave sincerity in my Hollywood blockbusters, something that Marvel has made all but obsolete. Sonic Adventure 2, despite its numerous flaws, is extremely sincere. Even though I laugh when the sincerity doesn't hit like it's meant to, that seriousness drives a plot that is unashamed of its silly nature and allows the audience to accept its reality and be part of the story.

The elements of a good story are here in Sonic 3, in all their sincerity. Maria features prominently, with a largely similar plotline as in Sonic Adventure 2. Shadow retains his seriousness, and the movie left me wishing I could have seen a movie with Shadow as the main character, not Dr. Eggman, or Tom Wachowski, or even Sonic. Keanu Reeves was obviously the perfect voice for Shadow, and Shadow has a similar arc of wanting revenge, and eventually wanting to help save earth. Ultimately this movie would have been watchable with about ten percent of Jim Carrey, and it would have been great if it were reworked with Shadow as the main character. As it is, I cannot recommend it. Can we all just pretend like the cinematics of Sonic Adventure 2 is the real Sonic the Hedgehog 3? If that's the case, I give it 5 stars out of 5. Go watch that Youtube video, or better yet, play the game. Otherwise, if you're wanting to see the movie in theaters, I give it 2 stars out of 5. At least Shadow is in it, but it could have been a masterpiece.

The Day the Earth Blew Up: A Looney Tunes Movie ?????

I didn't hear about this movie until I saw it listed at my local theater. Did they spend no money whatsoever on promoting it? The Day the Earth Blew Up has phenomenal animation, taking me back to watching those classic Looney Tunes cartoons as a kid. The animators clearly crafted this movie out of great love for that old style of animation. The movement of the characters is fluid and exaggerated, allowing for so many great visual gags. Do you know that thing where for the first season of an animated show the characters look wild and wacky, and then as the seasons progress, the animation locks in and closely follows the character models and the characters look smoother and prettier, but stiffer? The animation in this movie is a breath of fresh air in defiance of that phenomenon. They clearly gave their artists plenty of space for creativity.

Unfortunately, the superb animation doesn't save this movie from being boring and falling into the kid's movie trope of character growth that feels hamfisted and artificial. Daffy as a character is obnoxious, though that's not too surprising. Porky Pig is actually fine, though there is a running gag about sharing a stutter with his love interest Petunia that is cringy to watch. Petunia might be my favorite character. She has perhaps the most depth out of any of the characters, and I found her romance with Porky to be endearing. The movie has some genuine laugh out loud moments that made me worried I was being disruptive in the theater. These moments thankfully punctuated the overall dull story.

All in all, I can't recommend this movie. I think it would be great if its already short 90 minute time were cut in half, or even a third. 3 out of 5 stars.

Black Bag ?????

One way that I gauge my interest in a movie is by how often I think about the time or how long the movie is. During this movie, I do think I checked the time once, but I was fairly well engaged the whole time. Part of that is due to the movie's relatively short run time, 90 minutes as opposed to the more common 2 hour movie. My opinion is that if you have a 2 hour movie, it had better be justified by some amazing character development or storytelling. I'm always thinking about what could have been cut in a movie to keep the plot moving. This movie was not like that. 90 minutes was the right amount of time for the story they were telling.

The movie is essentially a murder mystery set in a James Bond-esque setting, complete with Pierce Brosnan in an essentially cameo role as the director of whatever shady MI6 or CIA type workplace the movie takes place in. The main character George must work out which of his five co-workers sold a MacGuffin to the Russians. But, uh-oh, one of the suspects is his wife! This movie has all the regular classic mystery tropes, like gathering all the suspects into one room together to suss out the killer, red herrings, twists, and suspects doing bad things without actually being the real villain. It's an enjoyable romp all in all. I liked that the movie was suspenseful and engaging without needing a lot of action.

My biggest complaint is that I felt no emotional ties to any of the characters, especially the main character George, who really should have been more likeable. He shows very little emotion through the whole movie, with the exception of one scene where he looks a bit nervous for a few minutes. Even the other characters accuse him of being a machine. I actually don't hate stoic characters, but I think a good stoic character needs at least one scene where they break to show you their humanity, as well as a tragic backstory to justify their stoicism. I understand where the filmmakers were coming from, however. This was a movie about killers who have...creative ethics. While George is solving the mystery, the viewers are trying to understand the varying moral codes of the characters.

In a lot of movies, we see action heroes and spies who seem to let their jobs envelope their entire lives and identities, and in this movie we see some of the consequences of letting your work life bleed into your personal life. I enjoyed thinking about that, though the lives of these characters were so ridiculously over the top that it's hard to relate to them, so some of this messaging misses the mark.

Overall, I can recommend this movie if you like spy movies or classic murder mysteries, especially since it's short enough not to be a big event to go to. I think it could have been better if the main characters were more emotional and relatable. Still, 4 out of 5 stars, I probably will never see this movie again, but I am glad I did see it.

Ash ?????

Ash is a sci-fi horror movie that leans more on horror than sci-fi. When I watch sci-fi, I want to think about how future technology might impact our humanity, identities, or lives while also commenting on the current state of the world. That's not what I got from this movie, it was much more like a monster of the week, but set in space. I'm not a horror kind of person, so it's not too surprising that this movie scared the shit out of me. It leans into the trope of "Wouldn't it be scary if you couldn't tell what is real and what isn't?" and yeah, that's definitely scary. I don't like thinking about that. But still, I was rooting for the main character, engaged in her plight, so I'll give it points for that. The effects and the setting were also interesting, so points there too. But I didn't really think this movie said anything unique or profound. It was just another alien monster movie. 3 out of 5 stars, obviously I will never watch this again, but I don't regret seeing it, it was a competently made movie.

Rule Breakers ?????

Rule Breakers is a film by Angel Studios, which is based in Utah. Maybe you can guess what kind of studio they are. I previously watched the movie Homestead by the studio, and even though I have major issues with the film, I actually thought that Homestead, though it wasn't that great of a film, had a solid story that could have been helped by better dialogue and a bit less Christian propaganda. Rule Breakers, however, was terribly boring, with a story so slow, that I was glad there was no one else in the theater with me, so that I could play on my phone, or get up and do jumping jacks without bothering anyone. Rule Breakers is essentially a sports movie, but instead of sports, it's based on the true story of the all girls robotics team from Afghanistan who almost didn't make it to their first competition due to their US visas being denied. The movie relentlessly bashes the patriarchal culture of Afghanistan which had my Cross-Cultural Studies degree fighting with my Social Work schooling. On the one hand, obviously Afghanistan is a pretty terrible place for women, and it's great to see a real life story of women escaping that. On the other hand, I can't help feeling that Christians making such a movie is still a kind of subtle propaganda trying to convince us, "See? That religion is SO bad to women. Isn't Christianity great by comparison?" I'll admit that I went into the movie with very low standards due to my own negative experience with Christianity, and I'm sure that influenced how I perceived the movie. But still, there was something off about the way the violence of Afghanistan was portrayed. It felt like they were trying to raise the stakes of the movie without affecting the characters' actions or showing them struggling emotionally. The most was when one of the character's father dies, but even then, they don't change any plans at all. Still, in the second half of the movie when the team is finally competing in several robotics competitions, I was definitely rooting for them. I think more than half of this movie could have been deleted, and more time could have been spent on the girls and their character development. 2 out of 5 stars, I'm sorry that I wasted 2 hours on this boring movie.

In the Lost Lands ?????

This was not a good movie. It was too dark (visually, not thematically), I laughed out loud at some of the clunky dialogue, the setting made little sense, and the characters weren't all that interesting. I looked at my watch halfway through surprised that the movie wasn't almost over yet. But it has a certain charm to it. The movie is set in a post apocalyptic world, so modern technology is mixed with medieval style elements. I practically lost it when the bad guys confront the main character, who has the power to create illusions if she is looking into people's eyes, so the bad guys are all wearing aviator sunglasses which block her power. Incredible. There is a continuum that starts with movies apologizing for themselves, to being genuinely heartfelt, and all the way to being pretentious about themselves. This movie falls squarely into pretentious. But I prefer that over the movie that apologizes for itself. A fine romp, I will forget everything about this movie in a few days, here's a way too generous score: 4 out of 5 stars, I don't recommend, but I'm glad I saw it.

Mission: Impossible ?????

There were a lot of movies that I wasn't allowed to see as a child. This wasn't one of them. I saw this when I was young enough both to not question the silly gadgets that barely make sense, and to not understand the meaning of them. Why does Ethan Hunt have a thingy he has to screw onto the pay phone? And what does it do? Apparently...it encrypts the call? How does putting a gadget on top of a zip drive and watching the number go up indicate that it's a tracking device? How does sending a usenet message to "Max@Job 3:14" actually successfully get a message to Max???? All these silly gadgets endear me to this movie, even as I think about how I loathe when modern movies bypass plot problems by duct taping over them with silly future tech. Instead of being overwhelmed by tech, this movie is grounded in the realism of the analog film of the 90s, filming on location with sparse CGI as far as I could tell, excepting the helicopter in the tunnel at the end. Tech isn't at the center of this movie, instead Ethan's quest to figure out the motives of his team members is what makes this movie exciting to watch. At the same time, it's unfortunate that the movie uses the lead female character as an object to develop not her own character, but to develop the hero and villain's characters. The hero almost loses the battle due to his weakness in being tempted by her, and the villain shows his villainy by coldly discarding her.

Overall, if you're willing to laugh at the silly bits, this movie is worth a watch. 4 out of 5 stars.

M:i-2 ?????

In the first Mission Impossible movie, Ethan Hunt stops his teammate Krieger from killing a CIA security guard who discovers them in the middle of their operation. "Zero body count," he demands, showing that compared to his adversaries, who don't show any hesitation in increasing their body count, his goal isn't just to steal the thing he needs, it's to show IMF that he's not the bad guy. The Ethan Hunt of M:i-2 has no such qualms as his former self. He mows through enemies like he's in a video game, and they keep popping up to be mowed down like they know they're NPCs. This is a movie built for spectacle. While the first Mission: Impossible movie made catching a single bead of sweat into a thrilling scene of epic suspense, M:i-2 makes a potential worldwide pandemic into a boring slog of unnecessary slow motion and close ups.

The end of the first Mission: Impossible is Ethan Hunt constantly one step behind his adversaries, methodically gaining ground on them and carefully taking advantage of the opportunities presented to him. And it's personal for him. He's up against two people who betrayed him and killed his friends. When he plants an explosive, jumps, and—somehow—propelled by the explosion lands on a moving train, it's satisfying, despite its implausibility, because we know what this means to him. The emotional stakes are high. But when Ethan Hunt in M:i-2 shoots the tenth henchman coming after him in a car, or a motorcycle or whatever, there's no sense that once he kills the next henchman, he will have achieved his goal. Even his fight with the main baddie suffers from this problem. A good fight tells a story. I'm engaged with fights when I understand why each blow is aimed, who is winning or gaining, and what they are fighting for. The final fight is just two dudes wailing on each other until one of them can't get up anymore. What is the fight for? Ethan Hunt is carrying the antidote that he must get to his girlfriend in time. The antidote is in his jacket, but at the beginning of the fight, he throws his jacket off, and it's just lying on the ground, not participating in the fight. A good fight would have made the antidote visually and strategically central to the fight. But this is not a thoughtful movie.

Unfortunately, similar to the first movie, the main love interest in M:i-2 is mostly just a prop to show the bad guy how bad he is, and to give the good guy some emotional stakes. She gets one good moment of agency in the middle, but mostly we get to see her fall for Ethan Hunt after one evening of romantic chemistry, and then abused and coerced by her ex boyfriend for the rest of the movie.

If you're willing to turn off your brain and laugh at the absurdity of it all, this movie is bearable. But it shows that there must be some rule about franchises that even though they might start off in a specific niche genre, they tend to end up as generic action. At least, that was my take on the Fast and the Furious series. I've seen the 3rd and 4th Mission Impossible movies, and remember liking the 3rd, but I will report back on how much of that is just nostalgia. 3 out of 5 stars, definitely skippable.

M:i:III ?????

This movie was one of my favorites movies for a while. A few years back I watched it with someone who nitpicked all the ways that the movie wasn't realistic, so I was worried that on rewatch I would find that I had given it more credit than it deserved. Maybe it's nostalgia, but I still think this movie is spectacular. It's a masterclass in how to create and sustain tension, while not losing sight of the personal stakes for the protagonist. Even though I knew exactly what was going to happen in each scene, I was still at the edge of my seat, worried for the characters that I already knew would make it to the end. In the last Mission Impossible movie, Ethan Hunt was just an overall cool guy who could handle anything thrown at him. In this movie, he's still ridiculously talented at what he does, but it feels like he's constantly at the edge of his abilities. In the last movie, he gets hit and shrugs it off without it seeming to affect him, but in this movie, you can see him struggle to recover his wits and keep going every time. Tom Cruise's acting sells this, as well as the writing and directing, giving each of these hits its proper weight to make the whole film feel like Ethan Hunt could fail at any given moment, but he doesn't, in large part because his love for his wife is so strong and desperate. Though his wife is the damsel in distress for most of the movie, she does get a solid scene where her choices and brains save Ethan Hunt from certain death. She feels like more of a character than the previous two love interests, even if most of her character traits are in service of their relationship. It's progress. And yes, there's a lot in this movie that is not realistic. Ethan Hunt should have died many times over, and setting up an entire operation in 2 hours feels literally impossible, but if you accept the reality where there's a government agency called "Impossible Mission Force" and suspend disbelief, the movie does have a sense of internal logic that satisfies me. And there's another kind of realism in this movie that helps it feel immersive. The movie was shot on location without a lot of green screen as far as I could tell. Tom Cruise really is running through the streets of Shanghai, and he interacts with real objects in real, physical sets. I've seen too many MCU and Disney CGI fests, so it feels like a breath of fresh air to have no trouble believing that what I'm seeing is at the very least physically possible, if not realistically plausible.

Though I like this movie more than the first Mission: Impossible, I do think it lacks something that the first one had. This one beefs up the action and suspense, and even though I just praised this movie for doing tension very well, I tend to enjoy when movies take their time and give space to breathe. That action replaces a lot of the drama of personal betrayals, double agents, and false identities, which works for this movie in its own way, but still feels like a loss for the character of the Mission: Impossible franchise. It still stays truer to Mission: Impossible than M:i-2 does, but that's not very hard to do. All in all, this is my favorite movie of the franchise. 5 out of 5 stars, I can easily recommend this as one of the top action movies of all time.

Mission: Impossible - Ghost Protocol ?????

The Mission Impossible movies shine most when they are grounded in some kind of reality. In the first movie, it makes no sense that there's a room where you can't touch the floor, and it senses temperature, and it detects sound, but then Tom Cruise is hanging by a wire, and the sound cuts out, and the tension rises as we see this very physical stunt being performed for real. The ridiculousness of the contrivance matters less when you see that these stunts are real. In Ghost Protocol, Jeremy Renner wears a "magnetic suit," drops a hundred feet, is caught by a magnet, and hovers around in a server room. It's very silly, and it looks fake, because it is fake. This movie is contrived to make a plot to watch exciting things happen to a group of people. It's silly and forgettable. The team Ethan Hunt leads is made up of misfits, and they have to work together in order to win the plot. Hearing Tom Cruise tell his team that they worked well together made me feel like I was watching a kid's TV show where they have to spell out the moral lesson learned at the end of the episode. But the most egregious sin this movie committed was breaking up Ethan Hunt and his wife, making the poignant wedding scene in M:i:III lose its meaning. I got a spoiler that she returns in a later movie, so I'll hold out some hope for that, but not too much. They're as likely to kill her off as to make her a real character. And speaking of love interests, this one teases a bit of chemistry between Ethan Hunt and his teammate, and she does have a reasonable role, but she feels one dimensional as a character. Still waiting for a proper female co-lead in one of these movies. 2 stars out of 5 because I'm so annoyed about Ethan Hunt's wife.

Mission: Impossible - Rogue Nation ?????

Alright, here we have it. The first Mission: Impossible movie to have a female co-lead who is a full character, and a match for Ethan Hunt himself. She even saves Ethan from drowning, and it's a skill she has over him that was previously set up, so it's believable. Props to the movie for this. But overall, I was fairly bored watching this movie. The scenes involving Jeremy Renner and Alec Baldwin I found boring. Ethan Hunt comes off as a crazed conspiracy theorist, even though we all know he's right. It all comes to a head in the finale where he's proven right, which, I'll admit, I found enjoyable. But the stunts are just okay, like I feel like I've heard that Tom Cruise really had to hold his breath for a long time for this stunt, but when he was underwater, for some reason it didn't feel realistic. I know I've been harping on this realism thing too much for this series. Maybe it's not important. Maybe I'm getting fatigued by too much Mission: Impossible, with 5 movies in 6 days. So far, I think Mission: Impossible peaked with M:i:III. And my earlier prediction is so far holding out: the series is drifting away from the spy genre into action, complete with a shift in tone just ever so slightly towards too much comic relief, as seen by Benji's character, introduced in movie 3. They do try to do some of the betrayal stuff here, but I don't think they commit. We're supposed to wonder, like Ethan Hunt and his team do, whether his love interest will betray them all. But we're given too much information. The movie doesn't commit. The first Mission: Impossible movie committed hard to the will she/won't she be a femme fatale. And I don't count the other character who has a betrayal, because I just don't care about them. A betrayal twist has to mean something personally to the characters, and to the audience too. Maybe the problem is that once you put a twist into your movie, then when the sequel doesn't have one, people are disappointed, but when you put one in, people are looking for it, so it doesn't feel that good. Anyway, I want to be entertained. Surely these last three movies will do that for me. I said earlier that I had only seen the first 4 movies, but I actually saw this one too, I just didn't remember it at all. 3 out of 5 stars. It's fine.

Mission: Impossible - Fallout ?????

After a couple of duds in the series, Mission: Impossible - Fallout comes back swinging, with the record for the most amount of times I stared at my TV screen, mouth agape, saying something stupid like "Holy shit!" while another incredible stunt ratchets up the tension on this movie which, if it has any flaws, it's that it is too exciting and stressful, not giving enough breathing room. In that sense, this one resembles M:i:III the most. I complained about the fourth movie, Ghost Protocol, unceremoniously making the storyline about Ethan Hunt's wife meaningless. This movie fixes that in a satisfying way, both for the viewers like me, as well as for Ethan himself.

I really enjoyed the clarity of the cinematography of this movie, and the series in general. This movie proves that you don't have to put your action in the dark or shake the camera around a bunch in order to make it exciting. Some people are nostalgic for old school film over digital cinematography, but I actually prefer movies that look like this one, ironically for the same reason that people prefer film. It's about the immersion. Digital cinematography has become loaded with visual effects, and so brings to mind fakeness for a lot of people, who understandably feel more immersed in analog film, which brings to mind the physical reality of 80s and 90s movies. But Fallout doesn't feel like a movie with a bunch of visual effects and CGI, though I'm sure it's just loaded with them. Instead, the crispness of the cinematography immerses me in a different way, removing the barrier of the medium that sits between me and the action, making me feel like I am there inside a crashing helicopter along with Tom Cruise experiencing the same stress and excitement. This movie makes the whole series worth watching, in my opinion, and also proves the rule that the best Mission: Impossible movies are the ones where Ethan Hunt's hair is short. Five out of five stars, you don't want to miss this one.

Mission: Impossible - Dead Reckoning Part One ?????

Mission: Impossible - Dead Reckoning Part One follows a great tradition in this series of an inconsistent naming scheme, with the next movie totally ditching having "Part 2" in its name. This movie, while not quite living up to its predecessor "Fallout," still delivers action that makes me excited that I get to see the final film in IMAX tomorrow. When I started watching this movie, I groaned when I realized that the antagonist was going to be an AI. But the movie doesn't fall into some of the worst tropes of Hollywood AI characters. The next movie could ruin everything, of course, but I'm still eager to find out the answers to my questions about what is really going on in this movie, and how this AI plot is going to play out. Ironically in a movie about the dangers of computers and the need for a human touch, I noticed a fair amount of CGI in this movie. But I forgive it, because it didn't totally take me out of the action.

This movie brought humor back into the series in an interesting way. A lot of the humor comes from physical action instead of from quips by the characters. I enjoyed it, though it may have been a bit much. I guess I complained a little about the last movie having no breathing room, so watching a car chase scene that seemed to be solely included for its humor was an interesting choice, and not necessarily a bad one. But the scene where Ethan Hunt lands in a train car after parachuting off of a cliff and saves the day by accidentally knocking out one of the bad guys did make me groan internally even as I laughed externally.

Overall, I enjoyed this movie, but it fell a bit short of the previous film. So 4 out of 5 stars.

Mission: Impossible - The Final Reckoning ?????

It's been about a month since I saw this one, so I had to read the Wikipedia article to remember the plot. I also started the review for the previous movie the day after I saw it, but didn't upload it till today, so I forgot an important part that I'll put here. In the previous movie, they killed off Ethan Hunt's love interest, and it seems like they only did that to introduce a new one that he has in this movie. I take major points away for that. But in this movie, the stunts are great, but the thing that made the last movie good, having the villain be a smart, almost prescient AI, is almost completely discarded here, even though the story continues with the same plot line. This movie was built for nostalgia, and I think it worked as far as that goes, with plot elements from many of the previous movies getting threaded into this movie and tied up in a neat way. There was a meta commentary about how each of the movies raised the stakes for Ethan Hunt, who constantly doubles down on gambling more and more lives to save the lives of the people he loves, leading up to this final gamble of the entire world's future. I think this also worked for this movie. I'm giving this movie 3 stars, but I waffled back and forth between 3 and 4 stars.

Ultimately, if you want to know if it's worth watching the full series, I would say yes, and this movie, though not the best of them, is a solid ending to the series, satisfying enough as endings go. If you just want to watch the best of the best Mission: Impossible movies, then watch Mission: Impossible, M:i:III, then Mission: Impossible - Fallout, and end it there. I don't think you're missing too much. But you could add the last two to that list. They're really not bad.

Superman ?????

I guess it's movie season, because this week I watched both Elio and Superman, and during the movies, I didn't look at my clock or wonder when they were going to end even once. It's a nice feeling. The 1978 Superman movie was one of my favorite movies growing up, and apparently James Gunn is also a 1978 Superman fan, because even though the movie avoids all the cringey nostalgia traps, it still hit some hidden nostalgia button in me. Perhaps the most obvious is that John Williams' Superman theme is played often, almost too often, and yet each time I heard it I felt like cheering as I watched Superman triumph over the baddies. The movie also puts Superman in a universe more akin to his golden age comics than the dark universe that Zach Snyder created for the character. It's a refreshing take. Sometimes it feels maybe a bit too cartoony, but it doesn't sacrifice emotional depth. I do have some complaints on that front, though.

Towards the beginning of the movie, there is a scene where Lois Lane (who is already dating Superman, and already knows his secret identity) is interviewing him, and asking some tough questions about his recent actions where Superman essentially scares and bullies a fictional political leader in order to prevent a war. Superman gets angry at Lois, and doesn't see that he's done anything wrong, because his objective was to prevent deaths from war. But he doesn't really address Lois' concerns that he may have stirred up more trouble by taking things into his own hands. When I saw this scene, I was very happy. I like how this Superman can get angry, and be human. I think this highlights how being empathetic can lead to anger, and being angry can cause those who see the angry person as being a bad person, justifying and solidifying their own beliefs. I expected that Superman would have a character arc where him taking action without considering the broader impact of his actions would lead to some kind of conundrum that he would have to solve by not letting his anger guide his actions, showing to the world that he is in fact the best person for the job of protecting Earth. That didn't happen. He does get into trouble, but that trouble essentially starts a different arc, where he has to consider his heritage, and who has more influence on him, his biological parents, or the parents that raised him. I don't think this is necessarily a bad arc, but because the movie sort of started with one arc and then shifted to the other arc, it didn't do either arc as well as it could have. He got angry one more time, and it did seem to add to people having a negative view of him, but it didn't feel like he did anything different to change that view. He just saves the world like he would do anyway, and all was forgiven, by the world, and by Lois.

Regardless of this major flaw, which does set this movie back by one star in my opinion, I still highly recommend this movie. I feel like James Gunn gets Superman in a way that I haven't seen in a while. I enjoyed all the supporting characters as well, including Lois Lane and Jimmy Olsen as well as Lex Luthor and his team of goons and cronies. (I appreciated the inclusion of Otis as a henchman of Luthor, a nod to Luthor's henchman in the 1978 film.) This Lex Luthor does feel like a real threat, like he's one step ahead of Superman the whole time, though he does devolve into incoherent cartoony madness at the very end.

This movie definitely has flaws, and could have been more emotionally moving, but it kept my attention for the entire runtime, and I was always rooting for the good guys to win, so it gets my recommendation with a solid 4 out of 5 stars. I'm just now learning that this movie is meant to be a soft reboot of DC, being the first movie in the DC Universe (DCU) which is totally separate from the the previous and totally different DC Extended Universe (DCEU). Since that is the case, I'm excited to see what they come up with, especially the next film planned for next year, Supergirl. I'm actually a pretty big Supergirl fan, so I hope they don't fuck it up!

Elio ?????

Once upon a time, every single Pixar movie was guaranteed to be an absolute banger, with NO exceptions. The 15 year run starting with the very first feature length CGI film Toy Story in 1995 up until the excellent Toy Story 3 in 2010 was legendary. The stories were filled with incredible character arcs and creative takes on beautiful fantasy worlds, leading to the meme that Pixar just asked "What if _____ had emotions?" and created the best possible film from that simple question. What if toys had emotions? What if bugs had emotions? What if monsters had emotions? What if robots had emotions? Then Cars 2 came out, and the bubble was burst.

The funny thing is, aside from Cars 2, Pixar doesn't actually make bad movies. Some of their movies just feel like they are missing that magic spark that I had come to expect from Pixar, that nebulous "What if _____ had emotions?" feel. But after a few okay movies, Pixar released Inside Out, answering the important question of "What if emotions had emotions?" and it felt like the magic spark was back. Now Pixar makes two kinds of movies, inoffensive movies, and emotional big hitters. Inside Out, Coco, Toy Story 4, Soul, Luca, Turning Red, Elemental, and Inside Out 2 all hit me with the feels, and if you haven't seen one of those, they're well worth the watch. Luca and Elemental are probably the weakest entries on this list, but I think they make it in by trying something new and creative, and I feel like they have something worthwhile to say. Inside Out, my favorite movie of all time, along with Coco are some of the best movies ever made of all time, and if you haven't seen them, oh my god why not, go watch them right now I mean it why are you still reading this they are so good please don't make me come to your house and force you to watch them they are important culturally and for your mental health so just do it. So where does Elio fit?

Well, Elio feels pretty derivative. It's like the backstory and setting of Lilo and Stitch mixed with the plot of The Owl House. Elio is a kid whose parents died, and is being raised by his aunt, but wishes aliens would come and take him away, because he has trouble fitting in on Earth. Then aliens actually do come and take him away, and shenanigans ensue when Elio pretends to be the leader of Earth in order to be accepted into the Communiverse, a peaceful group of diverse aliens living in an advanced space habitat. The plot is simple enough that I feel like I've seen this movie before. And there's some scenes that took me out of my suspension of disbelief, particularly a scene where the characters are in a spaceship dodging satellite debris. Like, come on, space is huge, that's not how it works. That's not even how it worked in an earlier scene in the movie, so why did it change? Elio changes too. In the beginning, he is an awkward kid who struggles to relate to others, but he doesn't seem to have trouble relating to the aliens who abduct him. He is more confident than is believable. And this definitely feels like a kid's movie. Elio is young, and the shenanigans are slapstick and childish. And I have several more gripes, so all in all I shouldn't have liked this movie...

But I cried like a baby numerous times, so I can't help but put this solidly in the category of emotional big hitters, answering the important question of "What if aliens had feelings?" as well as "What if lonely awkward kids had feelings?" and even "What if struggling parents had feelings?" Maybe it was just the mood I was in when I saw it, but I think Pixar found that magic spark for this one, letting authentic emotions run freely throughout the movie, even if the story isn't always the

strongest. I think that's the most important thing in a movie. When I go see a movie, I want to connect with the characters, and have my heart moved so that I am rooting for the characters to grow and to find their strength and their place in the world. For that reason I will heartily recommend Elio to anyone who wants to be moved in this way. I am probably going to see it again myself. So despite its flaws, I give it five out of five stars. And I can continue to be a fangirl of Pixar, because even while half their films are just okay, if the other half are like Elio, I don't want to miss a single one.