Instructor/Advisor: George Barbastathis
Associate Advisors: Jennifer Chen, Zachery LaValley

September 10, 2000

Seminar description

Among the media arts, motion pictures is one of the most engaging. The large screen, surround darkness and sounds dominate the audience's attention throughout the movie. This one of the most powerful methods available to artists to transmit messages to their audience, protest, explain, or simply entertain. Movie technology started with Edison's Kinetoscope in 1888 and the Lumière brothers' Cinematographe in 1894. Very rapidly it acquired a large following among audiences and a large push among art professionals who recognized the potential of the new medium. The almost complete immersion of the audience to the conditions created by the movie director allows the creation of unique experiences, some of them impossible or detrimental in real life. The most common examples are time travel and free fall! Moreover, the ease of film reproduction gave a new dimension to the theater arts and enabled audiences to enjoy masteful performances over and over again.

Movie-making is a fascinating integration of art, science, and engineering. The issue is to resonate the director's interpretation of the script with the audience's perception while still allowing the audience to freely associate and individually add their own dimensions to the movie (as in any other form of art). Motion picture audiences are more demanding than theater audiences in their expectations of realistic effects. Thus, many movies present formidable technical challenges which often have to be met with limited budgets. The ingenuity that went into making the first Star Wars (4th Episode), for example, is legendary. Even if special effects are absent or of secondary importance, diligent directors will put major effort into lighting, sound, etc. conditions and placing the actors and extras appropriately (since the camera
has more degrees of freedom than the theater stage, the staging problem is much more complex in movies.)

In this seminar we will try to target precisely the intersection of art and engineering in movie-making, and relate it to audience appreciation (which is what we know best.) After learning about how movies are made, talking to some real-life movie-makers and spending some time as ad hoc movie critics, we will hopefully become more than addicted movie-goers — perhaps a little bit of movie insiders?

About the seminar leaders

George Barbastathis is Assistant Professor of Mechanical Engineering. He received the B.S.E.E. (1993) from the National Technical University of Athens and the M.Sc. (1994) and Ph.D. (1997) in Electrical Engineering from Caltech, and worked for the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign before coming to MIT in 1999. His research and teaching explore the physics and algorithms of visual information processing, e.g. optical imaging, micro-optics, and visual learning. He is in the process of upgrading his movie addiction from hobby to a serious professional endeavor.

Jen Chen is a Sophomore majoring in Chemical Engineering. She graduated in 1999 from Hopatcong High in Hopatcong, NJ, and she now resides in Cambridge on MIT’s campus. Jennifer aspires to someday graduate and start a career doing research and development for a pharmaceutical company. Until then, however, she plans on spending her free time and money as she has done for many years—pursuing movies and music, her two greatest interests.

Zach LaValley is a Sophomore majoring in Electrical Engineering. He graduated from Leominster High School, in Leominster, MA, as well as the Massachusetts Academy of Math and Science, located on the WPI campus in Worcester, MA. He is currently a member of the fraternity Phi Delta Theta and a rower for the MIT men’s Lightweight Varsity Crew team. Movies have been a passion of his for many years, and he hopes to enter into the field of movie special effects after graduating from MIT.
Organizational issues

Each seminar is divided into three parts: technical, critical, and a movie show. The technical part covers each week a topic related to how movies are made. A good deal of it is devoted to standard engineering methods (optical, chemical, mechanical, acoustical, computer graphics, etc.) for movie making, as well as examples of how special effects are achieved. We also spend some time describing the various jobs comprising the movie set, the jargon of movie-makers, their common protocols and the peculiarities of individual studios, directors, and other artists. The material for the technical part is taken from the books “Making movies” (by Sidney Lumet), “Basic motion picture technology” (by Bernard Happé), and “Digital filmmaking” (by Thomas Ohanian and Michael Philips). In the critical part we discuss each week a movie theme, critique some representative movies and vote on the strongest theme representative among a small selection (the selections are given below and are not set in stone.) The technical and critical parts combined should last for about an hour. Then we watch the movie that was voted best for the previous week’s theme.

Division of labor

George B will take care of the presentations for the technical part. There will be no homeworks or tests on this material, but if one of you gets excited by a particular topic, you are more than welcome to ask the instructors for more information and guidance in doing some digging of your own. The latter is completely at your discretion.

You will participate more actively in the critical part. Among the 8 critical themes (see below) you will each select one and prepare ahead of time with a partner to lead the critical discussion. This means putting some thought on the merits and failures of the movie theme representatives, as well as reflecting on the directors’ intentions, the issue(s) involved and/or the impact that these movies had after they were released. George B, Zach and Jen will help each team as they prepare. Since it’s 8 of you, that will cover 4 technical themes. 2 of the remaining 4 are “reserved” by George, and the remaining 2 will be covered by George, Jen and Zach and/or more volunteers among you (this is also optional.)

1These are not required textbooks, just the principal sources of the presented material.
Administrative formalities

The seminar will meet at an unusual time — Sundays at 6pm. We have received special permission from the Chair of the Faculty (who oversees instruction regulations) to do that, due to the special nature of our seminar. However, if this time presents a problem for at least one of you, please bring it forward — we will then look for another alternative time. Please do show up for the first meeting on Sunday 9/10 (there will be no movie showing that day, but we may decide to watch one at some off-campus theater optionally — George B treats).

The requirements for the 6 units of credit that you are receiving are:

1) attendance in at least 6 out of the 9 seminars and 6 out of 8 movies,
2) active participation in the technical and critical discussions,
3) presentation of your selected critical movie theme and leading the discussion,
4) having fun watching the movies!!

Syllabus

Outline - technical

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Critical topic themes and movie selections

Disclaimer: The views and critiques expressed below are purely subjective on the part of the author (G. B.) You are welcome and, indeed, encouraged to openly disagree!

Week 1: Coming of age

“This is Benjamin. He is a little worried about his future.” It was the late ’60s, Simon and Garfunkel were hot, and romance with a girl and her mother was, perhaps, a natural thing to happen to an 18-year-old bumping out at his parents’ house in a California residential neighborhood. The Graduate (1967), a classic coming-of-age movie, takes a rather idealized but stiff view at the conflict between the emotional and sexual drives of this rather unusual love triangle. Dustin Hoffman was stamped with the “fuzzy hero” character for the rest of his career (he is capable of much more, as we saw in Tootsie, 1982 and the subtle Family Business, 1989) and Mrs. Robinson still makes the airwaves in the nostalgic radio stations aimed at my parents.

Coming of age then and now lends itself to some interesting comparisons. In the late ’60s, the world had already gone through about half of the Cold
War and was preparing itself for Vietnam, student revolt in both the U.S. and Europe, and a protracted period of questioning every single value that until then had been taken for granted. The period between roughly the release of The Graduate and the Happy-Go-Lucky Reaganistic ’80s was arguably one of the most turbulent for internal U.S. politics (and for big part of the rest of the world.) Released shortly after the end of the Reagan era and shortly before the last economy downturn of the century ended, Reality Bites (1994) has a totally different flavor of youth revolt against parents’ intervention, the entertainment industry’s hypocrisy and the conformism of its yuppies. Lelaina and Troy (Wynona Ryder’s and Ethan Hawke’s characters) are no more certain of their steps than Benjamin, yet their attitudes reflect a faster pace for their decisions and, strangely combined, more control as well. (They are older than Benjamin, too, but that’s not why they’re different.) Contrast that with the hollow, self-indulging psychological barriers encountered five years later by the heroes of American Pie (1999) as they go towards their Prom. Mrs. Robinson is here again, but she has become the genuine salvation, the last resort; Oz is happy to revolt against his football buddies sexism for his sweetheart’s sake rather than punch an up-and-coming movie executive. Still, reflecting the late ’90s trademark attitude, American Pie delivers enough spontaneity and frankness to be cute and entertaining.

Last year we saw two more coming-of-age movies, The Cider House Rules and October Sky with remarkably similar themes: the revolt of a young man against a parental figure trying to keep him in the nest where he grew up. While the results and motivations in the two movies are different, they both evoke quite strongly the bittersweet mix of feelings resulting from freedom away from home and nostalgia for those left behind. Ultimately, one choses where one belongs, but the circumstances rarely make it easy. And, true, the fierce struggle can be quite unintentional as The Jerk (1979) finds out in his euphoric oblivion. Could Steve Martin’s cynical portrait of an idiot be closer to most people’s coming of age than any heroic idealizations?

Movie Selections

- The Graduate (1967) Votes ； Show ；
- The Jerk (1979) Votes ； Show ；
- Reality Bites (1994) Votes ； Show ；
• **American Pie** (1999) Votes _____; Show _____

• **October Sky** (1999) Votes _____; Show _____

**Week 2: On the road**

America’s love affair with the automobile and travel in general could not escape being reflected in Hollywood. Motivated by a navy transport warrant (*The Last Detail*, 1973), revolt against sexual oppression (*Thelma & Louise*, 1991), holiday air traffic (*Planes, Trains & Automobiles*, 1988), airplane phobia (*Midnight Run*, 1988; *The Rainman*, 1988) or the desire for deliberate (*Murder on the Orient Express*, 1974) or random (*Kalifornia*, 1993) murder, heavy-weight casts drive cars and ride trains across the country. More often than not, they achieve goals far different than they started with. Typical themes of nostalgia, the rusty landscape of America’s vast midlands, and the traveller’s inescapable temporariness dominate these movies. The roads blend with the characters’ emotions as we watch their actions turn from unusual to plain odd as they go. The weight of memories from places you left and anticipation of the destination, the association with all those people who actually live their lives on the road (truckers, motel, gas station and restaurant owners, cops) end up changing a person’s perspective, for better or worse.

Travel almost for the sake of travel (and, well, a bet) is featured in *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1956) based on Jules Vern’s novel. Written in a different period and with quite different focus, it depicts the clash between cultures and technology in England’s colonial times, and portrays clear cut characters and blunt devotion to the parochial British “gentlemen’s world.”

Movie Selections

- The Last Detail (1973) Votes _____; Show _____
- Murder on the Orient Express (1974) Votes _____; Show _____
- Midnight Run (1988) Votes _____; Show _____
- The Rainman (1988) Votes _____; Show _____
- Thelma & Louise (1991) Votes _____; Show _____
- Kalifornia (1993) Votes _____; Show _____

Week 3: Live from …

Television was not “just” another technological innovation. It profoundly changed the nature of human entertainment and information exchange. The WWW is the only other medium with comparable impact, but arguably TV was more influential as it set the stage for most modes of Internet usage that we observe today. Broadcast news inform the public; they also have the first say in forming public opinion. Wars, elections, trials — does the omnipresent observant camera affect the outcomes in any way? (In the language of quantum mechanics, does the measurement affect the observable?) This week’s theme is centered on the seduction of the camera.

Network (1976) prophetically puzzled over real-time TV shock shows before they moved to prime time. Director Sidney Lumet quietly ridicules the influence that a celebrity-turned-lunatic can exercise over a disenchanted audience (the movie was made in the ’70s, after all). The complicated affairs between the characters (vicious politics, crumbling old friendships and extra-marital affairs) simply spice up the deterioration of most characters as the show moves on. The same point is hammered through in Natural Born Killers (1994) in typical loud Oliver Stone fashion. Killers can be charming if the camera is on …

The intervention of the media can blow up minor events into major catastrophes as we observe in Dog Day Afternoon (1975) and in Mad City (1997). In the first, a brilliant Al Pacino carries out a bank robbery to secure money for his male lover’s sex change operation and it’s all under control until the cameras take over reason. Rather a shocking theme selection and delivery (especially at the time), also directed by Lumet in an unusual for him frenetic
pace (perhaps influenced by Pacino?) In *Mad City* John Travolta and Dustin Hoffman pair up as desperate hostage-taker and cold-blooded journalist in a disastrous police stand-off. Even more shocking than the stories themselves is probably the mocking of audience apathy in these movies.

The theme of the omni-present camera perturbing people’s psyche is explored in a collection of four recent movies, each one having a peculiar angle. Not much can be said about *The Truman Show* (1998) without giving away the brilliant, monstrous, totally unexpected setting. Jim Carrey’s best performance to date and excellent backing by Ed Harris in a unique son – foster father relationship made a classic out of this movie. More conventional but still interesting, *Ed TV* (1999) dissects the changes that occur in a man’s life as a ruthless trash TV network attempts to take it over on behalf of its viewers. Can Ed have a private moment with his girlfriend? Can or should he make up with his bad-boy brother? Too bad the acting performances (with the exception of Helen DeGeneres) did not live up to the promise of the story. With a parallel theme but in a horror setting, *The Blair Witch Project* swept the box offices last summer. At times, this movie was rocking between brilliance and commonplace at the same pace as the hand-held camera. But the Hitchcockian escalation was frightening enough to qualify *Blair Witch* as a first-class thriller, especially since it was delivered, essentially, by amateurs.

Unquestionably original and deservedly Oscar-sweeping, *American Beauty* (1999) assigns a smaller role to the camera’s power. It rather puts recording in perspective with the surprising hollowness that can creep into suburban family life. By placing family in direct conflict with sexuality and social conventions, Sam Mendes delivers a shivering package that Kubrick would have been proud of.

**Movie Selections**

- **Network** (1976) Votes ______; Show ______
- **Natural Born Killers** (1994) Votes ______; Show ______
- **Mad City** (1997) Votes ______; Show ______
- **The Truman Show** (1998) Votes ______; Show ______
- **Ed TV** (1999) Votes ______; Show ______
• **The Blair Witch Project** (1999) Votes ; Show 
• **American Beauty** (1999) Votes ; Show 
• **[Fifteen Minutes]** (TBR – 2000) Votes ; Show 

**Week 4: War**

Awful as it may sound, war has been the human activity with the strongest, most far-reaching consequences along history. “War fathers everything,” according to Heraclitus, an ancient Greek philosopher. Human art, even the earliest found in pre-historic sites, reflects that fact by depicting war, sometimes glorifying it and others questioning its meaning. Hollywood has complied by exploring both theses, most recently in two characteristic movies, *Saving Private Ryan* and *The Thin Red Line*, both released in 1998. Even though the first suffers from excessive, unnecessary gruesome images of mutilated members and the second suffers from excessive, unnecessary dragging monologues, they both succeed at illustrating the contradictory prevalence of the human spirit under the most horrible of conditions. *The English Patient* (1996) undertakes the complementary exploration of how war tests the limits of personal relationships. Deliberately made to be tearful, it nevertheless conveys through multiple connected events the impossible balance of allegiances when duty and love collide.

The frustration experienced by prisoners of war has been at the epicenter of many masterpieces. *The Bridge on the River Kwai* (1957) and *The Great Escape* (1963) depict strongly the complex bonds that form between the captives and the guards (essentially members of the same trade who find themselves on different sides of the fence), and the culminating showdown of honor against survival. Especially touching is *Victory* (1981), a movie about British POWs in France during World War II who decide to escape during a soccer match arranged as a propaganda stunt by the Nazi authorities. It was directed by John Huston and led by two brilliant heavyweights, Michael Caine as the British Captain and team captain and Max von Sydow as the German Colonel and match organizer, with Pelé’s magical skills in a rare movie appearance, and with Sylvester Stallone delivering his first-ever genuine acting performance (he came back in *Cop Land*, 1997) as the inevitable American who knows naught about soccer but is indispensable for the escape plan to succeed. *Victory* resonates with our competitive spirit coupled with honor, and draws some disturbing parallels between these two major
human activities. A true classic which has unfortunately been overlooked by large-scale audiences. (Might it have had better fate if they had played baseball rather than soccer? If that’s what the audiences want, never mind that neither the British nor the French nor the Germans could play it or care less about it...)

Some wars have been particularly defining for specific nations and cultures. The detrimental effects of the Second World War Holocaust on the Jewish people have been the theme of numerous movies. Two recent masterpieces, Schindler’s list (1993) and La Vita é Bella (1997) made the point skillfully. Together with the drama of persecution, they emphasized how a single determined human spirit (in the first movie, a German; in the second, a Jew) could resist and deliver small but morally significant defeats on the inhuman Nazi juggernaut. The Vietnam war had smaller but nevertheless important and long-lasting consequences on the United States for the past three decades, especially the ’70s. Full Metal Jacket (1987) with Kubrick’s trademark dead-accurate, amoral character dissection method and Good Morning, Vietnam (1987) with Robin Williams’ light but still caustic humour express vividly the agonizing questions associated with that war. The same questions were subsequently generalized to the nature and purpose of any war, for the first time in history creating peace movements at such a large scale. Ailments brought to Vietnam war veterans by the scale of the atrocities and their prolonged nature have been commonplace in movies with diverse foci (e.g., Apocalypse Now, 1979; Born on the Fourth of July, 1989; Heaven and Earth, 1993; Pulp Fiction, 1994; Forrest Gump, 1994, etc.)

As the first major movie with reference to the recent Gulf War, and excellent representative of the light-hearted yet cynically pragmatic thinking in the ’90s including the catalytic action of the media, Three Kings (1999) delivers an outstanding (and shocking) elegy on modern war. The Clooney-Wahlberg combo (also powerful in A Perfect Storm, 2000) and brilliant cinematography by Sigel make this movie a likely future classic.

**Movie Selections**

- **Victory** (1981) Votes _____; Show _____
- **Full Metal Jacket** (1987) Votes _____; Show _____
- **Good morning, Vietnam** (1987) Votes _____; Show _____
- **Schindler’s List** (1993) Votes _____; Show _____
• The English Patient (1996) Votes _____; Show _____
• La Vita è Bella (1997) Votes _____; Show _____
• Saving Private Ryan (1998) Votes _____; Show _____
• The Thin Red Line (1998) Votes _____; Show _____
• Three Kings (1999) Votes _____; Show _____

Week 5: Cult movies

Cult movies raise to their reputation by the response of audiences. Through a magical confluence of topical subject selection and brilliance on the part of the director and actors, a few movies came to represent their times best than any other.

Kubrick’s genius captured the ’70s concern about society crushing individuals (even the aberrant ones) in the Clockwork Orange (1971). Cold-blooded and emotionless as usual, he delivers a breath-taking escalation from disturbing to outright inhuman following a rather typical character from bum life to correction to behavioral castration. This is more than the age-old question of individual freedom colliding with societal order; it’s about the two of them directing assaulting each other and crushing down in flames.

“We’ll never get caught. We’re on a mission from God.” Jake and Elwood rocked the ’80s with their cool car, cool sunglasses, and cool blues. Pursued by neo-Nazis, a murderous ex-girlfriend, Cook County police, and the deadline to save their orphanage from a greedy state tax, The Blues Brothers (1980) maintain their equanimity through the nuances of life. Dan Akroyd, John Belushi, and director John Landis wrote movie history scripted with the best authoritative blues music that ever appeared on cinema. Oh, and stay away from the disgraced sequel Blues Brothers 2000 (1998).

Violence: random, mindless, unavoidable, or deliberate? Pulp Fiction (1994) follows parallel stories evolving in the vast Los Angeles neighborhoods in a cleverly convoluted time sequence and with gravity centered around the low value of human life. That’s not what the movie is about, however. Director Quentin Tarantino captured precisely the light-hearted ’90s where sudden mood changes (or road bumps) can have disproportionate consequences. This movie marked John Travolta’s rebirth as actor (Bruce Willis had to wait until The Sixth Sense, 1999, to undergo this transformation) and Tarantino’s
single brilliant accomplishment as director (his previous ultra-violent Reservoir Dogs, 1992, was definitely inferior and after Pulp Fiction it went steeply downhill). It also probably qualifies as the movie with the most ingenious concepts, including problem-solving Mr. Wolf, Marcellus Wallace and his mysterious briefcase and band-aid at the back of the neck, the Gimp, the restaurant robbery, the gold watch surviving several generations through increasing personal pain of its owners, the adrenaline shot, and so many others.

**Movie Selections**

- **Clockwork Orange** (1971) Votes ____ ; Show ____
- **The Blues Brothers** (1980) Votes ____ ; Show ____
- **Pulp Fiction** (1994) Votes ____ ; Show ____

**Week 6: The chameleon art of Stanley Kubrick**

Stanley Kubrick (1928-1999) was a cinematographer and director with his very own unique style. His movies revolve around the same theme – the aberrant behavior of people who find themselves in conflict between their individual desires and the societal pretext of civilized normalcy. Yet in a small number of films (he directed 16 movies between 1950 and 1998) he has spanned pretty much all genres, including ancient/epic, drama, political satire, science fiction, psychological thriller, horror, and war. His characters are perturbing not because of their actions (often shocking to the point of revulsion), but because they are invariably “normal” people spiralling into the abyss despite their best intentions. Murderous mania, sexual perversion, apathy in the face of one’s own family suffering; Kubrick makes the viewer wonder how dangerously close he or she would be to committing these monstrosities without even knowing it or having a conscious choice, if the circumstances of the movie were to arise in real life. He dissects situations not morally, but with surgical apathy. Especially in his later movies, there is little or no detectable emotion behind and in front of the camera. Depriving his characters even of the excuse of ignorance or stupidity, he drives them

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2 Mr. Wolf’s character is remarkably reminiscent of Victor “the Cleaner” played so charmingly by Jean Reno in Besson’s Nikita (1990). And, since Besson came up, you may want for fun to try to locate and count references to Pulp Fiction from The Fifth Element (1997). I once counted more than 7!
to the crisis with deadly precision. Unlike Greek tragedy, however, he often rejects the concept of catharsis. Among modern directors, Kubrick conveys most vividly the feeling of the inevitable resulting from one's own intellect and societal surroundings, with very little metaphysics involved.

Movie Selections

- **Spartacus** (1960) Votes _____; Show _____
- **Lolita** (1962) Votes _____; Show _____
- **Dr. Strangelove** (1964) Votes _____; Show _____
- **Barry Lindon** (1975) Votes _____; Show _____
- **The Shining** (1980) Votes _____; Show _____
- **Eyes Wide Shut** (1999) Votes _____; Show _____

Week 7: Futurama

Predicting the future is a notoriously risky business. Yet artists’ projections of the world ahead reflect accurately the anxieties of their age. Often assuming new ultra-powerful technologies, futuristic movies put in perspective the unavoidable time lag between evolving societies and the means afforded to their members. The danger lies not in technology itself, but the fear of the general public towards the unknown consequences of progress combined with the engineers’ arrogant rejection of the possibility that their benign inventions can turn malevolent.

The future in movies is usually grim (otherwise, why should we worry?). For example, the agony of the ’80s about failing to cope with inner city problems is vividly stamped in Carpenter’s *Escape from New York* (1981). It portrays a nightmarish Manhattan Island turned into a giant high-security prison and the President getting trapped in it during nuclear cease-fire talks with the Soviets. With Carpenter’s chilling escalation of horror\(^3\) and good performances by Kurt Russel (new convict who is unleashed into the prison to

find the President in return for his freedom), Lee van Cliff (prison warden) and Donald Pleasence (the President) classify this movie among the best precursors to the modern futuristic *film noire*. Incidentally, the story in *Escape from New York* is set to occur in 1998.

Orders of magnitude more worrisome than a prison the size of Manhattan is the prospect of tech-aided bureaucracies turning monstrous like the totalitarian Stalinistic regime of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (appropriately released in 1984, based on the novel by George Orwell; the first movie version of the same novel was filmed in 1956). Orwell (born Eric Blair, 1903-1950) warned readers back in the ’40s about his frightening vision of the ’80s, projected from his observations of Soviet behavior before and shortly after World War II. Incidentally, he had fought in the Spanish civil war before expressing his revulsion against totalitarianism with “1984,” “Animal Farm,” and other books. Terry Gilliam’s brilliant rejoinder *Brazil* (1985) is even darker and, in some sense, more desperate than 1984. Both movies send chilling warnings about the decreasing value of the individual in an increasingly densely interconnected and monitored environment, where authority can make the flow of information one-directional and control the past.

Similar failings plague the citizens of *Gattaca* (1997) except their world is cleaner, leaner, gentler in appearance, and the ruling class is supported by a disturbing use of genetic technology.

A related common theme is superior machines turning against their makers in a more or less politically-neutral setting. Kubrick’s masterpiece *2001: Space Odyssey* (1968), based on a novel by Arthur Clark, demonstrates the difficulty of intellectual struggle against an emotionless opponent. The loneliness of space, the explicit meta-reference to Ulesee’s trip, some metaphysical reflections on humans’ ascent to intelligence and of course Kubrick’s genius undoubtedly add to the magic of this classic movie.

More appealing to Hollywood producers and, perhaps, more digestible to the general public are the action-packed (and even more apolitical) fu-

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1. “He who controls the future controls the present. He who controls the present controls the past” is one of Big Brother’s recurring mottos in 1984. In *Brazil*, the past and even human existence itself are irrelevant unless firmly established by paper trails.

5 One of the most defining moments of the human-computer battle in *Space Odyssey* occurs during a chess game; 19 years later, World Chess Champion Garry K. Kasparov lost to real-world computer “Deep Blue” made by IBM, and cited the computer’s relentlessness against his own failing nerves as one of the reasons. (He also accused IBM of cheating, but there has been no evidence of that other than his frustration for his loss.)
turistic flicks best represented by epic Schwartzenegger home-runs such as man vs. machine in *Terminator* (1984) and *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991), and Mars colonization in *Total Recall* (1990). *The Matrix* (1999) was remarkable not only because of the wildly original mode of machine domination, the apocalyptically shabby real world and the obvious biblical theme, but also because of the brilliant match between Neo’s personality and Keanu Reeves’ acting skills. Arguably the best Sci-Fi movie of the ’90s, *The Matrix* represents our era’s unusual reliance on geek revolution to defy the establishment.\(^6\) Lighter, rudely colorful, and also including a definite divine presence, *The Fifth Element* (1997) blends New York, the President, the military, reality shows, space travel, exorcism and the peculiar talents of super-hero Bruce Willis, evil Garry Oldman, clown Chris Tucker and priest Ian Holmes in an addictive live cartoon staged by acclaimed director Luc Besson (of *Nikita* and *Léon* fame). Too bad the script has gaping inconsistencies and the Deity (Milla Jovovich) did not manage to deliver any decent acting (they say it got worse in *Messenger*, 1999).

Future can be more interesting if technology has gone backwards instead as result of natural or human-inflicted disasters. In the stellar *Mad Max* (1979) and the equally excellent sequels *The Road Warrior* (1981) and *Beyond Thunderdome* (1985) Mel Gibson delivers rather good acting and plenty of bitterness-turned-heroism in a progressively deteriorating habitat. After watching each movie, one cannot help wondering how we would all survive should technology cease to tick.\(^7\) Nightmare scenarios of machines taking over seem less frightening then, actually!

**Movie Selections**

- **2001: Space Odyssey** (1968) Votes _____; Show _____
- **Mad Max** (1979) Votes _____; Show _____
- **Escape from New York** (1981) Votes _____; Show _____
- **Nineteen Eighty-Four** (1984) Votes _____; Show _____
- **Brazil** (1985) Votes _____; Show _____

\(^6\)The Linux and Napster examples reflect two sides of this coin.

\(^7\)Kevin Kostner’s two attempts to tackle this same theme resulted in spectacular flops, *Waterworld* (1995) and *The Postman* (1997).
- **Gattaca** (1997) Votes _____; Show _____
- **The Fifth Element** (1997) Votes _____; Show _____
- **The Matrix** (1999) Votes _____; Show _____

**Week 8: Exam rush!**

School life has been depicted in many movies with different flavors. For example, the “geek” theme is abundant in cute, smart comedies such as *American Pie* (1999; geek high-school students) and *The Mirror Has Two Faces* (1996; geek college professors), dramas such as *Good Will Hunting* (1997; everyone but the main character is a geek, including the psychoanalyst) as well as monstrosities like *Revenge of the Nerds* (1984). The best among these movies explore the strong bonds formed between peers and across the lecture bench in the competitive academic setting (where the competition is not necessarily in classwork, but may also be in forming relationships, attracting teachers’ attention, securing a better future, etc.) and evoke our own memories which, invariably, put us in direct association with at least one of the stereotypical characters. However, one school movie stands out among the rest.

*The Paper Chase* (1973), set among first-year students in the Harvard Law School, delves dextrously into the tricky competition between academic performance, friendship, mentorship, and love. The movie poses but (wisely) does not answer the following question: how does one cope with the intellectual equivalent of Marine Seal training that top-tier schools offer to their students? Some students are prepared for it or have pretty good reasons to force themselves through it; others may not know the reason but simply have enough stamina to still survive it; some just collapse under the pressure and wish they had chosen the “normal” life of the average-educated person. For example, is a demanding professor just a cruel, sadistic torturer? Has he become one after many years of ascetic devotion to study and desensitization to students’ individual personalities? Is he doing it consciously to give to the students the killer instincts and thick skin needed by leaders in a world that is actually much more cruel than academia? And, above all, how is the student to know and subsequently formulate an appropriate return attitude?

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8 Alternative, much more shocking and partisan resolutions to the complex relationship between high-end trainers and trainees in actual military settings were delivered in Kubrick’s powerful *Full Metal Jacket* (1987) and Ridley Scott’s *G. I. Jane* (1997). In *The
Delivered with stellar performances from a relatively lesser-known cast, with cleverly alternating witty classroom exchanges, comical and dramatic situations, and with beautiful shots from Harvard square and the Charles River bank, *The Paper Chase* is a must-see for anyone awed by the mythical aura of higher education and especially for those participating in it.

**Movie Selections**

- *The Paper Chase* (1973) Votes \[\_\_\_] Show \[\_\_\_\_\]

**Movie quotes**

Hercules Poirot (private detective): Only by interrogating the other passengers could I hope to see the light, but when I began to question them, the light, as Macbeth would have said, thickened. (from *Murder on the Orient Express*, 1974, based on a novel by Agatha Christie.)

Sergeant Hartman: How tall are you, private?
Cowboy (private): Sir, five-foot-nine, sir!
Sergeant Hartman: Five-foot-nine, I didn’t know they stacked shit that high. (from *Full Metal Jacket*, 1987.)

Butsch (boxer): What about you and me?
Marcellus Wallace (crime lord): What about me and you? ... There is no me and you, not no more. Two things. One, don’t tell nobody about this. Two, you leave town tonight. And when you’re gone, you stay gone ... or be gone. You lost your L.A. privileges. Deal? (from *Pulp Fiction*, 1994.)
Elwood Blues: It’s 106 miles to Chicago, we’ve got a tank full of gas, half a pack of cigarettes, it’s dark and we’re wearing sunglasses.

Jake Blues: Hit it! (from *The Blues Brothers*, 1980.)

Leeloo (deity): Everything you create, you use to destroy.

Korben Dallas (super-hero): Yeah, we call it human nature. (from *The Fifth Element*, 1997.)

The Duke (lord of Manhattan): They sent in their best man, and when we roam out the 69th street bridge tomorrow, on our way to freedom, we’re going to have their best man leading the way - from the neck up! (from *Escape from New York*, 1981.)

Neo (computer programmer and savior of the human race): Free my mind ... Free my mind ... Okee-dokee. (from *The Matrix*, 1999.)

Hart (law student): You... are a son of a bitch, Kingsfield!

Kingsfield (law professor): Mr. Hart! That is the most intelligent thing you’ve said all day. You may take your seat. (from *The Paper Chase*, 1973.)