
Subject: How I Rate Films

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In response to this letter:

> Mark,

>

> I have just finished reading your review of "Terminator." I am somewhat
> confused by your rating system (especially when I make a comparison to how
> you've rated things in the past).

>

> I can recall reading a review where the movie sounded quite interesting and
> well worth viewing, and where the movie received a +1. Now I read this review,
> which makes the movie sound like a real dog and see that it gets a 0 (I would
> have expected a -2).

>

> It might be instructive to put some attributes around your rating system (you
> probably did this once and I missed it) and list some sample movies that fit
> each of the categories.

>

Good idea. Let me explain what the system is and why it may look like ratings contradict what is said in the review. There are nine possible ratings for a film in what I call the "CFQ" rating system. The system rates films from a -4 to a +4 in whole numbers. A neutral film is a zero. This rating system was used at one time (and unfortunately abandoned later) by CINEFANTASTIQUE magazine. It has the virtue that positive numbers mean I (or whoever uses it) feel positively toward the film, negative means I feel negatively. The one to four rating system has seven possible ratings, so this one is a little more articulate. It is conceivable that a film could come along that is much better than any +4 film I have ever seen. I am not sure what to do in this case, but luckily that has never happened.

A -4 film is one that show a high degree of either incompetence or cynicism toward the viewer. It has no value in the manner in which it was intended. It may have some value as a laughing stock, but I always feel self-conscious laughing at a film because of its incompetence. A -2 is really pretty bad, but

still watchable for more than humor value. A 0 film is ok but nothing very special. A +2 is well worth seeing. A +4 make a movie one of the reasons I like fantasy films. It is a memorable and enjoyable experience.

The following are examples of fantasy films I give each rating:

- +4 FIVE MILLION YEARS TO EARTH
- +3 WAR OF THE WORLDS
- +2 KRULL
- +1 LAST STARFIGHTER
- 0 GREMLINS
- 1 WARGAMES
- 2 SPACEHUNTER
- 3 GIANT CLAW
- 4 CREEPING TERROR

This is not too helpful, of course, because they are very subjective ratings. But it will give you an idea of some benchmarks. The following are my +4 fantasy films:

-- KING KONG - A blockbuster and a groundbreaker of a film. Miles ahead of what came before.

-- FORBIDDEN PLANET - Something for the eye, something for the mind.

-- PHASE IV - A war between two truly alien intelligences. The most interesting part is how each uses its own physical differences against the other. Tremendous insect photography.

-- FIVE MILLION YEARS TO EARTH (QUATERMASS AND THE PIT) - Better sf than any but a handful of written pieces of sf. It has some amazing and sweeping ideas.

-- STAR WARS - A blockbuster and a groundbreaker of a film. Miles ahead of what came before.

-- DRAGONSLAYER - The highest level of traditional-style fantasy I have seen in a film; an interesting script and impressive visuals. Extra bonus: it has the only dragon I have ever seen that really looks like it could fly.

But now, why does one film seem like a complete dog and get a zero rating and another film sound really good and get only a +1? I will usually try to say something about a film that I feel should be said. If I were to review RETURN OF THE JEDI today, what I would probably say would involve how cloyingly sweet the ending was and how irritating the introduction of Ewoks was. How it degrades the series. So saying all that about it I must really hate the film,

right? Wrong! I would give it a +3. If I like it that much, why say such negative things about it? Well, what should I say? That it has great special effects and exciting sequences. Did you have any doubt it would? I say about a film what I noticed that someone else might not or might not have thought about. Sometimes what I say might leave a different impression than my overall impression of the film. The rating is unambiguous. In the case of TERMINATOR, there is a lot that is really pretty bad. Still there are some ideas, not all good, but not all bad. Also there is an interesting sequence near the end that I did not want to describe for fear of giving away plot. When the tone of a review and the rating disagree, believe the rating. It is often there because for some reason I did not make the tone of the review exactly fit my feelings toward the film. There is a lot that should have been tightened up in TERMINATOR's script. But overall it came up to being just ok.

(Evelyn C. Leeper for)
Mark R. Leeper
...ihnp4!!znv!mrl