

**Y**ou set out on a journey to the finish line. Along the way there may be obstacles — possibly many — you may even find that point where you want to quit. Yet, somehow, you must push on and may even be changed by the experience.

That description sounds like so many bike races or just about every movie that makes a lasting impression. The bicycle has been a part of its share of memorable films for this very reason. *The Bicycle Thief*, regarded by many as one of the greatest films of all time, reveals poverty and hope through the spokes of two wheels. Best Picture nominee *Breaking Away* also reveals the plight of the have-nots but shows that even those on the outs can find their way if only they have the will to win. And then there's that unforgettable image — arguably Hollywood's all-time favorite poster — the silhouette of a young boy flying beside the moon, his Reese's pieces-loving best friend, an alien, looking out from a basket. Yes, the bicycle has taken us many places on the screen, and we will take a look at the best.

### The Bicycle Thief

It took years for America to truly appreciate this Italian gem, but it didn't take long for the rest of the world, as *The Bicycle Thief* took home the British Academy of Film and Television Arts award for Best Film over American classics such as the Bogart film classic *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* as well as *The Third Man*. What Europe — and later practically every lauded film school saw — was a universal story of a man who loses his family's hope. A bike might only mean exercise or adventure to you and me, but for one loving father, it was his only way to work. His desire to retrieve the bike proves a challenge and a heartbreak in the end to himself and his son. Molly Haskell, a former critic for the *Village Voice*, said the film had the most heralded of all the neorealist themes. "It's a classic, but I'm not sure it was fully considered that at the time in the United States," she said. "It's part of the post-war movement, a grittier kind of filmmaking which

was nothing short of a revelation. The emotions of it are in the subtext. I think the neorealist films have been absorbed by the more realistic — what was once startling is no longer. But there's a reason why this film has endured after all these years."

"Put it down! What's the matter, you're afraid?" the main character Antonio is asked as he holds onto his bike while waiting to find out about the employment that requires it. This innocent clutching seems silly until the bike is stolen from him while he is performing his thankless job of putting up posters. The frustration the audience feels — because we know how much he depends on those two wheels — is gut-wrenching. The word "*ladro!*" comes from his horrified lips. Without speaking Italian, you instantly know it means "thief." He and his boy then go off in search of who stole it and find little solace, even when they finally locate the criminal after endless searching. With the bicycle gone and the accused feigning innocence, and even illness, Antonio realizes he can't win against a world that clearly is not on his side.

Maybe the worst part is when an honest man turns into what he hated most — a thief. Seeing endless bicycles, Antonio finally can't overcome temptation, sizing up stealing as the only way to save his family. When he's caught soon after the theft, only the sad eyes of his boy stop the victim from pressing charges. It shows us what bad luck and desperation can do to the kindest of souls, and we're left to wonder what will happen to this unfortunate family. It's a question that will never be answered. The father and his tearful boy walk among the masses, and the last shot we see is the crowd as seen from behind. Our characters are faceless among them — as poverty often leaves so many.

Justin Chang, a film critic for *Variety*, saw the 1948 release as a standout. He called it "one of the key works of Italian neorealism, a movement whose aesthetic has so seeped into our movies and television shows over the past 60-odd years that it's easy to overlook how influential it's been, and how radical its practitioners must have seemed at the time. It's worth noting that this is a story powered

not by a bicycle, but by the absence of one — and so one man's material loss becomes a spiritual crisis, as well as a timeless indictment of a society — any society — that spurns its own."

Still, Chang considered the movie more than a film just about poverty. It also contained captivating performances. "As resonant as De Sica's film remains, it never devolves into a mere tract or catalog of social ills," he assessed. "It's also one of the great films about fatherhood, and the indelibly moving performances by non-professional actors Lamberto Maggiorani and Enzo Staiola make *The Bicycle Thief* the rare film that not only stokes your pity but earns your compassion."

### Breaking Away

Few Best Picture nominees could be considered sleepers more than *Breaking Away*. At the time, little-known actors Dennis Quaid and Daniel Stern, who would both go on to become stars, were lucky to be cast in anything. When this film hit theaters, it was audiences that considered themselves fortunate. Quaid is a former high-school quarterback and a now-bored local. Stern is a wise-cracking fellow without a future. Their foursome is completed by small-but-tough Jackie Earle Haley and finally the most unlikely of heroes — Dave Stoller, played by Dennis Christopher in his most famous role. Stoller decides to dedicate his life to a solitary pursuit — cycling. Say what you will about Lance Armstrong, but did he ever start using an Italian accent and rename his cat Fellini just because he idolized Italian racers? Dave's father disapproves, his mother accepts, and his friends can't say they have better plans.

Throughout the film, the pain of a social divide is clear. Stoller falls for a local college student but pretends to be Italian rather than admit he's a cutter, a term for residents who cut stone for a living, or at least whose parents did. A fight breaks out between the cutters and the students, and the solution leads to the film's final exhilarating act. Indiana University opens their Little 500 bicycle race to these local boys as a way to keep the peace, and the foursome see it as their chance to show the

**ERIC BUTTERMAN'S**

# Bikes on the Big Screen

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school's student body that they're just as capable. The results give us moments that capture the plight and wonder of young adults trying to figure out who they are. In fact, the story partly originated from screenwriter Steve Tesich's experience of riding in the very same race as a student at Indiana University. Tesich took home the Best Original Screenplay Oscar for his work, and we'll take in another of Tesich's scripts later. That film featured another little-known actor at the time, but you likely know him very well today.

*Chicago Sun-Times* film critic Roger Ebert, winner of a Pulitzer Prize, thought so much of *Breaking Away* that it was second on his list of the best movies of 1979, trailing only Francis Ford Coppola's classic *Apocalypse Now*, but not everyone agreed. Bob Strauss, a film critic for the *Los Angeles Daily News* for 20 years, recommended it but wouldn't quite call it a great work of cinema. "This was, along with many movies of the time, inspired by American Graffiti," Strauss said. "It was about beating the system. Like so many sports movies I've seen, you'll find the ending to be predictable. But I'll take it any day over a film like *Field of Dreams*. That film taught you nothing about the small Midwestern reality while *Breaking Away* clearly does. Put in the context of the locals — called townies — versus the university students, it gives you an understanding of that divide between those who move on to college and those who maybe can't. The bicycle scenes were shot very well and give you a feeling of the excitement of the sport."

This is never more certain than when Dave tries to beat his best time by racing a trailer truck on the highway. Classical music plays and he spurs himself on — to the point where he earns the truck driver's awe as he manages to pass him. Haskell believes the fresh faces of the cast allowed the story to take over, saying that plot is often relegated to a distant second behind star power. "You can't beat having a movie with talent that hasn't yet given in to the realities of fame," she said. "They were all committed to the film — and it showed."

### E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial

When someone makes amazing time on a bike, it's not unusual to say that the rider is "flying." Well, Steven Spielberg had his own ideas on the subject, creating a movie moment that may rank in the top 10 of all time. In other words, if this scene doesn't make your heart soar, you may need to

check your body for robot parts.

It's the story of a little boy who meets a lost alien, and they form a bond that is the stuff of movie legend. But when they ride away on a bike together surrounded by other child riders who wish to help, what happens next prompts an automatic lump in the throat. As a magical score by John Williams plays, as the wheels of Elliot's bike lift from the ground, we have no idea how the moment will affect us. A boy, his friend, and a bike hundreds of feet in the air, with the moon as a backdrop — the scene reminds us why we go to the movies. It also brings back the dream of every child who wishes their bike could leave the earth for more than just the few moments they experience jumping off a small hill. Said Strauss of the 1982 film: "That scene encapsulates everything there is to say about that movie. A child's sense of wonder but within grasp. What is more common to a kid than their bicycle? It's their only real mode of transportation for years and years. When it flies in front of the moon, it says that this is a fantastic experience within reach. It's Steven Spielberg's view in that moment, maybe which sums up his moviemaking philosophy the most. Everything his movies seem to say about childhood and everyday aspirations for your life are here, to want something impossible and to reach out for it with the tools you have in hand."

Roger Ebert, who included the film in his book of great movies, wrote his assessment in a letter to the children with whom he had watched it. Of the bicycle scene, he recalled: "We loved the scene where the bicycles fly. We suspected it was coming, because E.T. had taken Elliott on a private bike flight earlier, so we knew he could do it. I was thinking that the chase scene before the bikes fly was a little too long, as if Steven Spielberg was trying to build up too much unnecessary suspense. But when those bikes took off, what a terrific moment! I remember when I saw the movie at Cannes; even the audience there, people who had seen thousands of movies, let out a whoop at that moment."

### American Flyers

Steve Tesich's second cycling screenplay to hit the screen, introduced moviegoers to a little-known actor named Kevin Costner. We learn that he had been very close to reaching the Olympics as a cyclist but never quite had what it took. His younger brother is sick, possibly dying, with cycling his only refuge. Costner, estranged from his

sibling, decides to take him on one final race, one they'll do together. But before that, he has to get him to leave St. Louis. Walking into his room, Costner brings up sports as many men choose to do to avoid communicating with each other. Seeing a bicycle hanging from the ceiling, he studies it and says, "Your rear wheel's not true." The response, with a grin, "Well, it's better than the front one." That little opening, that common interest, is the way in, and it's the key to their relationship throughout the film. They love cycling and in the end realize that they love each other.

Admittedly, the 1985 film (directed by John Badham, who also helmed the 70's-defining *Saturday Night Fever*) is filled with flaws: slow moments, an illness which sometimes seems to be glossed over, and a mostly one-dimensional rival of the type that seemed to pervade so many films of the 1980s. There's also a twist that few could expect — some will admire it, others won't find it believable. What is believable is the thoughtful training of the riders and the camaraderie that occasionally gives way to competitive anger. Clearly serious cyclists are their own breed of people in this movie, and either you get why they ride or you don't. These are people who hold the race above all else. They feel that they must always push themselves to be that much faster, and they literally wake up every morning with bike on the brain. For those addicted to the sport, the movie connects with a bull's-eye.

The race is set against the backdrop of the West, and two wheels framed by beautiful sun and canyon country will inspire many to strap on their helmet and go. At the minimum, you'll find the choreography of the racing exhilarating, not surprising when you consider that *Saturday Night Fever's* intense dance sequences made John Travolta an instant international star. *Leonard Maltin's Movie Guide* gives *American Flyers* three stars out of four, commenting that it's a "likeable, sweet-natured, root-for-the-good-guys film, if a bit too pat and manipulative at times."

### Jour de Fête (The Big Day)

Jacques Tati is considered one of the greatest French filmmakers, and this is the movie that paved the way. Tati plays the lead character, a postman named Francois, whose fervent goal is to get the mail out as fast as possible and who lets nothing stand in his way. The 1949 film uses slapstick comedy to show us bicycling in the most

creative and cinematic way. According to Strauss, "It really is a continuation of the physical comedy of the 1920s from the Chaplins and the Buster Keatons. Back then, it was all sight gags within whatever

camera movement they could pull off. Tati was the next generation of that, and this was his first great movie." Among the highlights are when Francois realizes that his

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unattended parked bike has been sent into motion by a car and its unwitting driver. Running after it, he thinks of ways to head it off at the pass as if it were a person he was trying to outsmart. The bicycle is such a part of him that it almost seems as if he's running after a lost love. The bike goes by a woman on the road who does a double take. It reaches a policeman guiding traffic, who only realizes the bike is riding itself once it passes. It seems to almost know where it's going, although Francois certainly doesn't. But even when he has the bike in his possession, problems arise. Francois stops the bike to jump over a railroad crossing, only to see it get hooked on the railroad arm and fly high into the air.

The film presents Francois as a single-minded rider, maybe to the point that it reminds us that there is more to life than riding. But he definitely makes it fun — and, just as important, funny. "Bikes were designed for transportation," Strauss said. "But here it [the bike] is made into a comedic partner, setting up jokes and delivering a lot of laughs. Tati makes the bicycle as amusing as a pie in the face, and the result is great cinema."

**Other Memorable Bike Moments**

*Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* —

In one of the most memorable scenes in this classic 1969 western, Paul Newman comes by and takes Katharine Ross for a ride on his 19th-century bicycle while "Raindrops Keep Falling On My Head" plays on the soundtrack. Strauss believes it's either an attempt to show how humans and technology are colliding, going from the horse to the bicycle, or just one of those clichéd romantic comedy montages with little reason to it. With the song going to number one for B.J. Thomas, maybe it was simply an attempt to sell albums — a successful one.

*The Wizard of Oz* — What scared you more, the tornado lifting the house or seeing the the Wicked Witch of the West, played by Margaret Sullivan, flying on a bicycle in 1939's all time classic *The Wizard Of Oz*? Although we don't think she went on to the Tour de France, there's no question even Greg LeMond and Lance would have been petrified. **AC**

*Eric Butterman is a Texas-based writer who has contributed to many publications, including Men's Fitness and Glamour. Reach him at ericbutterman@yahoo.com.*

**Italy** Follow the Ancient Roman Road to Brindisi. 41-year-old male riding from Rome to Brindisi in May, 2010, following the route of the ancient Roman road, the via Appia, most of the way (with a few scenic detours). I'll take it slow and easy, averaging about 50 miles per day with lots of time for sightseeing with one to two hard days going over the Apennine mountains. Email jacob@bicyclefreedom.com or visit my blog (www.bicyclefreedom.com) if you want to join me for all or part of the trip.

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Open Road Gallery

**ROLL'EM**

by Sarah Raz Photograph by Greg Siple



MOST OF US DON'T EVEN REMEMBER IT THAT CLEARLY — the sound of 50 feet of film running through an 8mm camera, spooling through the machine's innards until the reel reaches its finish and announces the conclusion with a final assertive click. We've become dependent on digital cameras, with their endless editorial capabilities and memory hours. Chester Bennett, however, knows well the whirr of a 1970's Super 8mm camera. During the summer of 2008, he and Stella, his beloved found-at-a-garage-sale-bicycle, rode from Seattle, Washington to Garrett, Indiana, journaling and filming. "I'm a sucker for nostalgic pieces of history," Chester said with a laugh when he stopped into the Adventure Cycling office.

Like a cycling tour, a reel of film has a beginning, middle, and end. Even when you're not necessarily keeping track, the panes keep slipping through, recording, in Chester's case, flat tires, ditches slept in, items sent home, 100-mile-days, lonely highways, and elevation gained and lost. When people ask if he was lonely or afraid, Chester explains that he was too tired to be scared and too free to be alone.

"This kind of journey unravels you," says Chester, who had never been on an overnight bicycle tour before spending 33 days on the road with Stella, riding mostly to ride, not just to arrive. "I felt like a pioneer navigating the two-laned blue highways like rivers ... it seems like I see things differently now."

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