

Movies With Lessons You're Probably Better Off Not Learning

Some of the best movies in cinema history have great lessons. *Groundhog Day* teaches us that self-betterment is its own reward. *Rocky* demonstrates how you can win without winning. *Toy Story* shows us how to accept change and illustrates the value of friendship. Great lessons in great movies. But there are plenty of movies out there – some that are even great – with lessons that are a bit... dubious, to say the least.

Below are 10 of those movies:

On the Waterfront (1954)

Snitches don't get stitches.

"I could've been a contender!" What a performance! What a film! This is the movie that changed how actors act. Marlon Brando is an absolute force of nature; his naturalistic performance is one of the first and best examples of method acting. Remember the way he plays with Eva Marie Saint's white glove as they walk through the playground? Or how he looks after his pigeons on the rooftop? Or how he accidentally sets up a friend to be murdered and then, after lots of moral wrangling, testifies against the mob-controlled union that's terrifying his fellow dockworkers?

I know, I know – testifying against violent criminals shouldn't be viewed as a bad thing. It's the morally right thing to do, especially in the context of the film (ratting out the mob for killing someone). But here's the thing. The film's director, the legendary Elia Kazan, had just finished testifying against his friends to the House of Un-American Activities Committee, causing them to be blacklisted from Hollywood due to past affiliations with the communist party.

Basically, Kazan made *On the Waterfront* as a parable to justify his snitching by comparing his betrayal of his peers to testifying against actual violent mob members. It's a little disingenuous – and with that context in mind... the lesson isn't as morally righteous as it might first appear to be. Still a banger of a movie though.

Breakfast At Tiffany's (1961)

Any problems a woman has can be solved by a good man.

A classic movie based on a classic novella by Truman Capote. What's not to like? To be honest, I don't like much of it, actually. Sure, Audrey Hepburn is her usual charming self as the quirky hot mess of a woman, Holly Golightly. Golightly – get it? She's a free-spirited young woman who loves to throw a good party. You could argue that she's the OG manix pixie dream girl.

However, this free spirit also happens to be a prostitute (not directly stated, but strongly hinted at). Based on what the film is basically saying, her "freedom" is coming at a great cost, both

emotionally and... well, she's a sex worker. Thank God she finally finds a man who fixes her at the end. Because if you're free-spirited and single, you might as well be a hooker.

Hey, look at that, I managed to talk about how problematic the film is without even mentioning Mickey Rooney's depiction of the Japanese neighbor, Mr. Yunioshi. Let's just say it's in the running for the most cringe-inducing example of yellowface – or any kind of minority depiction by a white person – in all of cinema. Kind of impressive, actually. I almost want to recommend the movie just so you can see how outrageously offensive he manages to be.

Dirty Harry (1971)

Sometimes a healthy dose of fascism is just what the doctor ordered.

There's a dude going around San Francisco murdering people left and right. To put a stop to him, Detective Harry Callahan must break every rule in the book, whether it's performing illegal searches, using excessive force, or coercing a confession using violence – all while complaining about the rules limiting his freedom to do whatever he wants to get his man, AKA, the law.

Listen, *Dirty Harry* isn't exactly breaking ground as a pro-vigilante movie that's basically saying, "hey, sometimes you gotta do what you gotta do to serve justice." Such an ends-justify-the-means mindset is, by nature, kind of fascist. But *Dirty Harry* is probably one of the best examples of showing how, apparently, the rule of law that limits what a cop can or can't do inhibits their ability to deliver justice.

The film kind of rigs this example by making the villain absolutely sadistic, so you can't help but agree with *Dirty Harry*'s actions. You could argue that they could've easily shown ol' Harold Callahan following legal procedure to capture the killer. But let's be honest, the movie wouldn't be nearly as enjoyable or memorable if this was the case.

So yeah. Kind of fascist. And that's not cool. But I can't really argue that the way he gets his man is cathartic. "Do you feel lucky? Well, do you – punk?"

Overboard (1987)

Women are happier when they're homemakers.

One of my absolute favorite childhood movies. It's hilarious! And Kurt Russel and Goldie Hawn not only have incredible comic timing, but absolutely impeccable chemistry – no surprise considering they were a couple at the time of filming and remain a couple decades later.

I still find the movie charming to this day, but it definitely falls into the camp of problematic 80s comedies. It's about a wealthy woman (Hawn) who refuses to pay a blue-collar father (Russel) after he builds a custom shoe closet on her boat. She gets her comeuppance when she falls overboard and suffers amnesia. Kurt convinces her she's his wife, and he takes her home to his sons. Comic mishaps happen. She grows fond of her fake family.

Eventually she finds out what happened and leaves – but decides she was happier as a homemaker than as a wealthy single lady and returns.

As you can imagine, this storyline is just packed with problems. For one, even though the movie sets her up as deserving her punishment, Hawn's character is manipulated into essentially being a captive. And he has sex with her. The movie tries to say she loves him at this point, but she still thinks she's his wife, so... yeah, not great.

But really, the lesson *Overboard* puts forth is that this once-wealthy, independent single woman finds out (after being manipulated by a man and his children) that she's much happier being a wife and mother. It's... also not great. The lesson, I mean. I still like the movie. I know, I know.

***Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986)**

If you have charisma, you can do whatever you want.

Ferris Bueller's Day Off is a stone-cold classic, one of the greatest high school films ever made. But let's be honest, Ferris is a dick. Charismatic, but an absolute dick. He takes advantage of his parents, hacks into his school's computer system, builds his reputation through lies, gets his girlfriend out of class by lying about a death in her family, convinces his best friend to ignore his actual poor health so that he can drive them into the city, and on and on. There's an argument to be made that he might even be a sociopath.

Much has been said about the fact that Ferris, as a main character, is unique in that he has no arc. He's the same at the end of the movie as he is in the beginning. It's the supporting characters, like his best friend and his sister, that undergo change. And that change is to "stop and smell the roses," so to speak. A fine enough lesson in isolation. But the movie also casually suggests that if you're charismatic enough, you can lie your way to success.

This lesson is technically correct, as we see time and time again in real life. So, I dunno, maybe it's a bad lesson for charismatic viewers who now realize they can take advantage of their charisma, but a good lesson for those who aren't, since it will prepare them for a life of "how the hell is that person getting away with that?" moments.

***Forest Gump* (1994)**

If you don't conform to society's standards, you'll die from AIDS.

Yeah, I get it. Everyone loves *Forest Gump*. But there is an annoyingly vocal minority (myself included) that will continue to shout from the rooftops about how overrated the film is, and how the messaging is lame as hell.

You've probably seen *Forest Gump*. It's about a guy who is – in today's parlance – on the spectrum. He runs real fast. But he's a nice guy. And he stumbles his way through various touchstones of American history. He had a friend named Jenny that he grew up with, that he

eventually married and had a child with. However, whereas he does everything that's expected of him (play football, fight in Vietnam, start a business – the American way), she does not.

Jenny escapes an abusive household, joins the counterculture movement, returns to Forest for one night before leaving him, becomes a hippie, then comes back with their son – only to die from AIDS.

That's right. Unlike Forest, she breaks away from what society expects of her in search of some kind of freedom and belonging, and she's punished by being killed off by AIDS. Forest gets a successful business, a son, and a cool story to tell everybody. He did what he was told and was rewarded for it. The lesson? Conformity leads to a better life.

Beauty and the Beast (1991)

Stick it out with your abusive boyfriend, you can fix him.

There isn't a single Disney movie out there without some kind of lesson for its young audience. *Beauty and the Beast* marked a resurgence for Disney in the 90s after a decade of mediocre films. It was a massive success and became the first animated film to be nominated for a Best Picture Oscar – even more impressive considering that there were only five nominees per category at this point in time.

I think everyone is familiar with the movie even if they haven't seen it (or it's been a while). It's based on a story first published way back in the 18th century. A prince who turned into a monster is holding a woman's (Belle's) father prisoner. She offers herself to him in exchange for her father's freedom. He holds her captive. She falls in love with him. Her love breaks his curse, and he turns back into a handsome prince.

The supposed lesson is that true love goes beyond looks, and that it's transformational. Great. But, like, he was holding her against her will. And let's be honest here, he's kind of abusive. It's a one-sided, abusive relationship. It might even be a little Stockholm syndrome-ish. Which means the lesson is kind of... if you're in an abusive relationship with someone, just be patient and nice, and you can change them.

I feel like the lesson should actually be, if you're in an abusive relationship, get the hell out. Not to encourage you to "keep at it, maybe he'll change."

The Matrix (1999)

The universe revolves around you.

"What is the Matrix?" I remember seeing this in the theater as a 13-year-old and having my young, impressionable brain blown to smithereens. It's about a badass hacker, Neo, played by Keanu Reeves, who discovers that the world he lives in is a computer program and that the real world sucks. He learns how to fight and dodge bullets and holy shit, *The Matrix* is awesome.

There's plenty of messages to like here. The system is against you – fight against the system. Pretty true, actually. It's better to learn an uncomfortable truth than to live in ignorance. Sure, yeah, I can get behind that. Always question your reality. Even more profound when you consider that its directors, the Wachowski siblings, came out as trans years later.

But there's one message that kind of bothers me in retrospect. "You're the one." Throughout the film, Neo is told that he's the one. It drives every action he takes. "I am? Okay, I guess I'll do this, and this, and this." It's his destiny.

Throughout the trilogy, we learn that it turns out he isn't the one. Then he is. Then he's not the only one. But then he is again. Anyway, it kind of reflects what we as Americans are told as children. We are special. We can do whatever we put our minds to. Follow our dreams. It's a real example of American exceptionalism. We are the one. But usually, we're not.

Maybe the lesson should be, "you're probably not the one, but that's okay." Maybe I'm just a frustrated millennial who wouldn't mind that office job Keanu had at the beginning of the movie instead of scraping together money writing listicles. I dunno.

The Notebook (2004)

Just stalk her until she falls in love with you.

Ah, The Notebook. The most romantic movie ever made. At least in the 21st century. Gosling... so dreamy. The lengths he goes to... I mean, how lucky is Rachel McAdams? Wouldn't every woman be so lucky to have a man so in love with you, so persistent? The way he shows his love for her by... stalking her throughout the movie, ignoring her rejection of him and her constant "no thank yous" – even when she's dating someone else?

He even threatens to jump off a ferris wheel if she doesn't talk to him. Nothing like adding a bit of manipulation to help round out that stalking strategy. There's a very fine line between persistence and stalking. Gosling's character goes well beyond persistent. But he gets the girl in the end. So the message here is stalking pays off. But she loves him and gets Alzheimer's in the end and then dies, so I guess everything turns out okay after all.

Babylon (2022)

Hollywood corrupts, but it's totally worth it.

That Damien Chazelle – good director, that guy. *Whiplash*, *La La Land*, *First Man* – all great. But it makes you wonder, did Chazelle have to sacrifice his first-born or something to become a filmmaker? Every one of his films seems to be about the need for significant sacrifice to follow one's dreams. *Babylon* is no different. But it feels different.

With *Whiplash*, the protagonist was forced to experience abuse and to sacrifice his relationships to be the best drummer he could be. In *La La Land*, both characters give up their relationship to

one another to follow their respective dreams. In *First Man*, Armstrong essentially sacrifices his family for the pursuit of the moon. But these films also carry a note of "is this worth it?" that makes the characters' sacrifice a little more ambiguous. *Babylon* feels less so.

Babylon depicts the rise and fall of several characters during the early days of Hollywood. It shows Hollywood's excess (over three hours of it), leading to a downward spiral that kind of mimics what *Boogie Nights* did decades earlier. The difference is that the movie flashes forward to the present, when one of the characters visits a movie theater and sits in awe of what he's watching. The movie then ends with a montage of film history, peaking with a clip of *Avatar*, because *Avatar* is the pinnacle of filmmaking (obviously).

Basically, a lot of people's lives were ruined by Hollywood excess, but man, it was totally worth it because... movies. The ambiguity of personal sacrifice is gone. Instead, it feels like the characters were sacrificed for Hollywood's benefit, and for the better of all. Sort of like, yeah, thousands of slaves died building the pyramids, but now look – pyramids!

Many movies have lessons that probably aren't great upon reflection. These are ten that stand out for me. That doesn't mean these movies are all bad. Some of them are quite good. Some I personally love. Just ignore some of the inherent lessons, and you'll be good. Except for *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. You can skip that one.