



Harlan Ellison's Watching

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Harlan Ellison's Watching Harlan Ellison

Ostensibly, this is a collection of Harlan Ellison's twenty-five years of essays and film criticism for various publications. What it is in reality is pure, raw, unapologetic opinion. *Star Wars*? "Luke Skywalker is a nerd and Darth Vader sucks runny eggs." *Big Trouble in Little China*? "A cheerfully blathering live-action cartoon that will give you release from the real pressures of your basically dreary lives." Despite working within the industry himself, Ellison never learned how to lie. So punches go unpulled, the impersonal becomes personal, and the reader is left feeling like they have read something someone actually meant. It is a gauntlet, for sure, but it is also an exhilarating release.

Harlan Ellison's Watching Details

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From Reader Review Harlan Ellison's *Watching* for online ebook

Jemiah Jefferson says

Essential for all lovers and students of film criticism, Ellison's humor, wit, intelligence, and vitriol are on fine display in these essays, starting with his earliest film reviews in the mid-1960s. You will want to see every film he mentions, even if his response is vicious and demeaning - you'll want to see for yourself if it's that bad (or that good)! Hilarious and infuriating in equal measure, this collection is a great survey of the inimitable Ellison style.

Karen-Leigh says

Very interesting connections between the world in 1989 and the world today. Reviews of movies and television and comments on media.

Jackie "the Librarian" says

I just finished the book, and am in awe of Ellison's ability to sustain a rant. He's so feisty! Harlan Ellison, who has written science fiction books and screenplays for decades, won all the big SF awards, and has seen the television and movie industry from inside and out, is an opinionated, bad-tempered, loud-mouthed (and foul-mouthed) know-it-all who won't shut up.

Who better to tell us what he *really* thinks about movies, especially science fiction (never, ever "Sci Fi", please!) movies? Who better to give us the inside story on how the movie establishment tried to kill the movie *Brazil* by insisting Terry Gilliam tack on a happy ending? Who better to rail against colorization, and then turn that attack around onto the directors who have abused the work of screenwriters for years, and are now getting a taste of their own medicine?

As a Star Trek fan, I especially loved his inside take on the first Star Trek movie, dubbed by Ellison (and everyone else) as "Star Trek: The Motionless Picture".

This book collects Ellison's columns from various magazines, including *Cinema* and *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*.

Daran says

This is a collection of movie reviews, written by Harlan Ellison© (hereafter referred to as "the Author" because making that mark has me playing the organ with the keyboard). I initially got this book because I had heard good things about Harlan Ellison's review of *Star Wars* ("Luke Skywalker is a Nerd and Darth Vader Sucks Runny Eggs"), and *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* ("Star Trek-The Motionless Picture"). None of the Author's reviews are available online, for obvious reasons, so I bought this collection to edify myself. Both of these essays are incredibly well-written, rather thought-provoking, and scathing to the point of sharpened acid. The book was, in short, what I expected.

What I did not expect was to spend the next month reading his other essays while watching their attendant

subjects. I now look at the movie *Gremlins* through new eyes. Eyes that now perceive the seeds that would eventually find full flower in the butchery that was *Transformers*. For that matter, the Author was able to diagnose the problems in *Star Wars* that would eventually hamper the prequels, back in August of 1977

The Second Installment of the book begins when Ellison started writing a column in the *Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* in August of 1984. They are not a series of stand alone reviews *per se*, but more an ongoing exposition of film and the film industry by the author, who happens to really know what he is talking about. The author manages to catch fleeting references in films long before the ability to pause and rewind was available to reviewers. He was catching amazingly subtle nuances upon first viewing in the cinema!

The author also has a prodigious knowledge of the history of movie-making. His ability to recall where he first saw a particular camera trick or plot element is amazing. I have had classes that took a few weeks and couldn't deconstruct a particular film the way the author does in a few paragraphs month after month.

I apologize if this review sounds glowing, but I was genuinely impressed. I will say that I disagreed with several of his reviews, but unlike most reviews I disagree with nowadays, I found myself hard-pressed to justify my dissent. Ellison is punctilious about placing his reviews upon a foundation of reasoned thinking. this never seems stuffy because he is screaming it at you with some of the most creative invectives I've ever heard. The writing in these reviews is enjoyable, and often hilarious.

If you like your Cows sacred, don't read this. If you like your Cows well-prepared, with cheese, this is a book for you. I wish I had had this when I took film classes in college.

Jim Cherry says

Harlan Ellison Thinking in the movies

In the 1970's Harlan Ellison published "The Glass Teat" a compilation of his articles he published in the L.A. Free Press. The articles were a critical assessment of television of the period and they became instant classics. "The Glass Teat" became part of the curriculum at numerous colleges and their media departments. In "Watching" Ellison takes his critical and rhetorical skills to the movies.

"Watching" covers a much broader span of time than "The Glass Teat" from the early 60's until the late 80's. In his articles, Ellison goes from straight movie reviewing to more behind the scenes and critical assessments of movies tackling subjects such as the "auteur" method of filmmaking, colorization, the so called homage and to the more subliminal messages behind the movies. Unless you're a rabid Ellison fan, his opinions on movies are never predictable and they may surprise or shock you but the reasoning behind his informed opinion is sound.

In writing his articles, Ellison's passion for the subject would get the better of him and he'd take off on digressions that would make even the best critical essayist jealous. Ellison is always the first to admit to the digressions and tries to control them, but even against his own will Ellison's reviews can stretch across two or even three articles because of his digressions. However, in the hands of Ellison those digressions are always interesting and thought provoking. I can't think of any other writer who can do this.

It's been a while since I've had the pleasure of reading anything of Harlan Ellison's and in reading

“Watching” rediscovered that Harlan Ellison is a sheer pleasure to read! “Watching” captures Ellison’s sense of humor and occasionally you’ll find yourself laughing out loud at some points, agreeing with others, wondering at some, and disagreeing with him, but Ellison is always interesting and thought provoking. One note when reading “Watching”, or anything by Ellison for that matter, you better sharpen up your vocabulary, you’re going to need it.

After reading “Watching” you’ll realize that when the lights go down and the movie comes on Harlan Ellison is thinking about the movie, and by reading “Watching” it’ll make you a better watcher of movies.

Scott says

Harlan Ellison is a bitter old crumudgeon, but that's why I love his writing. His poison pen is somehow full of charm and wit. He has a uniquely direct style, conversationally straight to the reader. And he is very convincing, he truly writes from his heart - in what he believes and what he believes important. This book is a collection of essays about cinema, particularly science fiction cinema, republished from a few different magazines. As writer (professional liar, he argues in a later essay) who has had a great deal of experience in movies and television - a lot of it amazing, check IMDB and be surprised - he shares some great insights into the absurdities and difficulties that writers face in the movie industry.

This book begins with some typical movie reviews but gradually (d)evolves in to a kind of episodic, foaming rant on the miserable state of (mostly 80's) cinema. The final essays are post modern-ly self-reflexive as he shifts away completely from film reviews (totally ignoring an earlier promise to dedicate a section to Cronenberg) and takes on the numerous dissenting readers who unwisely chose to write to the editors of the magazines. These wickedly funny diatribes directed toward Star Wars, Star Trek, Stephen King (movies), Robocop, Gremlins, science fiction "fans", agitated readers and anyone who has an "opinion" (as opposed to an "informed opinion") is pure delight to read.

Which is not to say he does not find ample words to praise movies, actors, cinematography, and other works he truly does like. And somehow, even though he detested Evil Dead 2, I couldn't help but agree with him - usually.

Louis Arata says

Ellison is primarily known as a writer of speculative fiction as well as TV shows, including the original Star Trek and The Outer Limits. His name comes up often as the inspiration for other writers. He’s the writer that other writers respect for his intellect and craft. So, I wanted to try out some of his work.

Reading this book was like being cornered at a cocktail party by an opinionated blowhard who has to tell me in a loud voice everything he thinks is wrong with the current state of cinema. It doesn’t matter what I think because he has no interest in any other person’s opinion. If I disagree with him, I am moronically wrong. If I do agree with him, it doesn’t matter, because I will never, never, never comprehend the true artistic depth of pure cinema.

I really debated whether to keep pushing my way through this book. Well, stubbornness prevailed.

And along the way, the book got better. In the second half of the collection, his tone lightened up and he

poked more evident fun at his own curmudgeonly demeanor. He also better articulated his reasons for criticizing the inadequate state of cinema and how it was pandering to the lowest denominator. He executed lengthy critiques about why Spielberg's thumbprint on movies like Gremlins and Young Sherlock Holmes was a bad thing, in the larger scope of things.

Did he educate me on what he perceived as the evident problems of Hollywood? Yes. Did I agree with his views? Sometimes. Was he full of himself? Definitely.

Still, the book was like being cornered by a blowhard, but as with many encounters in life, I did come away a bit wiser. The essays probably were more engaging in their original format – published monthly. Reading them back to back only emphasized the long-windedness and redundancy.

In the end, was it worth it slogging through?

Meh.

Liedzeit says

Ein dickes Buch von Harlan mit Filmkritiken. Was kann man mehr vom Leben wollen. Seinen Job und sein Talent?

Sicher.

Der Mann hat außerdem einen guten Geschmack. Bagdad unter den ersten Zehn, wenn nicht Nummer 1. Es gibt aber auch betrübliche Ausnahmen (Back to the Future war ein guter Film) und gerade das ist ja auch tröstlich. 9/10

Rachael says

Just as good as the first time I read it.

Ellison is a genius.

Give this one a try if you don't own the complete works of Ellison.

William says

Film criticism is a sticky subject. There are three routes a critic can take when writing reviews.

One: One may make an attempt to establish a persona, appealing to a specific fan-base, and thus write their reviews in such a way to appeal specifically to that fan-base, despite how they actually view a film.

Two: One may make a valid attempt to objectively view each film their review, through some sort of imaginary, impartial lens, in attempt to lend "credence" to their reviews, and thus becoming (in their own eyes) an authority on the subject.

Three: Balls to all of the above. A film reviewer will attempt to give THEIR unhinged thoughts upon the subject with no effort made to objectivity, or consideration for their audiences' feelings.

Ellison, is definitely a number three. While his writings on the subject are often scathing criticisms, with profanity-laden rantings, they are nonetheless well thought-out, and even if one disagrees with them, if one knows the person behind the reviews one may certainly come to understand why he feels the way he does. This is HONESTY folks, in the critic industry something that seldom was, or seldom is.

Rory says

The only problem I had with this book is his analysis of Risky Business; he completely missed the critical subtext because it was supposedly a teen sex romp. On the plus side, He loved David Lynch's Dune. Turns out I'd been making the same arguments for the excellence of the movie that he makes in his essay. In other words, he's brilliant.

Dianne says

If you admire Harlan Ellison because he dares utter all the criticisms of what is stupid and mindless in our popular culture that you, yourself, would utter if you were not so timid or polite, you will like this book.

If you liked the biopic "Dreams With Sharp Teeth," you'll like this book. Ellison was the same prickly guy in the 70s and the 80s that he is today.

If you thought the 1970s "Star Wars" trilogy was the tritest of trite plots lamely supported by then-state-of-the-art special effects, but have always been afraid to admit it, you'll like this book.

If you think Steven Spielberg has had more misses than hits, you'll love this book.

The book is a collection of many of Ellison's movie reviews (or really, movie criticism in the best sense of the word) over the years, mostly reviews of SF and fantasy flicks. One caution - the reviews can be repetitive, even monotonous. Ellison wrote them rather sporadically, and many of the reviews were published two or three months after the previous review. A reader reading them as they were originally published would surely have found the same criticisms leveled at Spielberg and his protégés far less monotonous than one who reads three of them consecutively in an evening.

Ellison does hold some unaccountable opinions. On the strength of his praise of "Raiders of the Lost Ark," my husband and I, who had not seen it in decades, rented it, and even went to the trouble of projecting it on our 5-foot screen - and I thought it was rather stupid and tedious. Why Ellison, who in other reviews takes Spielberg and his ilk to task for using cartoon violence conventions in live action films, and for asking us to suspend our disbelief without giving us any reason to do so, found anything praiseworthy in "Raiders" is a mystery.

Repetition and puzzlement aside, the book is worth dipping into, if not necessarily reading cover-to-cover. Not only is Ellison's language crisp (nowhere crisper than when his pen is dipped in poison), but he writes the kind of movie criticism that is becoming a lost art, the kind that asks that a movie be both entertaining

AND have redeeming qualities as a work of art. Moreover, Ellison points out that viewers will rise to the expectations Hollywood has of them - if you provide them with schlock, they'll eat it up, but if you give them a truly entertaining movie that demands something of them, too, they may in fact surprise you with their enthusiasm for it.

flannery says

Despite his arcane verbiage and frequent detours this book is good, funny, and easy to read: more so when he's reviewing a movie I've seen than b-movies I haven't. Also possibly my favorite title for an essay collection ever.

Craig says

Ellison challenges the reader to think about entertainment (and life!), to try to learn something from it, and to try to understand and weigh myriad labeling concepts like worthwhile, enriching, mindless, educational, and on and on and on. It's like when you pay the dentist to do stuff to you that's uncomfortable; you know you'll probably be much better off for the experience when it's over. You can't always agree with Ellison (heck, I suspect he didn't agree with himself a lot of the time during some of these essays!), but his opinions are clear and passionate and he invites the reader to try to keep up with him. It's worth the ride.

Drew Raley says

A pain in the ass whose opinions wear thin, this collection is for Young Iconoclasts only. For the rest of us, life is too short to hang around listening to the bloviations of a hack Star Trek writer. Shrill and unpleasant.
