

Hopeless devoted to 80's movies.

Girls, on Film The Animals Issue

Issue 27
February 2025

Teen Wolf * Howard the Duck * Cujo * Turner & Hooch * Never Cry Wolf
The Secret of NIMH * The Dog Who Stopped the War * Animalympics

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Girls, on Film is a digital and print zine about 80s movies. We publish quarterly. Digital issues are free on our website, girlsonfilmzine.com. Purchase full-color prints through our website and select vendors and events.

Photo credits: Ed Cash (cover) and Rhonda Baughman (inset)



Animalympics



The Secret of NIMH



Cujo



Never Cry Wolf



Teen Wolf



The Dog Who Stopped the War



Howard the Duck



Turner & Hooch

The other Creature Feature issue

Welcome to issue #27 of *Girls, on Film*, the zine that is hopelessly devoted to 80s movies! Each issue features eight movies released between 1980 and 1989 that relate to a specific theme. Past issues include 80s movies centered around music, sports, food, role reversal, road trips, school, robots, romance, heists, adventure, and much more. We cover all kinds of titles, from popular, to the obscure, and everything in between. Our essays are a mix of review, history, commentary, and personal reflection.

Issue #27 is technically, our second issues on creature features (our first was #14). But this time, we're talking about animals, not monsters! Well...some monsters, but you get the point. If you're unfamiliar with the movies featured in this issue, check out plot summaries below.

Members of the Pack

Animalympics - This animated spoof of the 1980 Olympics doesn't win a medal.

The Secret of NIMH - A single mom picks just the absolute worst time to move in a gorgeous adaptation of a popular kid's novel.

Cujo - He's a good boy. He just has bad luck.

Never Cry Wolf - A beautifully shot docudrama about a scientist studying wolves in the Canadian tundra.

Teen Wolf - Michael J. Fox is terminally sweaty and nervous as he comes to terms with being a werewolf.

The Dog Who Stopped the War - Children behave ... and watch how you play.

Howard the Duck - George Lucas's adaptation of a Marvel comic about a crime-fighting duck was one of the decade's biggest flops.

Turner & Hooch - Man and dog take their infamous best friendship to partners-in-crime-solving levels.

The Girls (and Honorary Girls)

Stephanie McDevitt (co-founder/co-editor)

Stephanie's one big disappointment in life is that she wasn't old enough to fully appreciate popular clothing styles in the 1980s, as she was mostly attired in paisley sweatsuits. A full-time editor and occasional freelancer, Stephanie looks nostalgically back on 80s films such as *Ernest Goes to Camp*, *Adventures in Babysitting*, and *Can't Buy Me Love* and wishes she could pull off the hairdos of Cindy Mancini and her friends.

Janene Scelza (co-founder/co-editor) Janene has made loads of zines over the years. She spent her teen years combing musty video stores and public libraries for all the 80s movies she could find. Janene's got plenty of favorites from the decade, but it's stylish indie films like *Desperately Seeking Susan*, *Repo Man*, and *The Terminator* that she loves best.

Dr. Rhonda Baughman (contributing writer)

Rhonda, a teacher and freelance writer, raised adolescent hell in the 80s and the horror films of that era were her BFFs! She loves all of 80s pop culture, but nothing spoke to her quite like *Sorority Babes in the Slimeball Bowl-O-Rama*, *Nightmare Sisters*, and *Reform School Girls*. She had a pink laminated Video Time Video rental card at 9 years old and she never looked back. Or forward, really; she still loves her VHS and sweet, sweet VCR. And let it be known: the scrunchie never died for Rhonda: she STILL wears one proudly!

Jessica Macleish (contributing writer) Jessica is a Veronica, not a Heather. She's also writer, editor, and late 80s baby who loves watching, thinking about, talking about, and writing about movies.

Matt Scelza (contributing writer) Matt loves to dissect and analyze everything. He co-writes essays for the zine with his sister, Janene. He has also logged a lot of hours at the same video stores and public library film collections with Janene in search of odd and unusual titles. However, he's got too many favorites to name.

Sebastian Gregory (guest writer) Sebastian came of age in the fiery crucible of the 1980s. His parents were avid cinephiles who dragged him to every small, independent movie house in Houston and made sure he had a thorough education in film... which may explain his enduring affection for low-grade Italian westerns. He has been an editor, writer, musician, and actor while masquerading as an IT drone in Sector 17.

Katheryn Hans (guest writer) Katheryn spent her childhood being afraid of, and captivated by, the movies she watched. *Child's Play* prompted her to lock up her dolls in the laundry room; before she understood the existential dread of *The Thing*, the images of alien body-invasion had her peeking through her fingers; and, while *The NeverEnding Story* graced her with the magical delight of Falkor, it also had that one scene (you know the one). Forged from these experiences, Katheryn harbors a deep love of horror, science fiction, and fantasy films.

Guest Submissions

Interested in guest writing for the zine? Send a short bio and writing samples to Stephanie and Janene at info@girlsonfilmzine.com.



Medal Discontention: **Animalympics**

Stephanie McDevitt

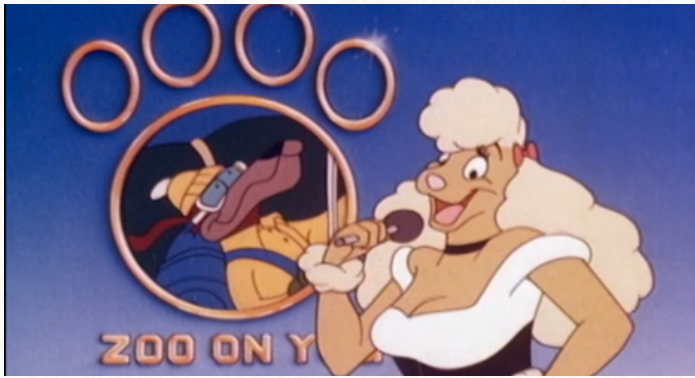
As I was researching movies for this issue, nothing really struck my fancy. Janene suggested *Teen Wolf*, which I didn't like, so for my second movie I was hoping to find something I'd enjoy. I came across this weird looking movie called *Animalympics*. It's basically an all-animal broadcast of an all-animal Olympics, and I found it to be pretty similar to current Olympic coverage (minus the weird sexualizing of some of the animal athletes and some bad jokes). I can't really say that it was an enjoyable movie, but it's definitely a movie.

Animalympics is a series of vignettes set up to be a broadcast of the first ever animal Olympics. All the characters are voiced by Gilda Radner, Billy Crystal, Harry Shearer, and Michael Fremer. Brought to you by the ZOO network, the broadcast combines the Summer and Winter Olympics and has reporters both in the studio and at the events to give a play-by-play of all the action. Henry Hummel (Michael Fremer), the turtle at the anchor desk, acts as a kind of narrator for the

games, and reporter Barbara Warblers (Gilda Radner) gets the athlete interviews.

That's pretty much it. There isn't much plot to this movie. There are a few storylines that run throughout, including the riveting footage of the marathon, where the front runners are a goat named René Fromage and a lioness named Kit Mambo (both voiced by Michael Fremer). Rene and Kit eventually start to fall in love. They hold hands for the whole second half of the race, and they finish at the exact same time. I can't imagine it's easy to run a marathon while holding hands, so I respect their accomplishment.

This movie felt like a platform for the voice actors to revive some of their well-known impressions. Radner's bird character, Barbara Warblers, is supposed to be Barbara Walters. Radner was an original cast member of *Saturday Night Live* and, by 1980, was at the tail end of her tenure there [1]. She was famous for her Baba Wawa charac-



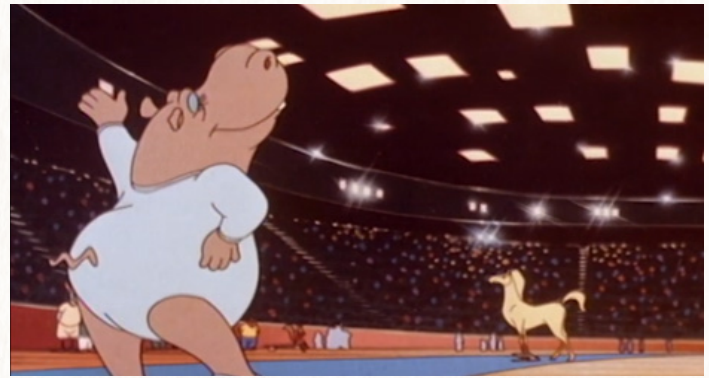
A busty cartoon Barbara Walters.

ter, which was a Barbara Walters impression in which she exaggerated Walter's speech patterns. I love Gilda Radner so much, but I don't think the impression worked for an animated character. So much of what made Radner funny was her physical embodiment of a character, and some jokes were lost by not being able to see her do the voice.

Billy Crystal got to do his Muhammad Ali impression when he played a kangaroo boxer named Joey Gongolong. Joey has to fight an enormous bull named Janos Brushteklel. Joey is smarter than Janos, so despite being much smaller than him, he manages to outmaneuver him and take the Olympic win. Crystal also includes his impression of legendary sportscaster Howard Cosell when he plays a turkey by the name of Rugs Turkell. Turkell reports from the sidelines of track and field, ice hockey, and the boxing match.

The more I write about this movie, the weirder I think it sounds. I bet you're wondering how something like this came to be. Well, in 1976 writer and director Steven Lisberger was watching the Summer Olympics, and he thought it would be great to make an animated parody of the games. So, he applied for and won an American Film Institute grant for \$10,000 with which he produced a seven minute short [2].

NBC then commissioned Lisberger to make two hour long specials, which were supposed to air



She's not as good as the hippos in *Fantasia*.

during both the Moscow Winter and Summer Olympics in 1980 (back in the day the Summer and Winter Olympics happened in the same year in the same city). So, the half hour Winter *Animalympics* special ran on February 1, 1980 in conjunction with the Winter Olympics coverage [3]. However, Jimmy Carter decided that the Americans would boycott the Moscow Summer Olympics due to Russia invading Afghanistan [4].

In an interview with the Los Angeles Herald Examiner, Lisberger said, "If there are no Olympics this year, it looks like we'll be providing our own version animal-style. No one could have anticipated this. It's as though our cartoon had turned into reality and reality into a cartoon. How people will view our movie will probably change now. Hopefully, they'll say, 'If animals are capable of having an Olympics, why not people?'" [5]. Unfortunately for Lisberger, NBC canceled their Olympic coverage and pulled the 1-hour Summer *Animalympics* special.

Welp, the Summer Olympic special went unfinished, but Lisberger was determined to make this a theatrical release. So, he combined the winter and summer specials into one film, which was a bit confusing to me since everyone knows they don't have the winter sports mixed in with the summer sports. But I guess when it's cartoon animals competing in the events, anything goes! Lisberger didn't have much luck finding a distributor in the states, but the theatrical version



Obligatory 70s political reference.

of the movie aired on HBO and Showtime in the summer of 1984 [6]. Eventually, *Animalympics* got a VHS release, and now is surprisingly streaming for free on Prime and Tubi.

Since it wasn't a feature film, *Animalympics* didn't get a lot of press or reviews. So, the reviews I've found are all written by people who either saw it during the 1980 Olympics, or people like me who found the movie and thought, "that sounds weird." A review on Don Markstein's Toonopedia said that in 1977 Hanna-Barbera released Scooby's All-Star Laff-a-Lympics, which was an Olympic parody with well-known Hanna-Barbera characters [7]. The characters in *Animalympics* were unknown, so why should anyone care about them when we can watch Yogi, Scooby, Snagglepuss compete? The reviewer noted, "Casting the film with the likes of Rugs Turkell, Dome Turnell, Bolt Jenkins, and Tatyana Tushenko was a lot like filling it up with generic funny animals. Not one of them was ever heard of before or since" [8].

The other big issue for me was the length of the movie. *Animalympics* did not need to be a feature film. As one reviewer noted, "It's just a chore to get through. While the parody of televised sports coverage is pretty on point, with some allowances because 1980, there's a reason no one is making *SportsCenter: The Movie*. This type of coverage



Watch *Cool Runnings* instead.

is meant to be digested and disposed quickly. It's not meant to sustain interest for an hour and a half. When split up and spread out over a few days of Olympics coverage, I'd probably have really enjoyed it. Like this, it just doesn't work" [9].

I think it would have been great as 15-minute shorts interspersed throughout some of the more boring Olympic coverage. And I specifically think the 15-minute timeline is key because after watching 15 minutes of this movie I felt like I'd had enough. And then, just to make it longer, Lisberger added music montages, with songs that were written just for this movie (the soundtrack, also not good, was released in Europe [10]). In a shorter time frame, they could have made it really crisp and a bit frantic (in a good, cartoony way), but in its current state, it's a drag.

So, that's *Animalympics*. It's too bad the project didn't go as planned. Steve Lisberger eventually rebounded from this movie and went on to direct *Tron* (*Girls, on Film* Issue 17). Billy Crystal, Gilda Radner, and Harry Shearer all had great careers, and Michael Fremer became a journalist. So, no one was harmed in the making of this movie. If you watch it, maybe just watch in small doses and keep in mind its original intent. I think that helped me get to the finish line.



Damn the Mouse! Save the Empire! **The Secret of NIMH**

Janene Scelza

Once upon a time there was one animation studio to rule them all! I am, of course, talking about Disney...ever heard of them? As previously discussed in my essay on Ralph Bakshi's *American Pop* back in our Animation Issue (#8), Disney actively tried to discourage ambitious young artists, claiming they'd never be able to make animated features on par, or better, than anything Disney could do. Luckily, some of those ambitious young artists called their bluff.

The *Secret of NIMH* was likewise the product of an experimental revolt. However, in this case, the artists were neither newcomers to the field, nor strangers to Disney. NIMH director, Don Bluth, started in Disney's animation department in the 1950s. And he was there for its flop era, too (the 20 years or so before *The Little Mermaid*, by some estimates). Walt was gone, and a new line of corporate stiffers were wondering whether to abandon the animation game and cut budgets accordingly [1].

That didn't sit well with Bluth, who had quickly

risen through the ranks at Disney to work alongside the "Nine Old Men" [2]. These were the OG animators who had been with Disney since the 1920s and were familiar with animation techniques created by the studio. (Two of the nine old timers outlined these principals in their book, *Disney Animation: The Illusion of Life*, published in 1981). Bluth felt like the studio was increasingly sacrificing the traditional methods for their bottom line and, along with some other similarly disillusioned Disney artists, went rogue. And so began his personal war with Disney.

Children of the 80s and early 90s are probably already well acquainted with Bluth & Company's subsequent popular works, like *An American Tale* (1986) (also featured in issue #8), *The Land Before Time* (1988), *All Dogs Go to Heaven* (1989), and also the *Dragon's Lair* game and TV show. They made super-gorgeous anthropomorphic adventure tales that were also kind of scary and made you cry like a butthole (did you get my *Terrorvision* reference?!). The *Secret of NIMH*, released in 1982, was

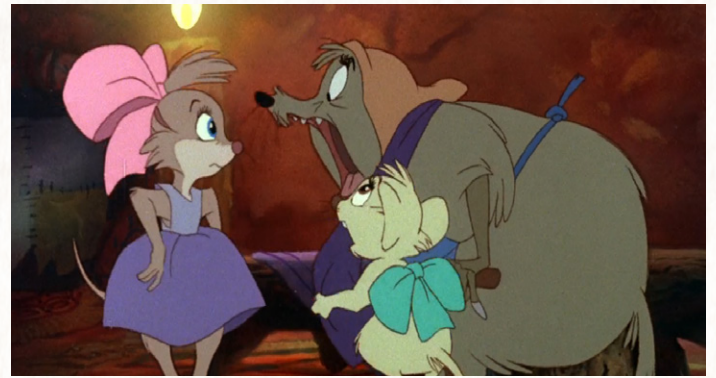


Mrs. Brisby's new BFF.

the second project for the new studio, and their first feature film, and they made it for a fraction of the budget and resources. I don't think that was to the film's detriment at all. It's a wonderful little production, and for me, a refreshing one to revisit, given the oversaturation of sterile, hyper-realistic kiddie fare (some Disney productions included).

The *Secret of NIMH* adapts Robert C. O'Brien's popular 1970 children's novel, *Mrs. Frisby and the Rats of NIMH*. (After his death, Robert's daughter, Jane Leslie Conley, continued the legacy with two sequels published in 1986 and 1990). I had the book as a kid, but only got around to reading it last year, and I really enjoyed it. With the exception of some science fiction elements, O'Brien's novel feels very typical of the anthropomorphic kiddie lit of its time. We observe an ordinary world from vantage points we rarely, if ever, think about. Young readers of this novel, in particular, are invited to consider the impact of our technological age on the rest of the ecosystem. Imagine the collapse if the alt-right nutjobs ever became aware of this egregious grammar school indoctrination? Don't go telling them, neither!

The story centers around widowed mamma mouse, Mrs. Frisby. (Her surname was changed to Brisby in the movie in order to avoid potential lawsuits from Wham-O-Toys, manufacturer of the beloved frisbee). Mrs. Frisby/Brisby Liberty/Bibberty and her young brood live near Fitzgibbon Farm. Winter is transitioning to Spring, and the planting season will begin after the last freeze. It's hard to predict exactly when that could happen,



No time for taming the shrew!

but the animals are acutely aware of the clues and prepare accordingly, as they do every year. As moving day approaches, Mrs. Frisby's youngest son, Timmy, comes down with pneumonia. Moving him could make his condition worse, but if they stay, the family will surely be killed by the farmer's machines. So, with the monumental task of saving her family and home, Mrs. Frisby seeks help from fellow forest creatures, including a concerned shrew (voiced by the excellent Hermione Baddeley in the film), a doctor mouse named Ages, a crow named Justin (Dom Deluise), a terrifying wise old owl (appropriately voiced by John Carradine), and a group of highly sophisticated rats.

The rats (and their real-life inspiration) are their own interesting story. They and some mice were captured by scientists who injected them with a serum that significantly boosted their intelligence, strength, and lifespan. NIMH refers to the National Institute of Mental Health. This part of the story was inspired by NIMH ethologist John B. Calhoun, who, in the mid-1950s, used rats and mice to test his theory about the impact of overpopulation on society, known as Behavioral Sink [3]. Eventually, the lab animals plot to escape, but only a few survive, including Ages and Frisby/Brisby's late husband, Jonathan, who died under circumstances still unknown to her. His name carries currency among the forest creatures, and they agree to help the widow.

The surviving rats form their own colony with a governing structure and everything. This part is especially interesting in the book because, when



Baby did a bad bad thing.

Mrs. Frisby meets them, they are expanding, breeding and training a new generation of rats. Mrs. Frisby meets young rats who are learning to read and wield technology and basically become a functional part of the new society. In the film, we only meet Lab Rats 1.0, though their dilemmas are the same: the colony runs on things they steal from humans, and there is a division among the mice about whether they should continue this practice. It sounds silly to wrestle with a moral conundrum involving the very people who put you in that position, but there is certainly a safety argument to be made for extricating themselves. Moreover, the NIMH scientists have been poking around the farm, hoping to locate and exterminate the unnatural species like they were Replicants or something. And with all this bearing down on them, not all are immediately eager to help a lowly forest creature. But they agree when a nefarious member senses an opportunity for a power grab.

There is a lot going on in the book and the movie, but with less time to tell the story, *The Secret of NIMH* seems to hit the ground at full throttle. Bluth's version adds a magical element to the story in the form of a sacred amulet that the NIMH leader gives Mrs. Brisby to guide in her quest. I heard somewhere that Don Bluth felt like animation needed magic. Maybe so, but this particular device detracts from an already busy story. It's also one of those all-powerful things that briefly hypnotizes even some of the good guys. And, that Mrs. Friday ultimately employs it to save the day really undermines the bravery of those who already overcame so many incredible obstacles on their own accord.



Precious, *NIMH* style.

If you didn't know the film's backstory, would you think this was a Disney production from the 1980s? I'm not asking you super fans; you folks can probably spot the difference like it were a choice between Coke and Pepsi. To me, it does look like something Disney would have made, though maybe not in the 80's. It has these gorgeous richly colored water-color backgrounds and Caravaggio-esque devotion to contrasts that instantly reminded me of films like *Pinnocchio*. (I would totally love a print of the Fitzgibbon house to hang on my wall!). It has the anthropomorphic creatures—not every hero has to be a princess or quasi-princess!—voiced by celebrities. It also has the old-fashioned soundtrack. But oh boy, this movie is heavy, Doc, although not tragic in a Mitziyaki kind of way. Aside from the obvious part about a mother's relentless efforts to protect her children and all the philosophical stuff, there's a whole murder plot. But I won't say more...I have already said too much!

Anways, I really enjoyed this movie. So did the critics. So did the audiences, I think (it made back double the budget). For now, it's on Tubi, along with the 1998 sequel, *The Secret of NIMH 2: Timmy to the Rescue*. Don Bluth didn't have anything to do with that one (me neither), but Dom Deluise did (he was the king of cartoon voicework in those days), so make your peace with that as you will. There may be more *NIMH* to come. As of 2021, FOX had a TV based on the trilogy in the works. In the meantime, if you're curious about the fate of Don Bluth's efforts to stick it to the Mouse, check out Matt Draper's video "The Disney/Don Bluth Animation War" [5].



Monsters are Real: Cujo

Katheryn Hans

My parents probably let me watch some movies a little too early. They had a particular blind spot when it came to Stephen King movies, largely because of their affinity for his novels. *Carrie* had me and my sister trying to move things with our minds; *Pet Semetary* was, perhaps strangely, a family favorite. The line was drawn, however, at *Cujo*. My mother said it was one of the most terrifying movies she had ever seen, and she refused to watch it again. I used to think it was because of the monstrous dog; I know better now.

In its simplest form, *Cujo* (1983) is a horror film based on Stephen King's novel by the same name, which tells the story of Donna Trenton (Dee Wallace) and her son, Tad (Danny Pintauro), trapped in a sweltering Ford Pinto, held hostage by a rabid dog named Cujo—it's a creature feature. Stephen King was inspired to write the story when he had to take his motorcycle to a mechanic's in a rural area, and there he encountered a large dog, got spooked, and wondered, "What if...." [1]. Considered more complexly, *Cujo* is about fear,

both real and imaginary. According to director Lewis Teague: "[The point of the movie is if] a real, lethal fear comes into our life, it will put a lot of our other... less lethal, imaginary fears into perspective" [2].

For Tad, the imaginary fear is the monsters hidden in the dark, under his bed, in his closet. The real fear, at least early on, is the simmering tension between his parents Donna and Vic (Daniel Hugh Kelly, in his first film role). Donna is having an affair with Vic's friend Steve (Christopher Stone), and Vic's advertising firm is getting wrecked due to a faulty product that he, unwittingly, made false claims about. Much like the family, Donna's car starts to break down, and Vic's promise to take her car to the rural mechanic, Joe Camber (Ed Lauter), goes unfulfilled when he has to take a business trip to try to salvage his job. Donna has to take it herself. There, she and Tad encounter Cujo, who, ravaged by rabies, has already killed two people.



A picture tells a thousand words.

Meanwhile, the real, lethal fear develops parallel to the family. Cujo, a friendly St. Bernard, opens the film running happily through the woods, chasing rabbits and poking his nose into holes when he is bitten by a bat and contracts rabies. The rest of the movie traces his slow decline, as Donna and Tad, and Cujo, embark on two different paths destined to converge. Monsters are real—they just weren't in Tad's closet.

In terms of filmmaking, having live animals on set is risky, at best, and Teague had a few challenges to overcome when it came to crafting Cujo as a monster. For one thing, Teague saw "one of [his] biggest challenges in this movie [was making] a St. Bernard scary" [4]. St. Bernards were bred for rescue: big, protective dogs sent out to care for people lost in the Alps [5]; they were basically the complete opposite of killers. Dog trainers on the film suggested other dog breeds, ones that were more easily trained, like a German Shepherd, but Teague stood firm [6]. Thus, six or seven dogs were used to portray Cujo, with the main dog, named Moe, featured in the pivotal scenes where Cujo had to attack the car [7].

Teague is careful to point out in the behind the scenes documentary *Dog Days: The Making of Cujo* (2007), that no animals were harmed in the making of the film. Which, quite frankly, is shocking. The scenes of Cujo attacking the car and Donna are so visceral, so violent, it seems an inevitability that someone would get hurt, and I think it is in the crafting of these scenes that really



Cujo's feeling a bit under the weather.

demonstrate the effort and care taken by the crew. Cujo lunges through the cracked windows of the car where Donna and Tad are taking refuge, jaws clicking. It's terrifying. But, what the audience doesn't see is the toy rat enticing the dog actor, whose tail, according to Dee Wallace, had to be tied down because it was wagging so much at the fun he was having [8]. The most impressive dog stunt, for me, is when Cujo rams his head into the driver's side door of the car, jamming it and trapping Donna and Tad inside. According to Teague, clever editing is used to make that shot so believable [9].

The thing is, it looks and feels real. Most of the dog sounds in the film are the actual sounds of the dog actors, though they did have a sound artist who could make believable dog sounds to fill in at moments when they needed it [10]. To emulate foaming of the mouth, the dog actors had whipped egg whites smeared on their chops before takes and shots had to be quickly done before the dogs could lick it off [11]. But it reads so well on camera, I found myself just assuming the dog was slobbering.

That's the thing: this film is gross. During the last forty-five minutes, actors are covered in dirt, grime, sweat [12], slobber, and blood. But, Cujo embodies filth: foam drips from his chops and mats his fur, blood paints his paws which are muddied with slobber and dirt, globules of pus drip from his eyes. It's a horror show. But this is all needed to bring the monster to life—the



Monsters in the closet.

fight against Cujo has to represent the reality of a true, lethal fear in order to put in perspective the more petty anxieties the Trenton family undergo. Donna's ultimate showdown with Cujo in order to save Tad's life needs to have weight.

To a point. The thing is, this is a horror movie, but it is also a tragedy. I read the novel a few years ago and what I remember about that experience is that I felt similar to how I felt watching the film in my twenties—which was sad. Just plain sad. Watching Cujo, a good boy, get ravaged by a disease, twisted into a monster, is devastating. The book is worse, in that regard. The book has moments where the reader is aligned with Cujo's perspective—experiencing his playfulness; his love for his people, particularly Camber's son, Brett; and his growing confusion as he behaves aggressively against his will. I bawled reading the last pages of that book. After Cujo dies, the narrator aligns with Cujo's perspective: "It would perhaps not be amiss to point out that he had always tried to be a good dog. He had tried to do the things his MAN and his WOMAN, and most of all his BOY, had asked or expected of him. He would have died for them, if that had been required. He had never wanted to kill anybody" [13]. He's a very good boy!

Teague was aware of the level of pathos Cujo evoked in his audience, whether they had read the novel or not. You don't need to understand Cujo's perspective to feel a connection to him simply by virtue of him being a dog. To prevent his audience from turning on Donna, Teague was careful



She'll never buy another Pinto.

to show the character never actually striking the dog. According to Teague: "Audiences can see people being shot, stabbed, blown apart, maimed, they continue to eat their popcorn and say, 'Oh it's just a stunt man or special effects' but when it comes to human violence towards animals, they don't feel the same way, and I was aware of that and concerned about it" [14].

For a similar reason, the movie changes the ending of the book when it comes to Tad's fate as well. In the book, Tad succumbs to heat exhaustion and dehydration before Donna can fight off Cujo. It's bleak. When Stephen King first adapted the novel into a screenplay, he changed the ending, commenting that he would have changed the ending of the novel if he could, so the screenwriters kept this change as the screenplay developed [15]. Probably for the best—I can't imagine the anger of an audience having to watch both a child and a dog die on screen.

Near the end of the book, after Cujo's death, the narrator describes Cujo as having "been struck by something, possibly destiny, or fate, or only a degenerative nerve disease called rabies. Free will was not a factor" [16]. No free will. That's the real fear—not the possibility of a killer dog, not the monster in your closet, not the potential break-up of a marriage. It's powerlessness; it's the feeling of being subject to an inexplicable, unpredictable set of circumstances that started days before, in fields far away, that you never saw coming.

A white wolf stands alert on a dark, rocky outcrop. The background is a dense forest of evergreen trees, with some bare branches visible. The lighting is soft, suggesting dusk or dawn.

Running with the Pack: **Never Cry Wolf**

Sebastian Gregory

Disney has a long history of producing nature films, going back to 1948 and the Academy Award winning series *True-Life Adventures*. But *Never Cry Wolf* (Disney Motion Pictures, 1983), a docudrama based on Farley Mowat's 1963 book of the same name, isn't your typical Disney documentary. With a bare bones plot about a lone researcher sent to study arctic wolves by the Canadian government to determine if they are a threat to the caribou herds, it was filmed on location in Canada and Alaska over a two-year period for 12 million dollars. It's a beautifully shot movie with a none-too-subtle lesson about humans and our relationship with the environment, each other, and with ourselves.

Never Cry Wolf is an odd film, quiet and extremely slow paced by today's standards, filled with quirky humor and a standout yet understated performance by Charles Martin Smith as Tyler the neebish scientist. The film avoids the typical happy ending and is clearly sympathetic toward the wolves, a message that is not diluted by the

fudged science in Mowat's book (he was accused of plagiarism and not letting facts get in the way of a good story) [1]. The film delivers a message that did for wolf conservation what *Silent Spring* did for the dangers of pesticides, and I can attest that it worked on me; I referred to this movie for years as if it were the gold standard of wolf science.

My strongest memory of seeing this in the movie theater is how effectively the film conveyed the notion that the land up around the Arctic Circle is damn cold. The landscape is dominated by snow, fog, and permafrost. The few human actors are rarely seen without layers of winter gear. The protagonist Tyler almost dies on the ice the first night and there is an epic near drowning in freezing water that they shot on location in a frozen lake that even the professional divers didn't want to do. Even the wolves look cold.

It's no surprise that the film looks like a particularly poignant segment of *Wild Kingdom*. Carroll Ballard, who was primarily known as an Oscar-nom-



Ice cold. Nowhere to go.

inated documentarian, had a surprise big hit with *Black Beauty* in 1978 for Disney. He was brought in to replace French director Louis Malle on *Never Cry Wolf* after pre-production had already started. Ballard understood that as a substantial amount of screen time featured only one actor and the animals, the right actor was essential to carrying the audience along and keeping them engaged. “They had cast a very handsome young guy to play the part,” Ballard said in a 2017 interview with the Director’s Guild of America (the actor was William Katt, the prom date in *Carrie*). “I didn’t think it was believable that this guy would go out there and do what he does. It had to be a bit of a guy who didn’t get every girl who came down the road, and a guy who was struggling with himself, trying to figure out where he’s at... he becomes a participant in a much bigger story that has much bigger ramifications than he would have otherwise. It’s a story of victory, in a certain way” [2].

Charles Martin Smith (*American Graffiti*, *The Buddy Holly Story*) was perhaps the perfect actor to take on the role. He certainly looked the part of Tyler the nerdy, naïve scientist. It really helped that he was also enthusiastic about the project and worked on writing the voiceover narration. In what is fundamentally a nature movie, he turns in a strong but subtle and understated performance that connects the audience to the action, especially when it’s just him and the wolves on screen. The interactions with his fellow humans (there are very few) are sometimes awkward but reveal much about Tyler and his hero’s journey, and his



An InnuIt traveler takes pity on Tyler.

transformation is well earned by the end. He also earns the distinction of being the first actor in a Disney movie to show his bare butt on screen!

Tyler only interacts with about six people throughout the film. Brian Dennehy as Rosie the bush pilot is a rip-roaring delight and gets one of the best quips in the movie, delivered as the engine conks out while on the way to deliver Tyler to the Arctic Circle. The Inuit Ootek the wolf shaman (played by Zachary Ittimangnaq) and the wolf hunter Mike (Samson Jorah) provide Tyler with some welcome human company and (of course) lay down some pithy native wisdom. That wasn’t as cringy in 1983 as it is now, and it’s worth noting that the Inuit are portrayed as realistic, not altruistic, in their relationship to the wolves and the caribou.

The wildlife (and the wilderness) is the real star of the show. 30 wolves were used, which were provided by Animal Actors of Hollywood and Lloyd Beebe’s Olympic Game Farm. Wolves raised in captivity are indistinguishable from wild wolves and it is easy to forget that there were handlers just off screen feeding them a steady diet of chicken necks and hot dogs. They look incredible on screen, captured against the stunning scenery of the tundra by director of photography Hiro Narita. Ballard and Narita never passed on a chance for a soaring, majestic aerial shot but they were equally focused on rendering the wolves in the habitat in a natural way. The one time they didn’t use wolves was in a dream sequence where the wolves attack



The college boy trying to school the native.

Tyler; German Shepherds trained in Alabama had to be brought in and have their fur highlighted to look more wolf-like in the shot. The “mice” (actually voles) proved to be incredibly difficult to get to stand still unless slightly stunned by swinging them around a few times. The story of renting the caribou herd (raised for their antlers, which are sold as an aphrodisiac in China) and what they went through to get the shots they needed is worth hunting down the documentary they produced about the making of the movie.

The film was one of the last to be produced before the Eisner/Katzenberg era began at Disney. The editing took longer than expected; Carroll Ballard had made a deal with the “old guard” that included giving Ballard final cut of the film, even though Ballard was a Hollywood outsider and an idiosyncratic filmmaker. He was confident he could make the movie when he went out to the Yukon even if he had a script he never intended to make as written. “The original script that we had... was very theatrical. It was like a television movie. I wanted to do something different, and I never figured out, you know, exactly how to do that. I thought I could figure it out on the fly” [3].

It wasn’t a way of working that suited everyone. He and Hiro Narita (director of photography) would shoot a scene repeatedly to get it just right, even if that meant waiting for natural elements to fall into place to get what they wanted. Narita is brilliant at capturing the snowy vistas of the Canadian and Alaskan outback, with soaring aerial



A frank discussion about wolf economics.

shots and long, lingering shots that are reminiscent of the 1982 film *Koyaanisqatsi*. They didn’t get all the footage they needed the first time and had to wait until the next summer to complete filming, which contributed to doubling the initial cost of the film.

In the end Ballard had three-quarters of a million feet of film; so much footage that the first edit was 10 hours long. Even when he got it down to three hours, the initial test screenings were disasters. But provided with a new score by composer Mark Isham, and a voice over narration to focus the story, Ballard was able to complete the film. On initial release, it made \$26.5 million dollars against a \$12 million budget... not a roaring success but not bad for a docudrama about wolves that has no more than four humans speaking to each other on screen at any one time.

It turned out far better than anyone could have expected and was critically well received. *Never Cry Wolf* was the first film Disney entered at the Venice Film Festival, and Hiro Narita won several Critics’ Choice Awards for his cinematography on this film. The sound designers (Alan R. Splet, Todd Boekelheide, Randy Thom, David Parker) were nominated for an Oscar that year (*The Right Stuff* won). It’s one of those films that might not be made today, at least under a major studio tent-pole. The pacing is glacial, there is a distinct lack of action, and it plays more like a well-meaning independent than a Disney product... and it’s all the better for it.



Without Meaning or Moral: Teen Wolf

Stephanie McDevitt

In the summer of 1985, Michael J. Fox was on the verge of becoming a superstar. He'd been on *Family Ties* for three seasons already, and on July 3, 1985, *Back to the Future* hit the big screen. Then, in August of the same year, *Teen Wolf* came out and opened at #2 in the box office behind *Back to the Future* (which had been #1 for 8 weeks). These two movies remained at #1 and #2 for a month, and *Teen Wolf* didn't fall out of the top ten until October 1985 [1].

Teen Wolf came about when the production company (Atlantic) found success with *Valley Girl*, which was a teen comedy that only cost about \$3 million to make [2, 3]. They hired writer Jeph Loeb to make a low budget movie that would take very little time to film. Everything came together when Michael J. Fox committed to the role after filming for *Family Ties* got delayed when his co-star, Meredith Baxter-Birney, got pregnant [4].

Atlantic definitely got what it wanted. *Teen Wolf* was shot from November to December 1984 on a

\$4 million budget, and it made \$80 million worldwide [5]. Reviews for the movie weren't great. In a review for *White Dwarf*, Colin Greenland said, "Anxious that their movie should be perfectly wholesome, clean and bloodless, writers and director forgot Scott was supposed to be a werewolf, and made him a basketball star instead" [6]. Obviously, the reviews didn't matter. My guess is that *Teen Wolf* rode Fox's success with *Back to the Future* because the movie isn't very good. In fact, I thought it was super boring.

Teen Wolf starts out like a lot of teen comedies. Scott is an average guy, who lives in an average small town, and plays on his below-average high school basketball team. He's pining after Pamela (Lorie Griffin), who is way out of his league, and his best friend, a tom boy he calls Boof (Susan Ursitti), loves him but he's initially not interested. This all sounds pretty similar to dozens of other teen movies, until Scott starts showing signs of being a wolf.



Gotta make both to stay in the game.

When Scott starts experiencing his werewolf symptoms (hair everywhere, suddenly having claws, making growling noises), he can't control it. But every time he gets worked up (with girls or on the basketball court), it starts to happen. Scott tries to talk to people about the changes in his body, which leads to many puberty jokes that are kind of funny, but not really. Eventually, he completely transforms during a full moon, and his dad (James Hampton) reveals that werewolfism runs in Scott's family.

It's weird, but okay, Scott now has his main conflict. However, it's only a conflict for about five minutes. In his next basketball game, he inadvertently goes full werewolf in front of the whole school, and because the referee doesn't have a problem with werewolves competing in high school basketball games, Scott learns that as the werewolf, he is an amazing basketball player. He's so good, he leads his team to their first win of the season.

From this point forward, Scott is able to control when he turns into a werewolf, so that is no longer an issue. Everyone loves him now because he's good at basketball (obviously the most important thing here). But, in true nerd-to-popular-kid transformation, Scott becomes a bit of a jerk. His teammates can't stand him because he hogs the ball, Boof is annoyed because he's sleeping with Pamela, who, by the way, has a boyfriend, and Scott's ego is through the roof.



Scott needs more Boof in his life.

Everything comes to a head at the big dance, when Scott, as the wolf, gets into it with Pamela's boyfriend, Mick (Mark Arnold). He lashes out and then gets freaked out at his wolf-like strength. But honestly, all he does is rip Mick's shirt open. He doesn't hurt anyone, but he runs away and decides he won't be the wolf anymore. Shortly thereafter, his basketball team is in the Big Championship Game, but Scott tells his team they can just win by being themselves. But, here's the thing, Scott is being himself by being the wolf. It's a part of his genetics and he can't change that, but it seems that the message is that suppressing parts of yourself for the larger good is okay. We know that's usually not how it works.

In *Can't Buy Me Love* (GOF issue #6), Ronald Miller goes from being a nerd to being popular by paying Cindy Mancini, the most popular girl at school, to date him. Ronald lets popularity go to his head, becomes a jerk, loses everything because he's an ass, and learns that being popular isn't important. That lesson works in *Can't Buy Me Love*, because Ronald was trying to be someone he wasn't. The lesson doesn't work in *Teen Wolf* because Scott is trying to suppress his true nature.

There is also really no issue with Scott being a wolf except that he became a jerk. This is not a horror movie, so Scott never attacks anyone or does anything really bad. So what's the problem? The wolf makes him an asshole? Can't he just learn to be the wolf and not be mean? That would be the better lesson.



Werewolf eyes override being underage at a bar.

In a review of *Teen Wolf*, critic Outlaw Vern says, “I can’t think of a way to see it as a metaphor without it becoming a completely fucked up movie. I suppose it ties in with his repeatedly expressed fear of being ‘average.’ The moral is that it’s okay to be yourself, whoever that is, even if you’re ‘average.’ But obviously he’s not average, the wolf is part of him, and he should be proud of that” [7].

The metaphor I think Vern is referring to is coming out as gay. There is a scene where Scott comes out to his friend Stiles (Jerry Levine) as a werewolf. As he’s tripping over his words, Stiles asks him outright if he’s gay (although he uses a slur that is not appropriate now). Scott says that he’s not gay, he’s a wolf, but what if Scott had been gay? Stiles said he wouldn’t have been able to handle it if Scott were gay. So would Scott have tried to hide his sexuality in the same way he talks about not being the wolf? If so, that would make it a fucked up movie. Honestly, though, I don’t think this was the writers’ intent. I don’t think they really had any kind of metaphor or any kind of meaning in mind when they wrote this script.

Aside from lacking a moral or lesson at the end of the movie, everything else about this movie just kind of sucks. There are no real stakes for Scott. His friends are annoyed with him, but they don’t



The wolf makeup looks so uncomfortable.

ever confront him. Boof gets mad, but she still agrees to hang with him at the dance. As I already said, he doesn’t experience violent outbursts or accidentally cause physical harm. His mom died before the start of the movie, but there’s no explanation of her death. It’s all just kind of blah and boring, much like how Scott complains about his small town life.

Despite everything I’ve said about this movie, *Teen Wolf* spawned numerous shows and movies. There was an animated TV series that ran from 1986-87, and there was a 1987 sequel called *Teen Wolf Too* that starred Jason Bateman as Scott’s cousin. In 2011, *Teen Wolf* the TV series aired on MTV and ran for six seasons, and it concluded with a 2023 movie called *Teen Wolf: The Movie*.

At the end of his review, Outlaw Vern says, “As far as I can tell *Teen Wolf* is not about anything, I guess that’s not a crime. It is weird though because it really seems like a story that lends itself to some subtext. It seems like an opportunity to say something about what it’s like to be that age. But really it’s just about wolves being good at basketball. Oh well” [8]. I’d have to agree. There is just not much you can take away from this movie. And, I guess that’s my main point. So, if you decide to watch it, don’t expect much.



The Futility of Conflict: The Dog Who Stopped the War

Dr. Rhonda Baughman

"Children behave ... and watch how you play."

— Ritchie Cordell, songwriter for Tommy James and the Shondells' "I Think We're Alone Now"

In search of a movie for this issue's theme, and secretly longing for comfort [1], I enthusiastically waved Rhonda's wee nostalgia flag and rewatched *The Journey of Natty Gann* (1985), erroneously assuming [2] my childhood infatuation with the film would seamlessly merge into adulthood. Mistaken but undeterred, I changed tactics—a risky move in the animal genre, certainly—but considering myself tough, I gallantly rode into the unknown with *The Dog Who Stopped the War* (1985). Excited from discovering a hidden gem, I settled in again, erroneously assuming forthcoming comfort based on the film's YouTube trailer [3]. At the film's conclusion and once I stopped crying, I realized my triple comedy of errors [4], but always one to transmute: I took a slow, deep breath, laughed at myself and felt better. While *Natty Gann* still held a few moments for me [5], certainly, *The Dog Who Stopped the War* hit harder, staying with me

for a long time after the final credits [6], headbutting my psyche in ways I never saw coming with its themes of childhood play, friendship, and the tragic consequences of war.

Dog Who Stopped highlights how childhood, and its accompanying bonds, can be tested and strained by competition and conflict, even much of which is merely invented for the sake of play. No regrets, though, sticking with this odd 92 minutes of French Canadian storytelling from director André Melançon, and the film had rewards other than a good cry. Long dormant memories resurfaced of my own first neighborhoods and first friendships; the magically electric current of snow days and the familial ease of sick days; and of course, my own first furry companion, my smart boy, an American Eskimo we'll only name here as Fat. So, to say it was an emotional first watch would be an understatement. The second watch brings in details missed the first time, but it's no less emotional once I started to notice things characters could have done differently.



The snowfort to end all snowforts.

Winter vacation [7] has begun for the neighborhood ruffians, initially appearing to me simply as little bullies, and I noticed at least eight of them (however, not only is my French lip-reading limited but the cut I watched was rough and dubbed blandly in English) [8]. More to the point, after a rousing round of show and tell, where young Luc's war bugle took center stage, the children are walking home together, deciding how best to spend that winter break, and somehow war seems super exciting. So, plans begin in earnest, everyone certain there can be one winner, certain there can even be a winner at all by the time they return to school. I would envy that kind of confidence if I wasn't old enough to understand the senselessness of war. Despite the overarching idea that "war" should be the vacation's festivities, I loved watching kids running around outside being kids—wagons and toboggans and skis and everyone all bundled up like burritos. Pre-cell phone era was wonderful: a verbal "meet in the clubhouse at noon" or "see you at the place after dinner" instead of a texted "WYD."

Sides are chosen, with little Luc (or "General Luc" as this chap fancies himself) emerging as the leader of the biggest group, the Attackers. His comrades include Ti-Jacques, Maranda, Chabot, and the Leroux twins, as well as a number of others later lured. The outnumbered Defenders are led by Marc, and he's flanked by his buds François (the genius designer of their hilariously elaborate snow castle-fortress) as well as Pierre and Jean-Louis. Siblings Sophie and Lucie also join the side of the



A kiddie army had a dog and Cléo was her name-o.

castle-builders. Neutral parties include weird but spirited boy of the woods, Nicky [9], and Marc's adorable dog Cleo. Nothing is simple in war, however, and although the initial meet-cute was hostile, the stirrings (trappings) of young love bloom between Sophie and opposition leader, Luc. Based on François' designs, and as their name implies, the castle-builders construct a massive, elaborate snow fortress (a probable representation of the children's growing division) but complete with lovely extras like little cubbies, a hot chocolate pot, radios, and a snowball stockpile, just to mention a few items that made me smile. I mean, I recall my friends and I tired quickly just trying to create a one-person igloo. These kids? They've created what basically equates to a castle with a toboggan escape door.

But soon, Luc and his army arrive, ready to take what they did not help build! Wielding wooden swords and unleashing whoops and cries, wearing makeshift armor, the Attackers' attempts to scale snowy fortress walls with a ladder is met with injury, so they must retreat. They regroup and stage a second, more covert attack, but they are spotted and beaten back again with snowballs soaked in ink, thereby soaking just about everyone (and dog) involved. Still a third attack sees Luc and his army dressed in garbage bags (as protection from more ink) but this time they manage to take the fort, but all Defenders escape (secret toboggan door!). Unfortunately, no one admits they've had enough, so the rival groups meet, agreeing to have one final battle to determine the official winter



Rink a dink a bottle of ink.

break war winner.

The “classic” label slapped onto this film [10] is warranted and despite its relatively unknown status outside its native Canada, I absorbed and experienced more of an impact watching *Dog Who Stopped* than I did *Natty Gann*—that was surprising [11]. *Dog Who* left me humming with overall literary vibrations. I searched for Jack London adaptations of *How to Build a Fire* after *Dog* ended—that’s how excited I was. Between both films, *Natty Gann* and *Dog Who*, there were no performances that weren’t heartfelt, no themes of resilience and camaraderie that didn’t hit hard, nothing about plot structure or pacing that I can complain about, but I have a sneaking suspicion it’s the combination of synchronicity and a film’s overall atmosphere and setting that I either connect with in the moment or not.

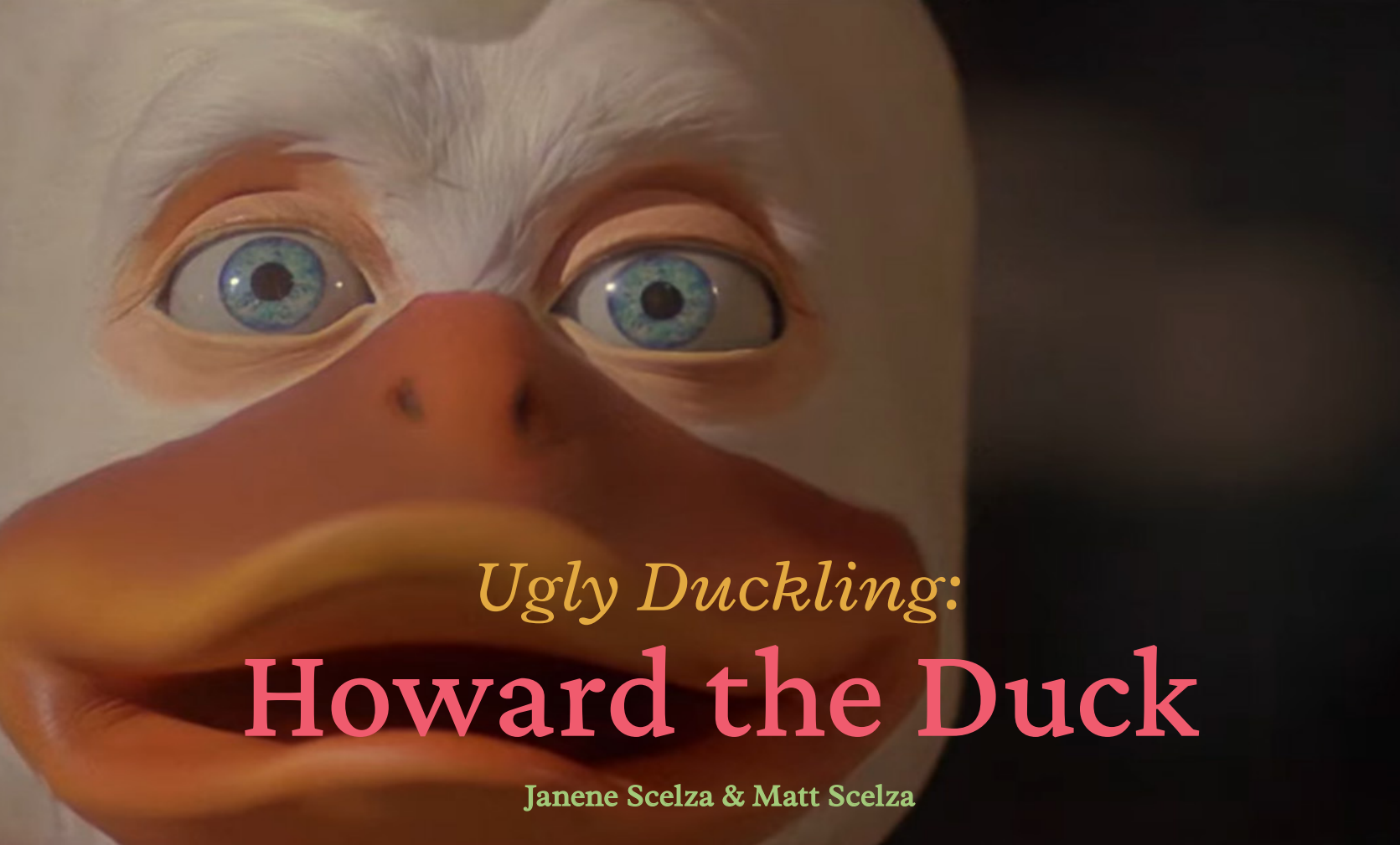
Natty’s brutally impoverished, Depression era, westward-bound journey didn’t quite hold the appeal that *Dog Who’s* snowy winter break setting did, which was at times idyllic and playful, then ruthless and unrelenting—and placed alongside my own stark Ohio snowy winter setting, albeit while safely snuggled under covers with my own dog [12], and watching from within my well-heated house while battling the flu for the first time in over two decades? Oh yeah, it was going to be *Dog Who Stopped* all the way that would resonate the most and encompass my thoughts and land deserving of the most attention.



Pick up some *Calvin & Hobbes*, kids.

All of the above truths of childhood, friendships, and war aside, *The Dog Who Stopped the War* isn’t really a movie for those seeking comfort [13]. Do children who were clearly friends decide instead to engage in openly hostile behavior despite initial protests and obvious signs to the contrary? Yes. Can painfully innocent friendships be rigorously tested and strained by competition and conflict even though markedly invented? Yes. Must everyone experience something traumatic before they cease with the childish thinking that “playing war is fun”? Still, probably yes. Does the dog die? Of course, the dog dies.

The dog dies in a most dramatically heartbreaking way, attempting to be the unifying figure amidst the chaos and division, giving its life in the process when caught in the purposeless [14] crossfire. Fending off that lump in my throat and fighting actual burning tears, my final thought before giving in to the floodgate was: Hm. Maybe I should have gone with the film for sure where I knew the dog lived [15]. But really though, who doesn’t need to be reminded from time to time with contradictory imagery (such as the snowy setting serving as its own character and providing both a playful backdrop and a stark metaphor for the cold realities of conflict, as well as showing how the idyllic winter vacation landscape contrasts with the escalating tension of the “war”). But what *The Dog Who Stopped the War* really wants to leave behind is the futility of endless conflicts, the cost of repeated divisions, and the value of peace [16]—and this is a message for children and adults.



Ugly Duckling: Howard the Duck

Janene Scelza & Matt Scelza

Howard the Duck is an 80's ugly duckling; the familiar tale of a major studio film backed with big money and big expectations that flopped HARD. What a shame that the film's failures would overshadow the legacy of its source material, Steve Gerber's early 70's Marvel comic of the same name about an anthropomorphic crime-fighting duck plucked from his Duckland home and dropped in grimy Cleveland to battle vampiric steer, psychotic frogman, and other deranged creatures. Movie Howard had little in common with the comic, other than the basic concepts. No one seemed to know what to do with him anyways. His cameos in recent *Guardians of the Galaxy* epics seem to hint at a potential do-over, and whatever grumblings there may be about the plague of mediocre remakes, it certainly couldn't be worse than this shit.

George Lucas curiously wanted to adapt the comic for the big screen after *American Graffiti* wrapped in the early 70s [1]. (His *Graffiti* collaborators joined him; William Hyuck wrote and directed

Howard, and Hyuck's wife, Gloria Katz, was a producer). And yet, it would take another 15 years for the movie to actually see the light of day. Despite the lengthy timeline, it seems like both Lucas and the studio clipped the duck's wings when it finally did come time to make the movie, stuffing him into theaters for the 1986 summer run. By then, Lucas needed Howard to be a financial success in order to pay the bills on Skywalker Ranch. Meanwhile, Universal, who passed on several of Lucas's better films, was hoping they'd have a hit on their hands, but sooner rather than later [2].

The tight production schedule meant that the film, originally conceived in the more practical animated medium, would instead be live-action, which in turn, created significant obstacles for the special effects crew [3]. This is why the star of the show looks like a *Garbage Pail Kids Movie* creature and moves like a Chuck E Cheese animatronic. Howard's hideous puppetry might've been forgivable if the script wasn't such a stinker. In the end, the drake only fetched a fraction of its reportedly

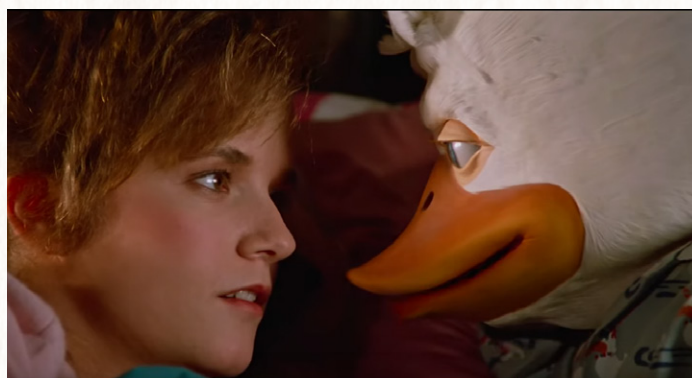


Bev discovers her new roommate.

\$40 million budget [4], and the studio executives raced to find their scapegoats.

More recent reviews have tried to be positive, saying that *Howard* is a unique film. Maybe so, but the opportunities to be found in Gerber's cynical, satirical comic, felt largely squandered. Comic Howard first appeared in *Adventures Into Fear* as one of the hapless victims of a jumbled time continuum. He is recruited to help thwart a potential fascist plot. (BTW, those early issues are worth revisiting, and you can find them all in the complete *Howard the Duck* collections published a few years ago [5]). During the mission, Howard accidentally falls into a void, landing in Cleveland—and his own series—where he eventually makes himself useful battling wacky foes.

Movie Howard is an incredibly mundane creature by comparison. (He wanted to be a musician, but wound up becoming an accountant...). By the time the opening credits and its bevy of duck puns wrap, the unlikable duck is inexplicably and abruptly plucked from his Duckland digs and deposited at a Tech Noir knock off somewhere in Cleveland. There, he meets Beverly (Lea Thompson), a typical 80s punk rock sweetheart who gets aggressively hit on by just about every schmuck in the movie (at least she gets to sing). Bev takes pity on the stray and tries to help him get home. They seemed to be hinting at something meaningful when Bev and Howard share their backstories, but instead, much of the first half of the film is just the same schtick over and over: passersby are mo-



A very awkward romance.

mentarily shocked by the walking, talking duck, if they notice him at all. Also, Bev and Howard getting cozy also leads to some VERY awkward bedroom teasing.

Bev calls on her nerdy scientist friend Phil (Tim Robbins) for help. He turns out to be more like the towel boy for the snobby higher-ups at an exceptionally well-funded museum, but he proves useful. Howard eventually learns that his trip to Earth was no accident—the scientists are to blame, but they can reverse the process. However, their attempt to beam him back home doesn't work and they transport yet another alien to Earth. The alien inhabits the body of the head scientist, played by Jeffrey Jones. He's the best thing about this movie, but and really could've been a fun villain in the far more exciting *Men in Black* movies.

Jones slowly transforms from confident head scientist to a snarling, exposition-dumping monster intent on destroying Earth (rude on all counts!). He festers on the sidelines while Howard disables asshole truckers with pies (yes...pies) at a family-friendly diner that apparently sees that kind of action all the time but still manages to look like an ordinary place. The demonically possessed scientist eventually absconds with Bev, and they are chased by Howard and Phil in a low-flying prop plane for way too damn long. You can guess how the rest goes, and double shiny nickels if your bingo card included Howard rocking out on stage with Bev during the closing credits. Like, what are we even doing?



Mutant Jones goes classic villain.

The movie garnered the expected slew of Razzie noms, including Worst Picture of the year, which it co-won (Prince's *Under the Cherry Moon*), and the Worst Picture of the Decade, lost to *Mommie Dearest* [6]. Siskel & Ebert included *Howard the Duck* among their picks for Worst Films of 1986, with Ebert ending on the most positive note he could: that with some tweaks, Howard could have been a decent movie [7].

Indeed, course correction wouldn't have been too hard. They could have ditched the duck boobs, the duck condoms, and a few of the off-color jokes and did a PG movie about a wise-cracking alien duck stranded on Earth who befriends the sweet quasi-punker (Thompson) that tries to help him get home, kind of like *Short Circuit* (also out in 1986). Or try do a PG-13 comedy about a duck-man-thing adapting to life on Earth, kind of like *The Coneheads* (1993). It was almost there.

Maybe Howard was a little too before its time, more apt for the experimentalism and goofiness of the early 90s. Shamelessly ride the coattails of *Darkwing Duck*, or go for a raunchy black comedy like another talking duck (*Duckman*) or something worthy of MTV's *Liquid Television*. Or, dump the duck altogether and let loveable Lea Thompson be the star of the show. Partner her up with a cool sidekick (not Howard or Robbins), and let them be the ones to save the world from evil Jeffrey Jones.

Maybe, it just needed a touch of Steve Gutten-



Duck's gotta take flight somehow.

berg? Granted, most of these options would still have been quite an insulting tribute to Howard's namesake, especially the option where he isn't in the movie at all. And, it would have been just as an insulting outcome for something backed by big Lucas/Universal dollars. They'd just be passable, not great, but you work with what you got.

Howard the Duck ultimately felt more like rushing to finish the homework minutes before turning it in. You're given quite a unique property—an effing Marvel series about a talking duck!—but no willingness to commit to something, and maybe no idea what you're being asked to do anyway, other than to make Daddy Lucas and Universal a ton of moolah. There was at least one silver lining: Lucasfilm's animation studio went on the auction block when this movie failed and became Pixar.

The fascinating history of the notorious dud continues with Lea Thompson announcing as recently as 2022 that she wanted to direct a sequel. During an appearance on Fallon's *Tonight Show*, she said that she and Chip Zdarsky, who worked on the comic books, pitched the idea to Marvel [8]. While we're kind of baffled by her eagerness for the project given how little she was given to do in the original film, we have total faith in her abilities. She's already directed several TV episodes, including some sci-fi stuff. So, channeling Guidance Counselor extraordinaire, Mrs. Cummings, we say: "Girl...you better work it!" (if Marvel says OK, of course).



Are You Aware of Your Drooling Problem?

Turner & Hooch

Jessica MacLeish

In 1989, following his star-making turns acting with Peter Scolari (*Bosom Buddies*), Daryl Hannah (*Splash*), Shelley Long (*The Money Pit*), and Zoltar the fortune-teller machine (*Big*), Tom Hanks released a movie in which his co-star was...a dog. Yes, that's right, 1989's *Turner & Hooch* found Hanks starring as Turner, an uptight, fastidious (how uptight and fastidious? He keeps a dust-buster in his car...) police investigator with a heart of gold, and a French mastiff named Beasley [1] as Hooch, the scrappy, slobbery, forever loyal dog who helps Turner crack both a murder and a money laundering scheme (the two crimes are related). Hooch also helps Turner loosen up and fall in love with a kind-yet-sharp veterinarian (played by Mare Winningham). If you're thinking that sounds like a lot of plot for one movie, we'll get to that, just sit. Stay. Good reader.

Touchstone paid \$1 million for the *Turner & Hooch* script, the most they'd ever paid for a movie at that time [2], and the script ultimately

boasted five credited writers (Dennis Shryack, Michael Blodgett, Daniel Petrie, Jr., Jim Cash, Jack Epps, Jr.). Henry Winkler, aka The Fonz, was originally attached to direct the film, but had a falling out with Hanks and was replaced 13 days into production with Roger Spottiswoode [3]. Winkler apparently got on well with the dog playing Hooch, at least.

Would Winkler have done a good job directing *Turner & Hooch*? Sure, probably, but I also think Spottiswoode did well with the (so-so) material he was given, and the performances he was able to coax out of Hanks and Beasley are the highlight of the movie—and if Winkler wasn't getting along with one of the co-stars, that surely would've negatively impacted the film. Now, to me, a feud between The Fonz and Forrest Gump feels like my dads are fighting, so I'm just going to move right along and hope they can patch things up on their own. There's still time. C'mon dads!

When it premiered in July 1989, it won the box



Turner lays down the house rules.

office on its debut weekend, earning just over \$12 million [4], and eventually raking in over \$71 million domestically during its run [5]. But even a big box office success doesn't always find its flowers among the critic class, many of whom gave this film mixed/middling reviews when it premiered—mostly due to the plot and writing, not the performances.

Hanks is the star of the show, obviously, with the critical consensus on the *Turner & Hooch* Rotten Tomatoes page reading “Tom Hanks makes Turner and Hooch more entertaining than it might seem on paper” [6]. Writing in *The Washington Post*, Desson Thomson said: “Hanks...is always a movie's best friend” [7], while in *The New York Times*, Caryn James concluded her mixed review by calling Hanks a “brilliant understated comedian” who was “the best part of this film” [8].

As an offshoot of all that high (and deserving, at least in this writer's opinion) praise, Hanks' chemistry with the dog actor (Beasley) got praise, too. Critic Michael Wilmington wrote in the *Los Angeles Times* that Hanks and Beasley “work together with the seeming near-telepathic sensitivity of longtime vaudeville partners” [9].

Let's not overlook Hooch here; while I may be Tom Hanks' #1 fan, I give credit where credit is due: the portrayal of Hooch is wonderful. He's slobbery, he's wild, he's adorable, he Parent Traps Turner and Dr. Emily with the help of the vet's pet collie. While I tend to lean toward Scott



Carl Winslow decides to transfer to patrol.

Turner's end of the “dog lover” spectrum in real life, when faced with a giant dog licking or jumping on me, in the movies? I love 'em.

Beasley the French mastiff (also called a Dogue de Bordeaux) hailed from Wisconsin, and he and his fellow stunt dogs were trained by Clint Rowe (who also makes an appearance in the film as one of the ASPCA officers) [10]. Beasley retired from the movie biz after *Turner & Hooch*, and lived with Rowe until he died in 1992 [11].

Hanks told Larry King in 2001 that the work he did on *Turner & Hooch* was the hardest he ever had to do because of his co-star [12]. Not because Beasley was a diva, no no, but because everything Hanks did as Turner in scenes with Hooch had to first and foremost come from reacting to Hooch. Of the stakeout scene, in particular, Hanks said: “The whole thing was about, whatever this dog does, I react to. We will not ask the dog to do anything specifically, this dog will just do things ... And I will react. That was the hardest I've ever worked” [13]. Does this make Tom Hanks an improv star? Discuss.

But really, whoever thought Tom Hanks was afraid of a little hard work? Watching *Turner & Hooch*, it's clear why nearly 10 years later, movie executives felt confident that Hanks could carry a movie with only a Wilson volleyball as his scene partner: The. Man. Can. Act. In this movie, Tom Hanks gets to play: a romantic lead, a serious (almost too serious) investigator with a mushy



Coach Fox, how could you?!

center underneath his hard shell, and one half of the Odd Couple with a dog as the other half. He nails each and every role.

Beasley does a stellar job—there were many scenes during which I wanted to reach through the screen and give that good boy a head scratch or a hug, and I’m not usually one to cuddle with dogs. Hanks does a stellar job reacting to him and acting around Beasley. The movie itself has some stark tonal shifts, thanks to its many different plotlines, but I could watch Tom Hanks watching paint dry. I have no doubt he’d bring gravitas, humor, humanity, and charm to it, just as he does to *Turner & Hooch*.

NBC made a television pilot based on the film that instead aired as a TV movie in the summer of 1990. In 2021, Disney+ released a *Turner & Hooch* series on the platform [14]. I get it—it’s a rich piece of IP and if you get the right comedic actor and well-trained pooch, there’s lots of family fun potential in the idea (though can anyone hold a candle to Hanks as Turner? I’m not sure.).

Even so, I said I’d get to the stuffed plot of the original movie in time, and you’ve been patient enough. Certainly, there is a lot of plot going on in *Turner & Hooch*; a script with five credited writers is doomed to feel a little patchworked together. It’s unclear in the middle of the movie where all the plots are going and what kind of movie we’re watching. Is it a buddy comedy? A hard-boiled crime movie? A romance? For what



Turner mourns his giant slobbering pooch pal.

it’s worth, I would watch a full rom-com starring Hanks and Mare Winningham and their sparkling chemistry.

The plot messiness has its ups and downs. The crime plot, in particular, really feels like an afterthought, with the eventual reveal (which I won’t spoil here) and solution feeling just a tad too neat and somehow also too random. The murder that kickstarted the whole overall plot of the movie by delaying Turner’s move to Sacramento was really just a murder of convenience, after all! Poor Amos—only knifed in the back because he was in the wrong place at the wrong time—deserved better. And so did Hooch, by the way! RIP Hooch.

I am actually still in shock that the movie ended the way it did, with the Hooch of it all. How are you going to let the dog die?! Yet the buddy comedy aspects, with Hooch and Turner learning to live together and love each other, were a real highlight of the movie, and even the romance scenes tickled me.

Ultimately, Hanks’ performance manages to elevate the movie just enough to make it an enjoyable watch overall. I can’t say I’ll be rewatching it anytime soon, but you may catch me turning on *Castaway* tonight to revel once more in Hanks’ ability to act with non-humans.

Endnotes

Metal Discontention: Animalympics

Release Date: July 4, 1982

Written By: Steven Lisberger & Michael Fremer

Directed By: Steven Lisberger

Essay By: Stephanie McDevitt

[1] "Gilda Radner." Wikipedia.
<https://tinyurl.com/yc858ubb>

[2] "Animation Anecdotes #277." Cartoon Research. 26 August 2016.
<https://tinyurl.com/4dejs9ka>

[3] Ibid.

[4] "1980 Summer Olympics Boycott." Wikipedia. <https://tinyurl.com/5e2vnnvn>

[5] "Animation Anecdotes #277." Cartoon Research. 26 August 2016.
<https://tinyurl.com/4dejs9ka>

[6] "Animalympics." Wikipedia.
<https://tinyurl.com/4aebhx7p>

[7] "Scooby's All-Star Laff-a-Lympics." Hanna-Barbera Wiki. <https://tinyurl.com/mr23ryaz>

[8] "Animalympics." Don Markstein's Toonopedia. 2010.
<https://tinyurl.com/3xbcb3xb>

[9] "Animalympics (Lisberger films, 1980)." My Year Without Walt Disney Animation Studios. 30 May 2015.
<https://tinyurl.com/ye27f8ch>

[10] "Animalympics." Wikipedia.
<https://tinyurl.com/4aebhx7p>

Damn the Mouse! Save the Empire! The Secret of NIMH

Release date: July 2, 1982

Written by: Don Bluth, John Pomeroy, Gary Goldman, Will Finn (Story); Robert C. O'Brien (novel)

Directed by: Don Bluth

Essay by: Janene Scelza

[1] "The Process of 'NIMH'" (Animation Obsessive, 2024) <https://tinyurl.com/dt45ukb9> and "How the Secret of NIMH Started an Animation Revolution" (Video posted by Modern Mouse on YouTube, 2022) <https://tinyurl.com/yz5yk72u>

[2] "Disney's Nine Old Men" (Wikipedia) <https://tinyurl.com/mryk3wsb>

[3] "Escaping the Laboratory: The Rodent Experiments of John B. Calhoun & Their Cultural Influence" (The Journal of Social History, 2009) <https://tinyurl.com/4mawfaw4>

[4] More details about sequels are found in "The Failure & Redemption of The Secret of NIMH & The Disney Walk Out" (Video posted by Secret Galaxy, 2023) <https://tinyurl.com/42arzn36>

[5] "The Disney/Don Bluth Animation War - The Story of a Rise, Rall & Renaissance" (Video posted by Matt Draper on YouTube, 2023) <https://tinyurl.com/thtsa63d>

Monsters are Real: Cujo

Release Date: August 12, 1983

Written by: Don Carlos Dunaway and Barbara Turner

Directed by: Lewis Teague

Essay By: Katheryn Hans

[1] [VIDEO] "Dog Days: The Making of Cujo" (42nd Street Films, 2007) <https://tinyurl.com/2ak5v5a9>

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ibid.

[5] "St. Bernard (dog breed)." Wikipedia. <https://tinyurl.com/2rwyj3sp>

[6] [VIDEO] "Dog Days: The Making of Cujo" (42nd Street Films, 2007) <https://tinyurl.com/2ak5v5a9>

[7] Ibid.

[8] Ibid.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.

[11] Ibid.

[12] In *Dog Days*, Dee Wallace explains that the movie was filmed in winter, the sweat was actually glycerine; they were, in fact, freezing.

[13] Stephen King. *Cujo*. 1981. (book), emphasis in the original.

[14] [VIDEO] "Dog Days: The Making of *Cujo*" (42nd Street Films, 2007)
<https://tinyurl.com/2ak5v5a9>

[15] Ibid.

[16] Stephen King. *Cujo*. 1981. (book)

Running With the Pack: *Never Cry Wolf*

Release Date: October 7, 1983

Written by: Curtis Hanson, Sam Hamm, Richard Kletter

Directed by: Carroll Ballard

Essay by: Sebastian Gregory

[1] "Never Cry Wolf" (Wikipedia)
<https://tinyurl.com/8e5ay6uc>

[2] "Visual History with Carroll Ballard" (Directors Guild of America, 2017) <https://tinyurl.com/yzfdb7bu>

[3] "Filming *Never Cry Wolf*" (The New York Times Magazine, 1983) <https://tinyurl.com/3shawsvw>

Without Meaning or Moral: *Teen Wolf*

Release Date: August 23 1985

Written by: Jeph Loeb and Matthew Weisman

Directed by: Rod Daniel

Essay by: Stephanie McDevitt

[1] "Teen Wolf" (Vern's Reviews on the Films of Cinema, 2020) <https://tinyurl.com/3vx8yde3>

[2] "Valley Girls (1983 film). Wikipedia."
<https://tinyurl.com/2m7stckr>

[3] "Teen Wolf," Wikipedia.
<https://tinyurl.com/42x8f8eb>

[4] Ibid.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Ibid.

[7] "Teen Wolf" (Vern's Reviews on the Films of Cinema, 2020) <https://tinyurl.com/3vx8yde3>

[8] Ibid.

The Futility of Conflict: *The Dog Who Stopped The War*

Release Date: October 25, 1985 (Canada)

Written by: Roger Cantin

Directed by: André Melançon

Essay by: Dr. Rhonda Baughman

[1] 2024 was exhausting. Don't you have a comfort movie for the type of year we had?

[2] For the second time. When will I learn?

[3] Seriously? Would I ever learn to stop assuming? I know it's human nature but come on! I did have some grounds, too: I'd just been gifted a big, pretty new TV for Christmas, and I had to try it out for *Dog Who Stopped*. Top tier sadness in HD. Additionally, from the Wiki: "The *Dog Who Stopped the War* (*Laguerre des tuques*) was the first film in the *Tales for All* (*Contes pour tous*) series of children's movies [same group that would bring *The Peanut Butter Solution* (1985)] created by Les Productions la Fête." I do feel somewhat betrayed by the box cover art, which did not suggest forthcoming trauma—it was cute and cartoonish. This in fact may be an animated remake, *Snowtime!* (*La Guerre des tuques 3D*), released in 2015.

[4] Excited by the new, duped by the trailer, and then betrayed by the marketing.

[5] Cute Meredith Salenger in a cute outfit and a wolf! That was about it. I was as surprised as anyone the film struck me as tedious and made it wholly difficult for me to suspend my usual disbelief as easily as I generally can.

[6] Whew, that closing song was a tearjerker: "L'amour a pris son temps" ("Love Is On Our Side") by Nathalie Simard.

[7] I just found out there's a sort-of sequel, a kinda-almost sequel if you will: The 2001 film *The Hidden Fortress* (*La Forteresse suspendue*): childhood buds become rival groups war gaming during summer break. The film included some characters from *The Dog Who Stopped the War* as—wait for it—parents of the new children.

[8] A bangin' Blu-ray release clocked at close to \$30.00.

[9] "Danny" in the Wiki.

[10] Proven by the last release with all the extras! <https://tinyurl.com/bdfhhu5z>

[11] Am I just sick of Disney maybe?

[12] A half-beagle, half Aussie Shepherd named Pumpkin. Check her out on the inside cover of this issue!

[13] Or hygge, as I often refer to it. Everyone has their go to "comfort movies" as it were, and although newer-released movies and movies new to me can become comfort movies, this one just does not have the needed elements for me.

[14] Unless that purpose is to teach a lesson about death and loss and the fact everything has consequences of course, but a furry life is cut short—it's annoying.

[15] I love the John Wick series, but I still have to "get snacks" at the puppy's death scene.

[16] From the Wiki: "The film won the Golden Reel Award at the 6th Genie Awards in 1985, as Canada's top-grossing film of the previous year."

Ugly Duckling: Howard the Duck

Release date: August 1, 1986

Directed by: William Hyuck

Written by: Willard Huyck and Gloria Katz

Essay by: Janene Scelza and Matt Scelza

[1] "Howard the Duck (film)" Wikipedia. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard_the_Duck_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard_the_Duck_(film))

[2] [VIDEO] "The Disastrous History of Howard the Duck" (Yesterworld Entertainment, 2022) <https://tinyurl.com/yc7p8dkk>

[3] Ibid.

[4] "Howard the Duck" (Box Office Mojo) <https://tinyurl.com/s2rfypd8>

[5] "Howard the Duck: The Complete Collection Series" <https://tinyurl.com/4ctt5pf4>

[6] "Howard the Duck: Awards" (IMDB) <https://tinyurl.com/54y32dsb>

[7] [VIDEO] "Siskel And Ebert-Worst Movies of 1986" (Andy sMITH, 2001) <https://tinyurl.com/58nx6nat>

[8] "Lea Thompson Still Wants to Direct a 'Howard the Duck' Sequel for Marvel: 'You Need Some More Women Directors!' (Video)" (The Wrap, 2022) <https://tinyurl.com/nhj59a7c>

Are You Aware of Your Drooling Problem? Turner & Hooch

Release Date: July 28, 1989

Written by: Dennis Shryack, Michael Blodgett, Daniel Petrie, Jr., Jim Cash, Jack Epps, Jr.

Directed by: Roger Spottiswoode

Essay by: Jessica MacLeish

[1] "Beasley wins 'Hooch' pooch cattle call." Los Angeles Daily News, July 31, 1989. <https://tinyurl.com/73f65jw6>

[2] "Dennis Shryack, Screenwriter on Clint Eastwood's 'The Gauntlet' and 'Pale Rider' Dies at 80. The Hollywood Reporter. September 15, 2016. <https://tinyurl.com/5b9beyas>

[3] "Henry Winkler Shades Tom Hanks After 'Turner & Hooch' Firing: 'Love That Dog.'" Decider. October 4, 2019. <https://tinyurl.com/4d9ayhxx>

[4] Box Office Mojo <https://tinyurl.com/bp6byac7>

[5] Ibid.

[6] Rotten Tomatoes: <https://tinyurl.com/3mzn2ymc>

[7] "Turner & Hooch." The Washington Post. July 28, 1989. <https://tinyurl.com/28k8z2vs>

[8] "Review/Film: A Droll Buddy Who Drools and Eats a Stereo Speaker." The New York Times. July 28, 1989. <https://tinyurl.com/mucb48a7>

[9] "Hanks and His Dog Charm in 'Turner & Hooch.'" The Los Angeles Times. July 28, 1989. <https://tinyurl.com/3kbyfn2x>

[10] <https://tinyurl.com/2p98dvvk>

[11] Ibid.

[12] Ibid.

[13] Ibid.

[14] "Disney+ Sets Premiere Dates, First Images for 'Turner & Hooch'..." Deadline. February 24, 2021. <https://tinyurl.com/bdfpyuwX>

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