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What We're Watching



Greetings from The Paley Center for Media's Education Department!

Teen Transmitters Takeover!

For eight weeks, What We're Watching is being taken over by the Paley Center's Teen Transmitters internship cohort!

Each week a different pair of interns will share their thoughts on the 2023 media landscape along with personalized recommendations. This week we hear from **Wilson Rumble**, a senior at Bard High School Early College and **Jordan Armstead**, a senior at the NYC Museum High School. Enjoy this unique educational opportunity to hear directly from young voices about media that impacts them!

As always, if you have any questions, thoughts, or ideas, don't hesitate to reach out to us at eduny@paleycenter.org.

Happy viewing,

Rebekah Fisk, Director of Education

Carlos Pareja, Manager of Education

What We're Watching: Video Game Adaptations in Film and TV

Hollywood is an industry built on investors whose goal is to make as much money as possible. The latest ploy to do so is through reboots, sequels, and remakes. These are a safer investment than original movies because they pull a guaranteed crowd and have roughly the same potential to be huge hits. Perhaps the most misfit group of movies in this trend are the long-awaited sequels which are nowhere near as safe as some of their counterparts. There is no guarantee the older audience will show up, or that the movie hasn't been forgotten since its initial run. Despite this, many have been made and some have even proven to be massively successful both commercially and critically.

This Week's Recommendations:



Blade Runner (1982) vs. Blade Runner 2049 (2017)

Age Recommendation: 16+

Available to rent

The original *Blade Runner* has had a tumultuous history since its release. It was a failure at the box office due to major competition from titles releasing around the same time. It's had numerous different cuts. One of which, the director's cut, was made with the intention of setting up a sequel. That sequel, *Blade Runner 2049*, would eventually arrive thirty-five years later. The original *Blade Runner* eventually made a name for itself as a cult classic and stayed that way until the sequel was released to nearly unanimous critical acclaim.

Blade Runner was something of a pioneer in its genre. The opening sequence with iconic shots of its dystopic LA setting is what set it apart from other movies of its time. Early on we are introduced to its main subject matter, Replicants, which are robots that are nearly identical to humans but with heightened physical attributes. The issue is that when it comes down to it, it's nearly impossible to tell whether or not a Replicant is human without being put through the "Voight-Kampff test." This test is designed to elicit an emotional reaction in order to figure out whether or not the test subject is a real human. Afterwards, the movie begins to follow Rick Deckard, portrayed by Harrison Ford, a "Blade Runner" who hunts down Replicants.

Using Replicants and their struggle as its centerpiece, the movie confronts some powerful themes about what it means to be human and how we

experience our lives. It manages to get pretty nuanced despite the fact that it's an action movie and spends the large majority of its runtime following Deckard's violent pursuit of a group of Replicants. Certain scenes of the movie have become downright iconic, such as the previously mentioned Voight-Kampff test and the incredibly moving "Tears in the Rain" final speech given by the main antagonist. The movie leaves a lot open to interpretation, with imagery in certain scenes hinting at hidden ideas about the characters, and Deckard's love interest being a Replicant.

However, in my opinion the greatest thing the original *Blade Runner* does is set the stage for its sequel: *Blade Runner 2049*. The first shift between the two is the introduction of a new main character; an unnamed Replicant referred to only as Officer K who works as a Blade Runner hunting down his own kind. He serves as a new centerpiece for the story that will eventually make its way back to Deckard, but make no mistake, he is the main character of this movie. K is played by Ryan Gosling, who puts on an incredibly iconic and realistic performance in order to bring the character to life.

Blade Runner 2049 didn't make as much as expected at the box office but still released to nearly unanimous critical acclaim. It has since permeated popular culture much like its predecessor, with its main character becoming a near analogous symbol for the themes the movie confronts. Although slow paced, unlike the first movie, *Blade Runner 2049* tells an incredible story through its cinematography and characters. It serves as a faithful, but inherently transformative sequel to the first movie. This is my favorite movie, not only because of its story and characters, but because of the ingenious way it builds off the story on which it is based. It's a truly exceptional example of a sequel, so much so that the only thing I wish it did better was sell tickets so that more movies like this would be made in the future. Both movies are incredible in their own right, even if I believe that *Blade Runner 2049* aims higher with the story it's trying to tell and successfully hits its target.



Raiders of the Lost Ark (1981) vs. Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny (2023)

Age Recommendation: 10+

Where to Watch: Disney+ / Rental

Picking two movie franchises featuring Harrison Ford as a key character was not an intentional move, but certainly a welcome occurrence. He's an actor that has very much been caught up in the torrent of modern sequels, with the movies included here as well as the recent *Star Wars* trilogy. It's incredibly interesting to see the now aged actor reprises roles from his heyday and the steps taken to bring the long dormant characters back into the limelight with Ford's new look.

It's unlikely that *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, the original Indiana Jones movie, will ever be topped regardless of how many more sequels and spinoffs are released. There are simply too many amazing scenes, many of which have become truly iconic (when someone says action/adventure movies; I think of the boulder chase scene). The line that the movie runs between realism and mysticism that culminates in the epic face-melting scene is so much fun. It's an element that simply cannot be reproduced in a sequel once you know the movie is willing to break the rules of reality, but the first time around it was all so satisfying.

However, the standout nature of the first film does not discredit the rest of the series. It has some amazing entries that very much carry the ethos of the original, except for maybe the fourth film, *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* (2008), which is an identifiable low point. The question is

whether the newest addition to the series restores it to its former glory or sends it further down the spiral. But the answer isn't quite so simple.

When you go to see *Indiana Jones and the Dial of Destiny* you're not going to see the new Indiana Jones movie, you're going to see what stands in place of it. Don't get me wrong, what stands in place of it isn't bad, but it feels disconnected. This is most likely due to the main premise of the movie. He's now an aged professor who is coping with retirement, divorce, and a world that has moved on without him. The opening scene of the movie consists of Indy participating in a series of high octane acts of espionage, combat, and thievery in a fortress clad with swastikas and then onboard a Nazi train as the allied bombs fall around him and the war comes to a close. He clutches the artifact he's recovered like his life depends on it. We then immediately switch to a tired Dr. Jones waking up alone in his apartment, pissed at his neighbors for partying. As he moves to his job at the university he faces a class of disinterested students and is surprised with a retirement party to which he is indifferent. This contrast sets the tone for the story. After the fourth installment it felt like a proper conclusion for Indy was needed. It has a powerful message about not being able to live in the past no matter how enchanting it appears to be, and concludes his story on a good note.

But it can't decide whether to be a story about this aged Dr. Jones or a classic Indiana Jones adventure. Because of this indecision it tries to do both at once, and does both half-heartedly. This is my main gripe with the movie. However, I don't blame any dedicated Indiana Jones fan for being disappointed in the direction it went. It doesn't stand up to the original trilogy and doesn't have the confidence to break away from the formula that it's already inevitably detached from given the time gap. Despite all that, I can confidently say I enjoyed (what will hopefully be) the last installment in the Indiana Jones series.



Godzilla (1998) vs. Godzilla: King of Monsters (2021)

Age Recommendation: 11+

Godzilla available to rent/ King of Monsters is on Max/Prime

I am a lover of older movies that lack plot connections and have unexplainable endings, such as the long running monster movie franchise featuring Godzilla, the famous 300-foot-tall lizard. The first American production in this series, *Godzilla* (1998), follows a confusing format. This installment starts off with Niko Tatopuolus, an earthworm scientist who is enlisted by the military claiming only he can save New York from Godzilla. An unlikely hero, he plays the die-hard environmentalist that tries to understand the monster and defend it against the impulsive US military. He makes the discovery that Godzilla is actually a female and has been reproducing asexually in NYC tunnels. An angry closeted-PTSD general sees Godzilla as the Taliban terrorist threatening New York and an excuse to try out his new explosive toys. Through various plot holes, Godzilla is allegedly killed but comes back to life only forty-five minutes later to find out that her eggs have been blown up. The monster is defeated on the Brooklyn Bridge by jet fighters before sharing an intimate moment with Tatopuolus. The camera pans out with suspense music to one last mutant egg being shown hidden in debris.

In the original Japanese Godzilla film called *Gojira* (1954), Godzilla was meant to be a prehistoric fire breathing reptilian monster empowered by nuclear radiation. It is meant to be a comment on nuclear war, in particular, the atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki by the United States. Emmerich's monster is also the product of a nuclear accident but is portrayed as a misunderstood mother protecting her own. It is ironic how the American

version of a Japanese monster that represents American terrorism was a flop.

Godzilla (1998) is considered one of director Roland Emmerich's disasters and is by no means a masterpiece but a camp favorite of mine. Characters like the mysterious French government official, Phillippe Roache, and the heavy Brooklyn-accented cameraman, Victor "Animal" Palotti, only exist to deliver their witty one-liners. Despite these flaws, I still recommend *Godzilla* as a rainy Sunday watch because of its unseriousness.

America wanted more *Godzilla*! That brings us to 2021's *Godzilla: King of Monsters*. Following the defeat of *Godzilla* years before, a cryptozoological organization known as Monarch continues to research Titan monsters that lived deep in the Earth. The Queen of Monsters, Mothra wakes up and attacks some hostile soldiers, furthering the government's mission of killing all of the Titans. The rest of the Titans, including the three-headed King Ghidorah and giant pteranodon Rodan, wake up and start terrorizing American cities. In an effort to save the world, Monarch scientists decide to revive *Godzilla*, who has been resting underwater, by using a nuclear bomb. There is a massive fight as *Godzilla* fights for dominance and the submission of the other Titans. *Godzilla* obviously wins, ordering the rest of the Titans to rebuild the world's ecosystem without human harm. The movie was epic for its impressive CGI and incredible battles between ancient monsters. While humans burn out the ozone layer and make more than 100 species go extinct, these supposed "monsters" that have been resting unbothered eventually help heal the Earth. It makes you wonder, who is the real monster?



Avatar (2009) vs Avatar: The Way of the Water (2022)

Recommended for Grades 8+

Available on Disney+

My sister introduced me to *Avatar* when I was young because it was one of her favorite movies. This movie will forever be a classic for me because of the memories it holds with my sister. In *Avatar*, the Earth is, of course, running out of natural resources, and an organization known as The Resources Development Administration (RDA) has been sent to the distant moon of Pandora to mine a valuable mineral known as unobtainium. The natives, the Na'vi, living there are highly evolved with their own religion centered around nature and the Trees of Souls as well as its own warriors. Because of the planet's poisonous environment, human explorers must link their minds with Na'vi-human hybrids or "avatars" to move freely on Pandora. Jake Sully (Sam Worthington), a paralyzed former Marine, becomes mobile again through one such avatar and falls in love with a Na'vi woman, Neytiri (Zoe Saldana). As their bond grows, Jake begins to side with the Na'vi, and prevents the demolition of their sacred land.

Avatar is obviously a metaphor for the mass genocide of Native Americans caused by the European arrival in the Americas. However, in this film's reality, the natives win the battle, expelling the intruders/white people from their land and preserving their culture. The controversy in this film is the use of the white savior trope in the form of Jake Sully. Despite this criticism, I would highly recommend *Avatar*, especially since first-time viewers will not have to wait thirteen years for the sequel, unlike many devoted fans.

For all the past devoted fans of *Avatar*, congratulations! We have waited thirteen years and finally the sequel *Avatar: The Way of Water* has been released. *Avatar: The Way of Water* did not fail to impress as it continued the story of Jake, Neytiri, and the Na'vi people. Jake and Neytiri are now parents to four kids, including their adopted daughter of the living yet unconscious Grace. Spider, the son of the late Colonel Quaritch is also being raised with the Sully kids, much to Neytiri's dismay. The first scenes include beautiful narration by Jake as he describes his assimilation into Na'vi culture, learning the languages, and raising his "mixed-race" children. The RDA makes another appearance as a reanimated Colonel Quaritch swears revenge on Jake and his family. A new private company is also searching for a youth serum found in the brains of the whale-like animals called Tulkuns. In order to protect the rest of the Na'vi tribe, Jake moves his family away from the jungle lands in search

of refuge among the Metkayinas, a water-type of Na'vi. Colonel Quaritch jumps from island to island with his kidnapped distant son, as he comes up with a plan to lure Jake out. Colonel Quaritch uses Jake's daughters as bait for Jake to finally surrender and the Sully family fights it out with a surprising death at the end.

Avatar: The Way of the Water hits on many important themes such as nature vs. nurture, motherhood, community, and complicated relationships between fathers and their sons. The Avatar franchise is meant to have five or six movies as the Sully family will continue to fight for peace and their culture. Honestly, *Avatar: The Way of the Water* answers many questions left from *Avatar* and still introduces so many more to be answered in the next movie. With the writer's strike, fans will be lucky if they get a new *Avatar* in 2030. I would still recommend going through with the painful and amazing experience of watching *Avatar: The Way of the Water*.

Enjoy,

Wilson and Jordan

Photos—*Blade Runner* and *Blade Runner 2049*: Warner Bros.; *Raiders of the Lost Ark*: Paramount Pictures; *Indiana Jones Dial of Destiny*: Disney Co.; *Godzilla* (1998) and *Godzilla King of Monsters*: Toho Japan; *Avatar* and *Avatar: The Way of the Water*: 20th Century Studios

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