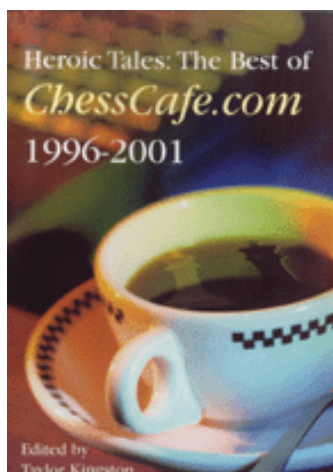




BOOK REVIEWS

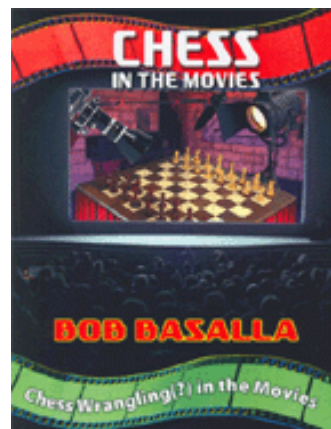


Better than Popcorn!

Taylor Kingston

Chess in the Movies by Bob Basalla, 2005 Thinkers' Press, English Algebraic Notation, Large format paperback, 422pp., \$34.95.

A favorite pastime of serious cinephiles is finding Alfred Hitchcock's cameo appearances in his own films. They delight in seeing him coming out of an elevator in *Spellbound*, trying to catch a bus in *North by Northwest*, talking to a pianist in *Rear Window*, or sitting in a photo on a mantel in *Dial M for Murder*. As a long-time movie-lover, this writer also enjoys trying to sight the portly director.



But I get a bigger kick out of finding film scenes that relate to chess. As contestants in the annual **ChessCafe** Holiday Quiz are well aware (perhaps sometimes to their chagrin) your humble reviewer, being inordinately fond of both chess *and* movies, is therefore inordinately fond of trivia questions about chess *in* movies. Those questions have been gathered more or less haphazardly over years of movie-watching: whenever anything related to chess appeared on the screen on in dialogue, I'd note it down for possible use in a future quiz. Now and then I toyed with the idle notion of organizing this data, possibly for publication, but being a somewhat lazy and procrastinative person, nothing's ever come of it.

Well, sometimes he who hesitates is not lost, but wins big-

time. I'm shelving those idle notions permanently — someone's beaten me to the punch, and in fine style. *Chess in the Movies* is just about everything a combination chess-and-film freak could want.

Beginning with Steven Spielberg's *A.I.* and proceeding in alphabetical order to *Zotz!* and *Zugzwang*, the book attempts to list every film known in which there is at least some reference to chess, ranging from those with just a trivial snatch of dialogue or a scene with board and pieces in the background, to films where chess players are important characters and the game is a featured plot element, central theme, or major symbol.

I was frankly amazed at how common it is for films to have at least some small chess content. *CIM* has entries for over 2,000 movies. Besides such well known classics as *The Seventh Seal*, or recent hits like *Searching for Bobby Fischer* and *Harry Potter*, there are many entries one would never expect — a Spice Girls flick, *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure*, *Godzilla vs. Megasaurus*, and such improbable titles as *Slave Girls from Beyond Infinity* and *The Wrestling Women vs. the Aztec Mummy*. And the films are not just listed — for each its use of chess is described in detail, often at some length, and critiqued and categorized. A typical entry:

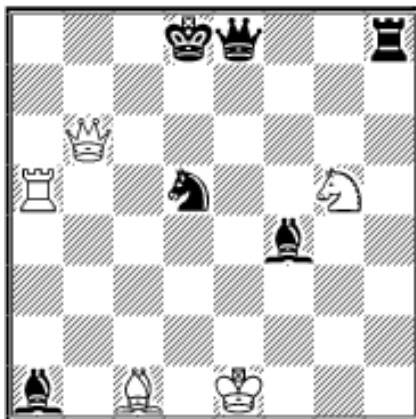
Titanic, (1953), Dir: Jean Neglesco. Keep a sharp eye out just after the fatal iceberg encounters the luckless liner for two nearly bald first class passengers blithely continuing their chess game, unaware of the danger. Sort of a fiddling while Rome burns moment. An even sharper eye will be required to pick out an earlier shot of chessplayers in the middle of a swirling second class crowd.
[C.E. 2]

That last cryptic note is one of several codes Basalla uses to denote how a film treats chess, and various errors that may be involved:

- **[C.E. 1] = A Chess Encounter of the First Kind.** A film showing an unused board and/or pieces, usually to indicate that a character is someone of intelligence or evil cunning. Also films with only a verbal reference to chess, e.g. lines like “You are only a pawn in his evil plan,” “It’s down to the endgame,” “The general deployed his forces like a chess master,” or “We have you checkmated, Professor Moriarty!”. Most of the entries are of this type.
- **[C.E. 2] = A Chess Encounter of the Second Kind.** People are shown actually playing chess, but in a peripheral, background way, or they make no moves during the scene.
- **[C.E. 3] = A Chess Encounter of the Third Kind.** Chess play is front and center, usually involving major characters, with the full position and specific moves often discernible.
- **[KQ]** = In the opening array, the positions of the white king and queen are reversed, king on d1, queen on e1.
- **[kq]** = Black king and queen reversed.
- **[KQkq]** = Both reversed.
- **[#]** = The board is rotated 90 degrees, a dark square at each player’s lower right corner. An *extremely* common error.
- **[C]** = Continuity problems, e.g. a previously captured piece magically reappears later on the board, or a white pawn on e4 has somehow retreated to e2, or the position changes without any moves being made, etc. Also distressingly common, usually due to bad editing or carelessness over multiple takes.

Without giving them special codes, Basalla also notes other errors: illegal moves, absurd and/or impossible positions, characters calling “check” or “checkmate” when it’s not, and anachronisms like chess being played in ancient Rome, or with modern rules in pre-Renaissance days. These gaffes are *legion*, and when seen in the theater by a knowledgeable person may spoil the film for him somewhat. But when reading about them in this book they somehow become a source of fun — perhaps because the reader can feel smugly superior and amused by the ignorant directors, screenwriters and editors who commit

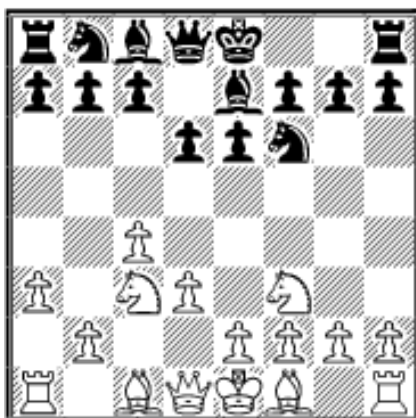
mistakes equivalent to showing Babe Ruth batting with a nine-iron or Napoleon riding in a Jeep. A few of the more risible examples from the book's 200+ diagrams:



From *C.A.T. Squad: Stalking Danger* (TV, 1986). Note the lack of pawns, that both black bishops are dark-squared, and that both kings are in check.



An utterly nonsensical position from *Donald in Mathmagic Land* (Disney, 1959), which certainly looks like the way a duck might play.



Then there's this from *The Last Castle* (2001). A rather normal-looking position, except that the character playing Black claims that beginning with **5...Nc6** he has a mate in three.

On the other hand, there are many cases of chess portrayed properly. I was surprised to learn that Paul Morphy's only known chess problem was used in, of all things, *Charlie's Angels: Full Throttle* (2003). Game 13 of Fischer-Spassky 1972 has a cameo in *Inside Out*, a 1975 Telly Savalas shoot-'em-up. And of course the "Kronsteen-MacAdams" game in *From Russia With Love*, based on Spassky-Bronstein, 1960 USSR Ch, is given in detail. And some films are non-fiction documentaries, e.g. *The Great Chess Movie* (Canada, 1983), which features top-rank GMs such as Korchnoi and Karpov.

The book lavishes the most care on the relatively few films in which chess plays a major role and is treated with respect. Such famous classics as *Casablanca* (1942), *The Bishop Murder Case* (1930), *Chess Fever* (1925), *The Seventh Seal* (1956) and *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968) get at least a full page each, often several, as do recent hits like *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* (2001), *Searching for Bobby Fischer* (1993), *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) and *The Luzhin Defence* (2000), plus some forgotten or lesser-known films of the [C.E. 3] type: *White Cliffs of Dover* (1944), *Harrison Bergeron* (a 1995 Canadian TV production), *Fresh* (France, 1994), even an episode of the TV show *Columbo*.

Readers should not expect full reviews of these films. The book concentrates almost solely on the chess-related material. Other aspects of film-making: plot, characters, quality of the acting, overall artistic merit, etc., are generally mentioned only as and if they pertain to the chess elements. A rather bad film with a lot of chess (e.g. *Knight Moves*) gets a lot more ink than a very good film with little chess (e.g. *Jezebel*, *Napoleon*, or *Lawrence of Arabia*). But that's as it should be — that's what the book is about.

And Basalla has obviously put in a lot of work to extract all

this chess data. Film directors are not in the habit of showing chess positions and moves clearly or for very long — often for only a few blurry seconds. I can just picture Basalla repeatedly hitting the pause and rewind buttons on his VCR or DVD player, and painstakingly noting down the position of every pawn, jotting down every bit of dialogue.

What is perhaps most impressive is the book's thoroughness. Basalla has obviously been at this for years. While *CIM*'s 2000+ entries of course don't include *every* film with a chess reference, not much is missing, as far as I could tell. Checking for the hundred or so films I already knew about, very few were absent: *Smiley's People* (1982), *The Naked and the Dead* (1958), *Le Voyageur* (1970), the 1980 version of *Pride and Prejudice*, and episodes of the 1960s TV shows *Mission: Impossible* and *Secret Agent* were the only omissions I caught. I was expecting not to see entries for some of my old sci-fi/fantasy favorites, but there they were: *The Blob*, *Earth vs. the Flying Saucers*, *The Thing* (both versions!), *Sinbad and the Eye of the Tiger*, *Jason and the Argonauts* and others.

Certain actors and directors appear many times. Chess figures frequently in the films of Ingmar Bergman, Woody Allen, Humphrey Bogart, John Wayne, Stanley Kubrick, John Huston, and other actors and directors who were enthusiastic players. Others I had not expected see so often include Alan Arkin, George Peppard, James Mason and Christopher Lee. Because of its reputation as an intellectual game, chess seems to appear in almost every Sherlock Holmes movie ever made, even though, says Basalla, in the most of the original Conan Doyle stories it does not!

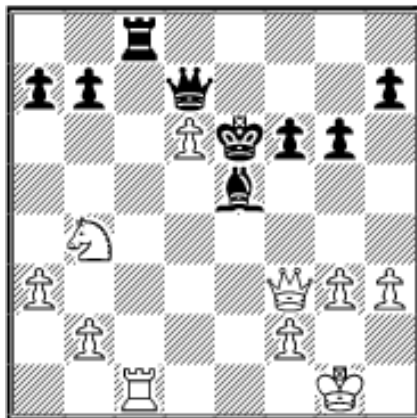
Of course it's almost impossible for a book of this sort to be without flaws. Basalla is a movie-lover but not a real film scholar, and he occasionally commits cinema history gaffes as bad as some of the chess errors he notes. The Alan Hale of 1937's *The Prince and the Pauper* did not later play the Skipper on TV's *Gilligan's Island*, his son Alan Hale Jr. did. Anthony Veiller was a screenwriter, not a narrator, and he had nothing to do with Frank Capra's *Know Your Enemy: Japan*

(1945). The title character was not decapitated in *Becket*. The term *film noir* does not contain the letter “e”. The role of Modred in *Knights of the Round Table* (1953) was played by Stanley Baker, not “Stanley Parker,” and with all the Arthurian films listed one would have hoped for a correct spelling of Guinevere.

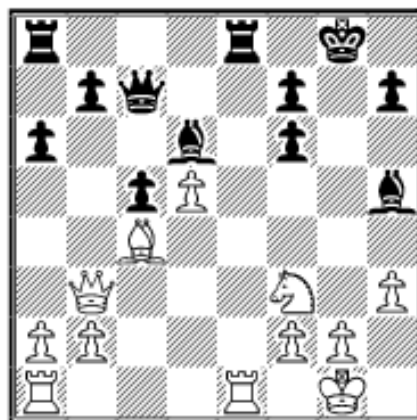
It appears that Basalla has not watched some films carefully, or has been misled by careless correspondents. The synopsis of *The Russia House* has several errors, 1973’s *O Lucky Man!* is erroneously described as taking place in a “near future society,” and the title character in *The List of Adrian Messenger* was a writer, not a spy. I could not confirm even the existence of some entries, such as *Chiip*, an Indian film of unknown year, or *The Condemned*, supposedly a 1948 release (perhaps 1929’s *Condemned*, starring Ronald Colman, was meant?). The game score given for the final scene of *Dangerous Moves* (with both sides playing verbally, *sans voir*) does not match at all what’s on the soundtrack of my video copy (Perhaps Basalla saw it in the original French?).

It’s rather a stretch to claim any chess content for some films listed. *The Creeping Man*, a 1991 Sherlock Holmes dramatization, has nothing remotely chess-related, just a character named Alice Morphy. Basalla admits he knows nothing of *King’s Pawn*, including it only because it “sounds like chess to me.” Of *Test Pilot: A Coming Attraction* he says only that “chess is somehow involved.”

And Basalla commits a few chess errors himself. For example, he suggests that this position from the Russian classic *Chess Fever*,



while matching no game actually played at Moscow 1925, might be an analytical variation of Capablanca-Zubarev from that tournament. However, a quick check of the actual game score shows that is impossible, because (among several reasons) at an obviously earlier point in that game



Capablanca played **17.a2-a4**. Using Basalla's codes, I'd have to flag this as a [C].

At least Basalla is a much better film historian than a grammarian. Ungainly phrases such as "whomever they are" are too frequent, he has homonymitis (e.g. "site" for sight) and his apparent ignorance of the hyphen is sometimes downright maddening ("Perhaps this was part of a for the audience analysis"). If there is a second edition, I hope he gets a good editor/proofreader.

However, I don't want to stress the book's flaws too much. This is not really a scholarly reference, for pedants to pick over every peccadillo — it's a book to be read for fun. I'm not in the habit of citing other reviewers, but in this case I must mention

Edward Winter's comments at <http://tinyurl.com/fjwrt>. He starts out in his usual stern tone, pessimistically pointing out various errors — Stahlberg never appeared in *Chess Fever*, F.D. Yates was not Canadian, a TV actor is misidentified, etc. etc. — yet soon Winter winds up liking the book despite himself.

I think anyone who likes chess and films will find *Chess in the Movies* as amusing and tasty as a bag of popcorn, but much longer-lasting. Of course it probably won't add even a single Elo point to anyone's rating, but so what? This is a celebration of *chess culture*, detailing the various ways it has intersected with, and been used and misused by, one of the most important of *mass culture* media. It's a unique and interesting book, that deserves more attention than it will probably get.

As an incentive for ChessCafe readers, at least, to give *Chess in the Movies* its due, I will mention that possessing it augments by several orders of magnitude my ability to come up with stumpers for the annual trivia quiz. Contestants who ignore the book cannot complain they were given no warning.

A postscript: Basalla welcomes corrections and additions. Interested readers are encouraged to contact him at swgcfwip@core.com.

Order *Chess in the Movies*
by Bob Basalla



[\[ChessCafe Home Page\]](#) [\[Book Review\]](#) [\[Columnists\]](#)
[\[Endgame Study\]](#) [\[Skittles Room\]](#) [\[Archives\]](#)
[\[Links\]](#) [\[Online Bookstore\]](#) [\[About ChessCafe.com\]](#) [\[Contact Us\]](#)

Copyright 2006 CyberCafes, LLC. All Rights Reserved.

"**The Chess Cafe**®" is a registered trademark of Russell Enterprises, Inc.