

All Work and No Play

[Chloe Kent](#) and [Andrew Young](#) take a look back at the career of cinema's not-so-dull boy

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Image: Warner Bros.

Jack's back! After seven years out of the spotlight, Nicholson is set to be returning to the cinema screen in a remake of Oscar-nominated German comedy *Toni Erdmann*. While already rehashing a film which only came out in 2016 does seem more than a little premature, it'll be good to see one of the most talented actors of a generation back at work. Coinciding with this news has been CityScreen's recent Jack Nicholson season, in which six of the actor's greatest efforts were recently reshowed. Each one characteristic of his trademark roguish charm, we chart Nicholson's career from the late 60s to the late 80s and bring you the actor in his prime; flamboyant, rambunctious, and unflinchingly real.

The earliest film in the Jack Nicholson season and the first 'classic' the great actor made is Dennis Hopper's seminal counter-culture trip *Easy Rider*. Of all the films, it is the one where Nicholson has perhaps the smallest role, but he leaves an indelible mark on the film. Following Peter Fonda and Dennis Hopper as they ride across America on their choppers, searching for freedom and the soul of the states, it is a film very much of its time. Its spirit of rebellion and rejection of authority seems somewhat naïve today, but was a powerful call to a generation in the late 1960s. During their bike-riding adventures Hopper and Fonda do their best to highlight the hypocrisy and corruption at the heart of America's establishment. Correct or not, the film makes a persuasive argument for their marginalisation rather than their law-breaking being the thing separating these outsider criminals from the rest of society.

As well as being an entertaining and intellectually engaging work, *Easy Rider* is of course an important film too; it helped usher in a new era of filmmaking. Hopper's film holds an esteemed place in movie history by helping to kickstart the New Hollywood movement that would give us some of the greatest of all American films. After *The Graduate* and *Bonnie & Clyde* pushed the boundaries of sex and violence,

Easy Rider completed the full spectrum of parental outrage with its enticing and terrifying depiction of drug use.

Injected with the electric energy of psychedelic rock, there is sometimes the feeling that we are watching a cool-hippie-montage of great landscapes and warbling guitars. Yet, beyond this, there is complexity to the film. Hopper and Fonda's characters are crucially different in their outlooks on life, one desperately running from conformity, one looking upon the mess of a country he was born into with deep sadness. Beyond their cynicism and spirit of *rejection*, there is a vital heart and pain at the film's core. Nicholson is key to this; his alcoholic lawyer has the glint in the eye and charming laugh that characterises so much of his work, but there is a real tragedy to him as well. If people hadn't noticed him yet, by God they will have done after *Easy Rider*.

And so exploded the illustrious career of John Joseph "Jack" Nicholson. Moving into the seventies, we find some of his best work. The earliest among them is Hal Ashby's *The Last Detail*. If his film-stealing turn in *Easy Rider* announced what we could expect from Nicholson, this road movie comedy with sadness lying beneath gave his undeniable talents a superb showcase.

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Known by many as the ultimate outsider, the man who stubbornly refuses to give in to conformity and authority even at tragic cost to himself, Nicholson plays one of the finest examples of that character here. Billy "Bad Ass" Buddusky is a marine with a contempt for supposedly marine-like conformity. When we first meet him he is asleep with booze nearby, a one-shot summation of his denial of his own subservience to others. After he and Otis Young's "Mule" refuse several times to go on the "chicken shit detail", they end up taking a young offender to prison to serve his unfathomably harsh sentence. Along the way, the almost desperately aggressive and rebellious "Bad Ass" and the more restrained mule decide to show this young man a good time before his life as he knows it is ended.

Scripted by Nicholson's frequent collaborator Robert Towne, it is an at-times hilarious look at justice, youth and fun. As in *Easy Rider*, they encounter classic era archetypes along their journey - communes of hippies and detestable authority among them. Nicholson is compelling to watch as "Bad Ass" becomes more and more contemptuous of the bosses that have sent him out on a job he hates with a purpose he despises even more. Classically, he displays an energy and violence that is only just beneath the surface. But, being Jack, he does it all with an incredible amount of charm and outsider wit. Also, being Jack, it's not as straightforward as that. Bad Ass's search for fun and rebellion has an air of sadness to it and, as the film draws to a close, Nicholson conveys so much sadness in the briefest of looks that you remember once again just how good he is.

The Last Detail was a lesser-known ball of Jack's manic energy, social injustice, and sharp dialogue. Both great performances, both good films. Then there's *Chinatown*. *Chinatown* is a masterpiece. It is the only film in the season where Jack strays away from his classic manic-charming-rebel style, and it is quite possibly one of the best films he ever made, one of the best films of the New Hollywood era and one of *the* great American movies of all time.

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Again scripted by the superbly talented Robert Towne, it is a neo-noir that both honours and subverts the classic genre archetypes. It is the story of private eye Jake Gittes, played by Nicholson with more restraint, but no less wit, spark, or pain than his other characters. Following on from a routine bit of

snooping into an extramarital affair, Jake finds himself closer to a much more serious kind of misdemeanour. Finding corruption and murder in LA's water department, he becomes embroiled in a taut web of sex, love, violence and capitalist greed.



Image: Paramount Pictures

A logical and intelligent man who is used to being right, Jake here faces something much bigger than himself. For once in his life he needs to leave things alone, which is easier said than done when confronted with Faye Dunaway's enigmatic Evelyn Mulwray and the pure evil at the heart of the film's mystery. There was a well-known feud between Polanski and Towne concerning the ending of the film, but Polanski won out and the final scene, not to mention the final line, are among the very best.

Chinatown on the surface is a tense and shocking mystery, but its magnificent depth reveals a world of metaphors and complex commentary on money, power, and the nature of evil. Anti-authority and grinningly rebellious as always, this time Nicholson plays a more complex character, conflicted and confused by the daunting challenge of being in love. He goes on one of the most interesting journeys of Nicholson's characters. In a career of great films, *Chinatown* sees Jack at the height of his powers.

A particularly heart-breaking addition to the Nicholson canon, *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* is a story of chaos vs order, subject vs oppressor, id vs superego. In the ultimate case of malingering gone wrong, we see Mr. Nicholson as Randle McMurphy, a man imprisoned on a statutory rape charge who attempts to avoid hard labour in prison by having himself committed to a mental institution. However, once he's on the inside, he's dismayed to find the ward run by the humourless Nurse Ratched, who engages in passive aggressive bullying and mind games with the patients. Dreams of a comfortable life behind bars crushed, McMurphy ignites a revolution among his more lucid peers to dismantle her regime, resulting in ultimately tragic consequences.

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Based on the 1962 novel of the same name by Ken Kesey, *Cuckoo's Nest* is a tragicomedy with one of the most devastating conclusions to a film in cinematic history. It's an extraordinary, vicious power-play, Nicholson's uninhibited and heartfelt performance dominating every scene, without overshadowing the fantastic ensemble cast. Sydney Lassick as the childish and stopy Charlie Cheswick and Brad Dourif as the anxious, stuttering Billy Bibbit are particular standouts, with Billy's devastating suicide as the event

which triggers McMurphy's downfall. And how can we go without mentioning the "Chief", played by Will Sampson, and his performance in the bittersweet endscene. Still, Nicholson acts as the ringmaster in this chaotic circus. Seen by many as the film which made the man, his trademark grin and untameable spirit are more of a force than ever. His talents are perhaps encapsulated best when, having been denied the ability to watch the World Series on television by Nurse Ratched, at the expense of the disruption to routine, he untouchably mimics a sports commentator, ad libbing the events of the game. He infuriates Ratched, excites the patients, and establishes himself as one of the most talented actors of a generation.



A story not only of the patients of the mental hospital, but a general allegory for the corrupting influence of power, Nicholson's loveable rogue provides us with a touching tale of martyrdom - McMurphy's tale of fiery rebellion will stay with you long after the credits roll.

From Munchausen's madman to a sincere psychotic, Nicholson got to go completely off the wall in *The Shining*. Not Stanley Kubrick's best work, but perhaps his most fun, Nicholson stole the show with his presentation of Jack. An adaptation of a Stephen King novel which strays pretty far from the original book by the close, Nicholson plays a man driven gradually to insanity. Relocating to an isolated hotel with his family for the winter, a nightmarish combination of cabin fever and a few of the hotel's unadvertised residents - all of whom are a little less organic than the Torrance family - collaborate to gradually detach his grip on reality. At the same time, his telepathic son Danny, adorably dressed in an array of jumpers and dungarees which these days wouldn't appear out of place on a grown man in the right trendy cocktail bar, is having some pretty intense visions of the same unwanted guests.



Image: Warner Bros.

It's a picture which doesn't quite make sense or tie itself together, going absolutely batshit insane in the third act, with an obnoxious jangling soundtrack that isn't always used to ultimate effect, as well as some really ugly carpets. Despite these shortcomings, *The Shining* is an iconic piece of popular culture, and it's Nicholson's performance which really cements the film in horror's hall of fame. More disturbing than any of the hotel's ghosts - Shelley Duvall's encounter with the 1980s answer to furies, (anyone?) - is his

portrayal of a man slowly losing his mind, and you feel a genuine chill when he tells his wife "I'm not gonna hurt ya. I'm just going to bash your brains in!"

Concluding this tour-de-Jack, a more comical depiction of Nicholson as a villain is Tim Burton's 1989 interpretation of *Batman*. Face prosthetically contorted onto a permanent, sinister grin, which looks even more disturbing when flesh-toned than in red and white, Nicholson is deliciously camp as everyone's favourite comic-book villain. Flanked by a boombox-toting lackey who plays situationally-appropriate Prince songs, this gaudy incarnation of the joker is undeniably one of the best. He's difficult to compare to Heath Ledger's much darker, equally brilliant, 2008 interpretation in *The Dark Knight*, and in a completely different league to *Suicide Squad's* recent bastardisation. This is most likely for the best. After all, one should never rub another man's rhubarb.

Batman is by far the most lighthearted film on this list, cut from an entirely different cloth to modern takes upon the superhero genre. Effectively balancing style and substance, with a booming soundtrack that won Danny Elfman a Grammy, and a comfortable equilibrium between moments of tension and comedy, *Batman's* only shortcoming is its female characters. Vicki Vale (Kim Basinger), a photojournalist who has apparently documented warzones but faints when something makes her jump and for the most part screams and flails her way through the movie, is best left in the 80s.

The Jack Nicholson season was showing at CityScreen as part of their weekly Vintage Sundays slot. They offer annual student memberships for £20.



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