

**FADE TO
BLACK**

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James Wham

I was sceptical at first. Nobody gets to choose when they die. Or rather, not many of us: exceptions include Jean-Luc Godard and Jesus Christ. Godard had just finished work on his *Trailer of the Film That Will Never Exist: "Phony Wars"* (2023), then apparently took one final puff of his cigar, extinguished it, and picked up the phone to say he was ready. For the rest of us, last movies arrive at random, much like the stroke or heart attack they typically precede. The fact of one's 'last movie' is incidental. This was the case for Sergio Leone, who, just fifteen minutes into Robert Wise's unfortunately titled *I Want to Live!* (1958), succumbed to cardiac arrest. Steve Jobs' last film was *Remember the Titans* (Boaz Yakin, 2000). Kurt Cobain's was *The Piano* (Jane Campion, 1993). At a glance, none of these are especially meaningful. Last movies are not last rites. Nevertheless, filmmaker Stanley Shtinter reads them as such, and in his film *Last Movies* (2026), the readings are as compelling as they are strange.

Londoners might be familiar with Shtinter's programming work for the Liberated Film Club, where guests are invited to present a film to the audience, one either "lost, banned, or made in impossible circumstances." In its original iteration, the twist was that neither the guest nor the audience attending know in advance what film will be screened. (I've never attended, but I'm told the events are full of whimsy and whiskey; screenings continue at the Close-Up this year until mid-July.) Other projects include *The Lock-In*, which takes every scene from *EastEnders* set in the Queen Vic pub and mashes them together into a 96-hour lock-in-film; and *Schneewittchen* (2025), an adaptation of Robert Walser's play *Snow White*, which is also a shot-for-shot remake of João César Monteiro's (largely imageless) *Branca de Neve* (2000).

The *Last Movies* project began in 2023 as a book published by Tenement Press. The project's stated aim is to remap the last century of cinema without adhering to the usual "categories or value judgements." In lieu of these, it takes as its organising principle the sometimes-verified-and-occasionally-speculative final films seen by famous people—mostly actors and directors, but also presidents, musicians, and cultists—just before their deaths, and sets about devising a history from the strange constellation that emerges from these darkest nights. Given that the best history of cinema would take the form of a cinematic history, *Last Movies* makes more sense as a film (or as a series of films programmed around the theme, as Shtinter has done in the past). The film version is narrated by Jeremy Irons, who sets forth the biographies, deaths, and final films of each personality included, accompanied by film clips and archival materials.

Irons notes early on that these stories are often apocryphal—as in the case of Stanley Kubrick, whose rumoured last movie was John Smith's *Blight* (1996). Meanwhile, Shtinter takes the liberty of giving Bette Davis a purely conjectural final film, James Whale's *Waterloo Bridge* (1931)—which she of course starred in. Davis died aged 89 at the American Hospital in Neuilly-sur-Seine after attending the San Sebastián International Film Festival for a retrospective of Whales' work, but we can't be sure that Davis was actually present for the screening of *Waterloo Bridge*. In the end, it doesn't really matter—the afterlife is entirely speculative. Yet watching Shtinter mummify his dead celebrities in reels of their imagined final films is oddly thrilling. *Last Movies* sometimes feels a little like wandering through the Museum of Moving

Image with a compelling but crazed guide—one whose idea of film history falls somewhere between cinephilia and necromancy (what might we call that?).

During the section on John Dillinger, *Last Movies* descends into a kind of historical schizophrenia. So many filmic versions of the same story—the same celebrity—are superimposed onscreen, with warring audio streams reverberating around Irons's unrelenting narration. All the actors who've portrayed Dillinger coalesce into a dizzying montage, until Shtinter's meta-film mellows into a single image of Johnny Depp sat smiling in the cinema watching Dillinger's (confirmed) last movie: *Manhattan Melodrama* by W.S. Van Dyke (1934). Irons recounts Dillinger's squabbles with J. Edgar Hoover—who now exists as Leonardo DiCaprio's *J. Edgar* (2011)—and Shtinter brings the two personae together in a cross-cut, almost kissing. Finally, Depp gets up from the audience and leaves the cinema, and we're sutured firmly into the world of *Public Enemies* (Michael Mann, 2009), where Depp's Dillinger meets the same end as every other Dillinger—again and again and again. You could call it a multiverse of madness, but what this sequence particularly reminded me of was the work of Christian Marclay. Not so much his seminal piece *The Clock* (2010), a 24-hour montage that takes footage of clocks and timepieces from film history and aligns them with real-time, making the work itself a functional clock, but rather *Doors* (2022), which passes through the many portals of cinema by cutting together scenes where one door closes and another opens. So much of *Last Movies* shares this cut-as-connection ethos, where one celebrity's life (and death) opens the way to another—where History is posited as a kind of Scooby-Doo hallway.

Is it right to call cinema the medium of death, as Irons does early in the film? Maybe there is Death in the obsolescence of celluloid, which fades and perishes and eventually becomes lost—like the 'lost film' that was the 'Last Movie' of Lee Harvey Oswald, *War is Hell* (1961). Maybe there is Death in cinema theatres themselves, the shuttering of which we hear so much. But movement is the stuff of life—the essential *anima* that turns mud into man. It's hard to watch the many scenes of Charlie Chaplin in *Last Movies* and not think him more alive than ever, almost ubiquitous in public consciousness and film history, cued ready for a pratfall should you just turn on the Criterion channel. *Last Movies* seems more so a reminder that, just before dying, life flashes before your eyes—not just your life, but *life* itself. Each last movie, no matter how meaningless or meaningful, how incidental or ironic or totally imagined, begs the same question: What dreams may come?

This text was commissioned by Open City Documentary Festival to accompany the screening of *LAST MOVIES* (2026; dir. Stanley Shtinter) at Institute of Contemporary Arts, 17 April 2026.

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