



Welcome to my film blog. I am not a film critic or a film historian, and this blog has nothing at all to do with scholarship of any kind. I just watch a fair amount of movies and feel compelled to write about what I see. What I write is only my opinion, which means absolutely nothing, so it's no problem if you disagree.

### **MAY GOD ERADICATE THESE BARBARIANS FROM OUR COUNTRY – Persepolis (2007)**

Persepolis is far subtler and universal than what appears to be a cartoon about a young girl coming of age (both physically and politically) in post-revolutionary Iran. Although the film was made in 2007, it is impossible not to draw comparisons to what is happening in the U.S. today. Marjane is 8 years old when the Shah is overthrown. She is taught by her communist grandfather that the deposition was a good thing because the Shah and his father were brutal dictators who were propped up by the West. So Marjane becomes a communist. Then grandpa, who believed that the revolution by religious fundamentalists was but a necessary step in the apostasy of the proletariat, is arrested, tortured and executed. So much for communism. Marjane is then forced to deal with puberty in a religiously oppressive society where she has to wear a hajib, eschew her Nikes, and buy her Iron Maiden tapes on the sly from shady black market street peddlers while trying to avoid detection by the omnipresent security forces. At a crucial point in the film, Marjane, in order to save herself, falsely accuses a merchant of selling decadent Western music. The merchant is hauled away by the authorities and is never seen again. Marjane's grandmother is not pleased, to say the least, and Marjane learns her first lesson about integrity.

Thinking Marjane will be safer, her parents send her to boarding school in Vienna, where she spends her teenage years learning to drink, hanging out with nihilist hipsters and flouting all authority. She ends up ill and homeless and is forced to return to Iran, where she sinks into a major depression.

Marjane then falls in love and gets married, only to discover Prince Charming is more like Prince Ahmadinejad. She divorces but is now in her late 20s and damaged goods.

By the end of the film, Marjane becomes an unwilling butterfly, flying to Paris in order to escape the chrysalis of a bleak but inevitable future in Iran where she will be little more than chattel. The price of freedom? Her family, her country, and most of her soul. Not exactly a happy ending, but not exactly despairing either. That paradox may be the point of the movie. For women of a certain age, there appears to have been little choice in the Iran of the Ayatollah and his progeny. Persepolis seems to be saying that in order to find HER self, SHE was forced into a self-imposed exile.

Persepolis was the capital of Persia until it was overthrown by Alexander the Great. By its very title then, the film asks from whence come the barbarians? From without or within? The question isn't answered, but the takeaway from the movie causes a frisson of fear in 2017, in an America that is promised to be made great again. When Marjane asks her father how Iran could have fallen to the Ayatollah, the father replies that the overthrow of any established order is easy when the population is half literate because they will then latch onto nationalism and religion, making anything possible. Sound familiar?

## MOVIES 2016

Here's the list of the movies I saw in 2016. I wasn't bowled over by most of what I saw last year, especially the awards movies (although this year's crop looks better than what I've seen in the past few years, so I have high hopes for 2017). With the exception of Look Who's Back, which was my favorite film I saw last year, the films I liked the best were oldies but goodies - Saving Private Ryan, Dr. Strangelove, etc.

Other faves include: Chi Raq, Straight Outta Compton, The Big Short, and Mad Max: Fury Road (an unexpected surprise as I usually don't like those kinds of movies).

Stinkers: The Danish Girl and The Revenant.

Happy 2017.

1. 1/2/16 The Revenant \*
2. 1/2/16 Spotlight \*\*\*\*
3. 1/3/16 Best of Enemies \*\*\*\*
4. 1/3/16 99 Homes \*\*\*
5. 1/4/16 Black Mass \*\*
6. 1/5/16 Man on Wire \*\*\*
7. 1/6/16 Sunset Boulevard \*\*\*\*\*
8. 1/7/16 Hector and the Search for Happiness \*\*\*
9. 1/8/16 Bridge of Spies \*\*\*\*\*
10. 1/10/16 Do I Sound Gay? \*\*
11. 1/10/16 An Honest Liar \*\*
12. 1/11/16 Lenny \*\*\*
13. 1/11/16 From Caligari to Hitler \*\*\*\*
14. 1/12/16 The 39 Steps (1935) \*\*\*\*\*
15. 1/14/16 The Bad and the Beautiful \*\*\*\*\*

16. 1/15/16 The Defiant Ones \*\*\*\*\*
17. 1/16/16 Steve Jobs \*\*\*
18. 1/16/16 Stagecoach \*\*\*\*\*
19. 1/17/16 The Big Short \*\*\*\*\*
20. 1/18/16 Mr. Warmth: The Don Rickles Project \*\*\*\*\*
21. 1/19/16 Room \*\*\*\*\*
22. 1/20/16 Straight Outta Compton \*\*\*\*\*
23. 1/21/16 Artists and Models \*
24. 1/22/16 The Danish Girl \*
25. 1/22/16 Howard Zinn: You Can't Be Neutral \*\*\*
26. 1/23/16 Brooklyn \*\*\*\*
27. 1/23/16 Buck Privates \*\*
28. 1/25/16 Fire Over England \*\*\*
29. 1/25/16 Mad Max: Fury Road \*\*\*\*
30. 1/27/16 Kelly's Heroes \*\*\*
31. 1/27/16 The Court Jester \*\*\*\*
32. 1/28/16 Trumbo \*\*\*
33. 1/29/16 The Martian \*\*\*\*
34. 1/30/16 The Quiet American (1958) \*\*\*
35. 2/1/16 Hearts and Minds \*\*\*
36. 2/2/16 The Sting \*\*\*\*\*
37. 2/4/16 The Graduate \*\*\*\*\*
38. 2/5/16 I Am A Fugitive From A Chain Gang \*\*\*\*\*
39. 2/6/16 For Whom the Bell Tolls \*\*
40. 2/7/16 This is the Night \*\*
41. 2/7/16 Dangerous Blondes \*\*
42. 2/8/16 The Strange Love of Martha Ivers \*\*\*\*\*
43. 2/11/16 Imitation of Life (1934) \*\*\*\*\*
44. 2/12/16 The Third Man \*\*\*\*\*
45. 2/13/16 The Harvey Girls \*\*
46. 2/14/16 The Goldddiggers of 1933 \*\*\*\*\*
47. 2/18/16 Rope \*\*\*\*\*
48. 2/19/16 W \*\*\*
49. 2/20/16 Trumbo \*\*\*
50. 2/23/16 Gun Crazy \*\*\*
51. 2/24/16 Waking Ned Devine \*\*\*\*
52. 2/25/16 The Black Power Mixtape \*\*\*
53. 2/26/16 Aliens on the Moon: The Truth Exposed \*\*\*\*
54. 3/1/16 Spies \*\*\*\*\*
55. 3/3/16 The Last Days of Vietnam \*\*\*\*\*
56. 3/12/16 Out of the Past \*\*
57. 4/9/16 Jane Eyre \*\*\*\*
58. 4/10/16 The Phantom Lady \*\*
59. 4/17/16 Tokyo Story \*\*\*
60. 4/24/16 Libeled Lady \*\*\*\*
61. 4/27/16 Nothing Sacred \*\*\*

62. 4/29/16 Chi Raq \*\*\*  
63. 4/30/16 The Gathering Storm \*\*\*\*\*  
64. 5/1/16 Harper \*\*  
65. 5/2/16 Red Hollywood \*\*\*\*\*  
66. 5/3/16 Why We Fight (Parts 1-4) \*\*\*\*\*  
67. 5/4/16 Scaramouche \*\*\*\*\*  
68. 5/6/16 Into the Storm \*\*  
69. 5/8/16 The Insider \*\*\*\*\*  
70. 5/11/16 Five Star Final \*\*\*  
71. 5/13/16 Why We Fight (Parts 5-7) \*\*\*\*\*  
72. 5/18/16 Vertigo \*\*\*\*\*  
73. 5/22/16 Annie Hall \*\*\*\*\*  
74. 5/25/16 What's Up Tiger Lilly? \*  
75. 5/25/16 The Black Cat \*\*\*\*\*  
76. 6/1/16 Brothers in War \*\*\*  
77. 6/2/16 Look Who's Back \*\*\*\*\*  
78. 6/3/16 Woody Allen: A Documentary \*\*\*\*\*  
79. 6/4/16 Siegfried \*\*\*\*\*  
80. 6/5/16 Saving Private Ryan \*\*\*\*\*  
81. 6/6/16 One Day Since Yesterday \*\*\*\*\*  
82. 6/12/16 Manhattan \*\*\*\*\*  
83. 6/17/16 Chaplin \*\*\*\*\*  
84. 6/20/16 Julia \*\*\*\*\*  
85. 6/29/16 Fury \*\*\*  
86. 7/3/16 Dr. Strangelove \*\*\*\*\*  
87. 7/15/16 Brian Eno 1971-1977 \*\*\*\*\*  
88. 7/17/16 The Conformist \*\*\*\*\*  
89. 7/18/16 That Gal Who Was In That Thing \*\*  
90. 7/23/16 Inside Out \*\*  
91. 7/24/16 Night in the City \*\*\*\*\*  
92. 7/28/16 Attack \*  
93. 7/29/16 I'll See You In My Dreams \*\*\*  
94. 7/30/16 The Program \*\*\*\*\*  
95. 7/31/16 The Sea Hawk \*\*\*\*\*  
96. 8/3/16 A Walk in the Woods \*\*\*\*\*  
97. 8/7/16 5 Graves to Cairo \*\*\*  
98. 8/10/16 To Be or Not To Be \*\*\*\*\*  
99. 8/19/16 Arsenic and Old Lace \*\*\*  
8/20/16 His Girl Friday \*\*\*\*\*  
8/21/16 Holiday \*\*\*\*\*  
8/26/16 The Caine Mutiny \*\*\*\*\*  
8/27/16 30 Seconds Over Tokyo \*  
8/28/16 Easy Living \*\*\*\*\*  
9/3/16 The Philadelphia Story \*\*\*  
9/4/16 The Talk of the Town \*\*\*\*\*  
9/5/16 My Favorite Wife \*\*\*\*\*

9/17/16 Desk Set \*\*\*\*  
 9/17/16 The General \*\*\*\*  
 9/18/16 The Conversation \*\*\*\*  
 10/27/16 The Gypsy Moths \*\*\*  
 11/5/16 Bride of Frankenstein \*\*\*\*  
 11/5/16 Member of the Wedding \*\*  
 11/5/16 Another Woman \*\*\*\*  
 11/6/16 Throne of Blood \*\*\*\*  
 11/7/16 Scarecrow \*\*\*  
 11/9/16 Bright Eyes \*\*\*\*  
 11/12/16 The Great White Hope \*\*\*\*  
 11/12/16 Night Moves \*\*\*\*  
 11/13/16 Café Society \*\*\*\*  
 11/15/16 Air Force \*\*\*\*  
 11/18/16 I Never Sang for My Father \*\*\*\*\*  
 11/19/16 The Best Man \*\*\*  
 11/20/16 8 ½ \*\*\*\*  
 11/25/16 Mean Girls \*\*\*\*  
 11/25/16 Arrival \*\*  
 11/28/16 The Narrow Margin \*\*\*  
 12/4/16 Night Train to Munich \*\*\*\*\*  
 12/10/16 Scrooge \*\*\*\*\*  
 12/16/16 Love Actually \*\*\*\*\*  
 12/21/16 The Nutcracker \*\*\*  
 12/24/16 Young Frankenstein \*\*\*\*\*  
 12/24/16 Blithe Spirit \*\*\*\*  
 12/25/16 The Bishop's Wife \*\*\*\*\*  
 12/25/16 Sullivan's Travels \*\*\*\*\*  
 12/26/16 Around the World in 80 Days \*\*  
 12/27/16 The Broadway Melody \*\*  
 12/28/16 Ah, Wilderness \*  
 12/29/16 Singin' in the Rain \*\*\*\*\*

**“DO I LOOK LIKE A CRIMINAL? You look like Adolf Hitler. EXACTLY!”**  
**Look Who's Back (2015)**

Look Who's Back is the best movie I've seen thus far this year.

Somehow, A.H. has time warped to 2014 Berlin. He quickly adapts to modern times, taking refuge in a newsstand run by a kindly Turk, where he can read all the papers he wants and catch up on what he's missed for the last 70 years. He discovers Germany didn't win the war. Even Poland still exists! But he kind of digs the modern world. He thinks selfies are cool. He likes power bars. He is mesmerized by the power of television but repulsed by its content. Everyone he meets thinks he is some kind of performance artist. When he is discovered by a television mogul, who, as he says, is the best women he's known since Leni Riefenstahl, he's put on TV and becomes a star. All of Germany thinks he's a comedian because he's channeling

Hitler, saying Hitler type things, calling himself der Fuher, etc. It's pretty funny stuff – until it's not.

You see, old Uncle Adolf understands the propaganda power of TV. As the movie progresses, his charisma and the power of his rhetorical skill ignites the long smoldering resentments of the repressed and disenfranchised Aryans who have seen their country run into the ground by immigrants, weak kneed leaders, and the monied classes with vaguely Hebraic names who have exploited the German Silent Majority for their own profit. They think “hey... this guy who looks and acts like Hitler is starting to sound pretty good. He'll restore our national pride, he'll lower taxes and make sure everyone has a job, he'll restore law and order.” In short, he'll make Germany great again. Sound familiar? Whenever Herr H. is confronted with his past, he merely shrugs and says “I told you what I was going to do. It's in my book. And besides, you elected me.”

Look Who's Back was made before the rise of the Trump phenomena, but the rhetoric of the film makes it impossible not to notice the parallel. At the end of the movie, Adolf is riding triumphant in the back of an open car, the masses saluting him as buildings burn. Let's hope next January in Washington, D.C. doesn't look the same.

### **BOYS KEEP SWINGIN' – The Danish Girl (2015)**

I suppose Tom Hooper et al didn't intend for the The Danish Girl to be a joke, but it would have been a better movie if they had. Where to even begin? Let's start with the positives. The cinematography was good, as was the production design. Most of the shots were composed and lit like Vermeer paintings and the starkness of the production design, with its blue color palette, emphasized what I can only assume was the filmmaker's intent to highlight what he believed were feelings of isolation and detachment on the part of the lead character. Kudos to those artists because without their talents, this movie would have been unwatchable.

So here's the plot: A famous male painter in 1920s Copenhagen is married to a not so famous female painter. They appear to be much in love and have a pretty robust sex life. One day, a model is late for a sitting with the wife. So, the husband puts on a pair of stockings and too small pumps so that his wife can work on some detail in the painting. The husband appears to get into the female accoutrements and the couple indulges in a little role play with their sex life. Soon, hubby is going to parties dressed as a woman and starts kissing men, which causes him to have a nose bleed. The movie then goes from this to hubby's declaration that he is a woman trapped in a man's body. He even starts to have what I presume are menstrual cramps. Hubby then undergoes a sex change operation and dies. Sorry about the spoiler, but what the hell. It's not like you should pay any money to see this movie.

WTF? There is no indication that hubby has gender identification issues at any point prior to his decision that he's a woman, which seems to come out of nowhere. What I saw was a filmmaker making a story leap from mild fascination with transvestitism to harmless fetish to serious role playing to gender reassignment (hell, hubby even hopes to have a baby after he undergoes surgery. What?) without there being any signposts along the way to help the audience understand the lead character's inner life or motivations.

I lay most of the problem with *The Danish Girl* at the feet of Eddie Redmayne. He of the doe eyes and “aw shucks” grin that is somehow supposed to indicate “sensitivity” was simply execrable in the role of hubby. I generally don’t like his work anyway, but I thought he was pretty good in *The Theory of Everything*, leading me to believe he needs a strong director to shape his performance. He didn’t have it in *The Danish Girl*, so shame on you Tom Hooper. You left your lead actor dangling in the wind. Eddie mugged and indicated throughout the movie and I never once believed anything he said. Moreover, if I, as an audience member, am supposed to believe that no one in Copenhagen society can tell Ed’s a man when he’s dressed up as a woman, then all I can say is Denmark has to be the stupidest country on the planet because old Ed ain’t a pretty dame. But what can I expect? The script has Ed learning how to be a lady by watching customers at the fishmongers’ and copying the gestures of Paris peep show performers.

Unfortunately, all of this nonsense reminded me of the Monty Python Piranha Brothers sketch (check it out on Youtube for Cleese’s take on dressing as a lady). Frankly, if I were a member of the LGBTQ+ Community, I’d be offended at this juvenile and puerile treatment of a complicated and sensitive subject.

To spare their reputations, I won’t go into the other performances. The supporting cast was giving it the old college try, but there was just no way to save this mess when the script and the lead performance were so bad. If it were me, I’d omit the credit on my IMDB page. Someday, maybe there will be a mainstream film that seriously examines gender identification with intelligence, grace, and sensitivity. Save your money until that movie comes along, because *The Danish Girl* ain’t it.

## **OUT WITH THE OLD**

What a crappy year for the movies. I did not see any new release that excited me at all. I even skipped the Oscars for the first time in my life. Here's hoping 2016 is going to be better. For those of you having any interest, the following is a list of the movies I saw in 2015:

1. 1/1/15 *I Love You Again*
2. 1/1/15 *Paris, Texas*
3. 1/3/15 *Birdman*
4. 1/4/15 *Meet John Doe*
5. 1/5/14 *The Rapture*
6. 1/6/14 *The Theory of Everything*
7. 1/10/14 *Please Give*
8. 1/12/14 *Macbeth* (1971)
9. 1/14/15 *American Sniper*
10. 1/14/15 *The Wizard of Oz*
11. 1/16/15 *Requiem for a Heavyweight*
12. 1/17/15 *Foxcatcher*
13. 1/19/15 *Helter Skelter*
14. 1/19/15 *Midnight*
15. 1/21/15 *The Wipers Times*

16. 1/25/15 The Swimmer
17. 1/25/15 Day of the Locust
18. 1/28/15 The Imitation Game
19. 1/28/15 The Hunt
20. 1/29/15 Boyhood
21. 1/31/15 The Great Ziegfeld
22. 2/1/15 Drive, He Said
23. 2/2/15 True Romance
24. 2/3/15 Topkapi
25. 2/4/15 Lady in the Lake
26. 2/4/15 The Candidate
27. 2/5/15 A Safe Place
28. 2/5/15 Bernie
29. 2/6/15 Easy Rider
30. 2/7/15 The Last Picture Show
31. 2/8/15 Shadow of a Doubt
32. 2/13/15 Winter Light
33. 2/13/15 Nightcrawler
34. 2/14/15 Chimes at Midnight
35. 2/15/15 Lost Horizon
36. 2/18/15 All the President's Men
37. 2/19/15 Five Easy Pieces
38. 2/20/15 The King of Marvin Gardens
39. 2/21/15 Auntie Mame
40. 2/23/15 The Trip
41. 2/23/15 Hearts and Minds
42. 2/23/15 The Invisible Woman
43. 2/25/15 Whiplash
44. 2/25/15 Inherent Vice
45. 2/27/15 Fury
46. 2/27/15 Walking the Camino
47. 2/27/15 The Interview
48. 2/28/15 If I Were You
49. 2/28/15 Mile...Mile & A Half
50. 3/1/15 1900
51. 3/4/15 Camp Takota
52. 3/7/15 Poltergeist
53. 3/20/15 Henry V (Branagh)
54. 3/22/15 The Incident
55. 3/24/15 Little Miss Sunshine
56. 3/25/15 Nebraska
57. 3/25/15 A Long Way Down
58. 3/27/15 The Adventurers
59. 3/28/15 The Straight Story
60. 3/29/15 Dean Spanley
61. 4/4/15 Witness for the Prosecution



62. 4/5/15 Laura
63. 4/10/15 A Walk In The Sun
64. 4/10/15 Never Bet the Devil Your Head (“Toby Dammit”)
65. 4/19/15 Grey Gardens
66. 4/26/15 Ordinary People
67. 5/3/15 Pillow Talk
68. 5/11/15 The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp
69. 5/12/15 No No: A Dockumentary
70. 5/14/15 The Silence
71. 5/15/15 The Bicycle Thief
72. 5/15/15 Klute
73. 5/16/15 Easter Parade
74. 5/17/15 Foreign Correspondent
75. 5/20/15 Au Revoir Les Enfants
76. 5/21/15 The Last of Sheila
77. 5/23/15 Places in the Heart
78. 5/24/15 The Red Shoes
79. 5/26/15 Million Dollar Arm
80. 5/27/15 Ninotchka
81. 5/30/15 Tracks
82. 6/1/15 It Happened One Night
83. 6/2/15 My Neighbor Totoro
84. 6/3/15 The Crossing Guard
85. 6/7/15 Johnny Guitar
86. 6/7/15 The Thin Red Line
87. 6/7/15 Zero Hour
88. 6/9/15 Hiroshima Mon Amour
89. 6/14/15 Ace in the Hole
90. 6/15/15 God Bless America
91. 6/21/15 Black Narcissus
92. 6/27/15 Testament of Youth
93. 6/27/15 Love is Strange
94. 6/28/15 Compliance
95. 7/4/15 Yankee Doodle Dandy
96. 7/5/15 Bad Day at Black Rock
97. 7/5/15 Pick Up on South Street
98. 7/12/15 The Man From Laramie
99. 7/22/15 Don’t Look Now
100. 7/23/15 St. Vincent
101. 7/26/15 Love Me Tonight
102. 7/28/15 Pieces of April
103. 7/29/15 Grand Illusion
104. 7/29/15 Here Comes Mr. Jordan
105. 7/31/15 Fort Apache
106. 8/1/15 Show Boat (1936)
107. 8/2/15 Le Samourai

108. 8/3/15 Goodbye Mr. Chips (1969)
109. 8/4/15 Advise and Consent
110. 8/5/15 The Sand Pebbles
111. 8/6/15 The Wild One
112. 8/7/15 Ride The High Country
113. 8/8/15 The Long Goodbye
114. 8/8/15 Big Hero 6
115. 8/8/15 The Magician
116. 8/9/15 Kansas City Confidential
117. 8/11/15 Heaven's Gate
118. 8/12/15 Shadow of a Doubt
119. 8/13/15 Rust and Bone
120. 8/14/15 Sweet Charity
121. 8/15/15 McLintock
122. 8/16/15 The Rock
123. 8/17/15 The Misfits
124. 8/18/15 Eight Below
125. 8/19/15 12 Angry Men
126. 8/20/15 The Counselor
127. 8/28/15 Young Frankenstein
128. 9/4/15 Winter Solstice
129. 9/5/15 The Prisoner of Zenda
130. 9/6/15 Saboteur
131. 9/7/15 To Kill A Mockingbird
132. 9/9/15 It's a Big Country
133. 9/10/15 Tricked
134. 9/12/15 12 Angry Men
135. 9/12/15 To Kill A Mockingbird
136. 9/13/15 Adam's Rib
137. 9/18/15 The Beguiled
138. 9/19/15 Now, Voyager
139. 9/20/15 Antarctica: A Year On Ice
140. 9/21/15 Antarctica on Edge – 70 degrees
141. 9/21/15 A Trip to the Moon
142. 9/21/15 Ethos
143. 9/23/15 Deceptive Practices
144. 9/24/15 Keith Richards: Under the Influence
145. 9/24/15 Greenwich Village: The Music That Inspired a Generation
146. 9/25/15 Gore Vidal – The United States of Amnesia
147. 9/26/15 The Searchers
148. 9/26/15 The Sunset Strip
149. 9/27/15 Moonrise Kingdom
150. 9/28/15 Tom and Viv
151. 9/30/15 The Secret of NIMH
152. 10/1/15 Breathless
153. 10/1/15 They Call it Myanmar

154. 10/2/15 Our Nixon
155. 10/3/15 The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari
156. 10/4/15 The Killers
157. 10/5/15 The Hunt for Bin Laden
158. 10/5/15 Detropia
159. 10/6/15 Korengal
160. 10/18/15 Design for Living
161. 10/18/15 RKO 281
162. 10/31/15 The Beat My Heart Skipped
163. 11/7/15 The Tin Drum
164. 11/7/15 She Wore a Yellow Ribbon
165. 11/8/15 Croupier
166. 11/12/15 One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest
167. 11/14/15 Heaven Can Wait (1943)
168. 11/17/15 I Am
169. 11/19/15 Reel Indians
170. 11/21/15 Cat People ( the old one)
171. 11/21/15 He Who Gets Slapped
172. 11/23/15 Beasts of No Nation
173. 11/24/15 Nanking
174. 11/25/15 Muscle Shoals
175. 11/26/15 Beware of Mr. Baker
176. 11/27/15 The Other One...Bob Weir
177. 11/27/15 The Wrecking Crew
178. 11/28/15 Glen Campbell: I'll Be Me
179. 11/29/15 Of Mice and Men (1939)
180. 11/29/15 Listen to Me Marlon
181. 11/30/15 History of the Eagles
182. 12/3/15 From Austin to Boston
183. 12/7/15 Wild
184. 12/8/15 Happy-Go-Lucky
185. 12/8/15 What Happened, Miss Simone?
186. 12/9/15 The Deer Hunter
187. 12/10/15 Bridge to the Sun
188. 12/11/15 Love, Actually
189. 12/12/15 In the Heart of the Sea
190. 12/15/15 Cave of Forgotten Dreams
191. 12/16/15 Into the Woods
192. 12/17/15 The Battered Bastards of Baseball
193. 12/19/15 Still Alice
194. 12/20/15 Happy People: A Year in the Taiga
195. 12/23/15 Miracle on 34th Street (1947)
196. 12/25/15 Scrooge (1951)
197. 12/26/15 Never Cry Wolf
198. 12/28/15 Killing Lincoln
199. 12/28/15 Zeitgeist: Addendum

When Claude Lelouch spoke to my class at AFI, he said he watches at least one movie every day. That stuck with me, so I tried to do the same thing in 2015. I found it impossible. So, either Claude Lelouch was fibbing or he has more time on his hands than I would have thought.

On my own list, the movies that stick out for me are:

Polanski's Macbeth - Still the best film version of a Shakespeare play in my opinion.

The Wizard of Oz - What more is to be said? Always a delight and a near perfect demonstration of the Hero's Journey.

The Swimmer - I don't know what it means, but I really liked it.

Easy Rider - A pleasant surprise and a far better movie than I remember. Nicholson saves it at the moment it needs saving.

The Last Picture Show - Unrelentingly grim, but universal in its examination of loneliness. I have to think it would never be made today. Superb acting.

Ordinary People - Better and better each year I get older.

I'll Be Me - An unflinching look at the progression of Alzheimer's Disease. Kudos to Glen Campbell and his family for sharing something so personal.

Eight Below: If you're not touched by the plight of those dogs, I don't think I could be friends with you.

To Kill a Mockingbird - I saw it on the big screen for the first time. It is one of the very few times in my life where I have felt the audience was in complete communion with the presentation. Very cool.

Movies that disappointed me:

Birdman - What a load of crap, made by people who appear to have no idea what a life in the theatre is all about.

American Sniper - What a load of jingoistic crap that is dangerously inciteful for all of the Teddy Boyz and other Republican Mussolini wannabes.

Still Alice - Trite, cliché and fraught with a sense of tragic import merely because the lead character is a Columbia professor. I'll Be Me is so much better.

Movies that I don't think have worn well:

All the President's Men - Maybe we've just had too much of Watergate that we've become desensitized, but I found myself just not caring.

1900 - Ponderous and overwrought.

One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest - I didn't like it when it came out and I like it even less now.

Forman took a good (not great) book, chopped it in half, and filmed the wrong half.

Heaven's Gate - I've always been a defender of Heaven's Gate but I now agree with its critics.

Different casting and a less megalomaniacal directorial hand would have served the story better.

The Deer Hunter - Everyone is too old for their characters and there's a lot of plot holes.

The Misfits - The problem I have with The Misfits is the same problem my friend Greg Gross has with On the Waterfront. Too much Actors Studio mannerisms that have not survived the test of time.

So there you have it. I hope you found more movies to like in 2015 than I did. Onward and upward.

### **KILL YOURSELF AND YOU'RE KILLING THE WRONG PERSON – God Bless America (2012)**

OK, it's not a well-made movie – Pasadena does not look like Syracuse – but it's a delightful guilty pleasure and largely succeeds in making a more profound statement than the plot might otherwise suggest.

Frank and Roxy are an odd couple version of Mickey and Mallory; he's in his 50s, she's in high school. They are platonic spree killers who target several barely disguised symbols of the wasteland that passes for current American culture. Like less adept Dirty Harrys, they only blow away people who "deserve" it – like the Kardashians, Simon Cowell, and anyone who is remotely associated with TMZ. Tasteless, yes; but I dare you not to laugh.

The filmmaker is Bobcat Goldthwait, assisted by what appears to be most of his family. If you're familiar with the Bobcat's comic sensibility, it will not be a surprise that anger is the predominant catalyst for Frank's actions.

Frank's a middle aged guy who is fed up – with pretty much everything. To-wit: "I am offended. Not because [people] act like it's my responsibility to protect their rights to pick on the weak like pack animals, or that we're supposed to support their freedom of speech when they don't give a fuck about yours or mine. I would defend their freedom of speech if I thought it was in jeopardy. I would defend their freedom of speech to tell uninspired, bigoted, blowjob, gay-bashing, racist and rape jokes all under the guise of being edgy, but that's not the edge. That's what sells. They couldn't possibly pander any harder or be more commercially mainstream, because this is the "Oh no, you didn't say that!" generation, where a shocking comment has more weight than the truth. No one has any shame anymore, and we're supposed to celebrate it. ... I mean, why have a civilization anymore if we no longer are interested in being civilized? "

Sure, sure, middle-aged loser on a rant. Just like Howard Beale in *Network* – to which *God Bless America* bears a striking thematic resemblance. Like Howard, Frank is genuinely bewildered by what America has become. As he levels an AK at Simon Cowell, all he wants to understand is why Simon is so mean. That's it. That's the theme of the movie - Why are we so mean to each other? America's indifference to that bewilderment contributed to the death of Rodney King. Rodney appears to have died clueless; the butt of mean-spirited humor that passes for American hipness. Frank also dies clueless – in a hail of police bullets on live TV during the season finale of "American Superstarz". Frank, in his tortured soul, is every bit as eloquent as Howard Beale and while the Bobcat may not be the second coming of Paddy Chayefsky, he may well be a worthy successor to George Carlin.

The performances are okay. Joel Murray (you've seen him on a million TV shows) plays Frank. Like a clogged carburetor, Frank is able to turn over the engine but can't quite get up the hill. His sense of weary defeatism underscores his mini tragedy.

As Roxy, Tara Lynne Barr barely escapes Quinn Cummingsesque precocity, but her performance, while pretty bland, is not bad enough to diminish the deeper meaning of the film. She's at her best when she's extolling the pioneering contribution of Alice Cooper to the evolution of Rock and Roll.

Like God Bless America, Idiocracy is another angry and satirical movie about the decline of Americanism, but, unlike Idiocracy, God Bless America leaves room for empathy. For my money, that's enough right there to recommend it. You'll probably laugh but, hopefully, you'll also think.

### **WE HAPPY FEW – Henry V (1989)**

In watching Kenneth Branagh's treatment of Henry V for the first time in many years, I was struck by how thoroughly Shakespeare examines all sides of the question regarding the morality of war and how lonely it can be at the top, making me wonder if a film that is not an adaptation of Shakespeare examining the same issues could be made today. American Sniper would have been so much better if it had even scratched the surface of the moral complexities embraced by Shakespeare in Henry V more than 400 years ago.

The theme is pretty simple and has been oft repeated in literature and film throughout the centuries (The Lion King and The Godfather movies spring instantly to mind) – hellion youngster sews his wild oats then has to grow up, sacrificing friends and his former life for the greater good.

As Henry, I found Branagh's metamorphosis to be both believable and heartbreaking. I felt his pain when he has to watch through tears Bardolph's hanging. Yeah, Branagh fiddled with the text a little to make his points – inserting bits of Henry IV parts 1 and 2, reassigning lines originally said by one character to another, showing events that are only referred to in the plays (Bardolph's execution, Falstaff's death) – but it works in a way that illustrates how film can do what the theater can't; focusing on and illuminating character aspects that enhance, rather than supplant, the text.

The performances are uniformly excellent. Standouts include Richard Easton and Christopher Ravenscroft as the Constable of France and Montjoy, respectively. Their performances give life to what are essentially narrative filler roles, lending context to and making us believe the magnitude of the French loss at Agincourt. Brian Blessed, always great, lends gravitas to Exeter. Ian Holm, as Fluellen, eliminates the silliness of the character and embodies the everyman aspect of the British yeoman soldier that has faithfully served the realm for centuries. Richard Briers, as Bardolph, shows us a wasted life and the betrayal of friendship with just a look. Paul Scofield, as the King of France, gives the anti-Crispin's Day speech, lending a tragic dimension to the character's prescience about the impending ruination of his dynasty, while craftily exhorting his commanders to fight even as he saves his son from slaughter. The best shot in the film occurs with Scofield's look as he and his ministers pass by the open door to Katharine's chamber as she's playing with Alice (the wonderful Geraldine McEwan) during the English lesson scene.

Speaking of great shots, the Dunkirk evacuation shot in Atonement and the extended shot in City of Men owe a debt of gratitude to Branagh's 4 minute tracking "Non Nobis" shot where Henry slogs across the post-battle field of Agincourt carrying the dead Christian Bale. The shot has everything you need in it, without a word being spoken – the chastisement of the Dauphin for ordering the murder of the luggage boys, Montjoy fending off the French widows from attacking Henry, the blood filled mud puddles, the self defeated Pistol who barely notices what's going on. It's stirring in the way Shakespeare is meant to be stirring, bringing tears to the eyes.

Soldiers have been dying in the mud and rain of France for a millennia, but few works of art (yes, I use the term deliberately) make you feel it as immediately as Henry V. Henry is a king who pauses to make sure he's justified before he goes to war. He grieves when he knows his soldiers are going to be killed. He bleeds when he is wounded. He feels the weight of the crown. Whatever your politics, whatever your feelings about war, Henry V embraces the concept of "patriotism" in its most noble form – before perversion by those who twist it for their own parochial agendas. Would that more war films follow its example.

### **SLIM PICKINGS - The 2015 Oscars**

Here we go again. Last year's nominees were from hunger and this year is only slightly better. But, they have to award an Oscar to someone, don't they? Don't they? Hello...is this thing on? Too bad there wasn't much to justify spending the requisite ticket prices to be able to listen to cell phones ringing and running commentaries from yahoos who think that American Sniper is heroic. But I digress. Here are my predictions, musings, whatever.

Best Picture: I guess Boyhood will win. Why, I don't know other than here in the 21st century we all DESERVE to be famous, so why not a movie about a not very interesting kid doing not very interesting things filmed over a 12 year period. Whoopee. Not that any of the other nominees that I saw were anything to write home about. However, I have not yet seen Whiplash or Selma. Were they any good?

Best Actor: Michael Keaton is a great actor and lots of fun to watch. Too bad none of that came through in Birdman which I just found cloying and obnoxious. I usually don't like Eddie Redmayne - he of the doe eyes and the aw shucks mooncalfing. While he did a lot of that in the first half of The Theory of Everything, I will say that once he got ALS, his acting got much better, so if he wins, I won't be all that disappointed. English actor wins Oscar for playing a handicapped guy. Wow. That's never happened before. Bradley Cooper didn't do anything except grit his teeth in American Sniper, and Benedict Cumberbatch was just doing a riff on Sherlock in The Imitation Game. If I had a vote, I'd vote for Steve Carrel, who I thought gave the most psychologically interesting performance of the nominees but it seems unlikely that he'll win.

Best Actress: I only saw two of the nominated performances. I liked Roasamund Pike's work in Gone Girl but didn't like the movie. Everyone says Julianne Moore will win. Why not? She's a great actress who has given a lot of great performances over the years. I'd be happy if she wins.

Best Director: I guess it will be Richard Linklater, so not much point in discussing anyone else. As long as it isn't Innaritu.

Best Supporting Actor: They say J.K. Simmons will win. His is the only performance I haven't yet seen, but he always turns in great work. See Julianne Moore. Of the others, I liked Mark Ruffalo's work in Foxcatcher. I always find his work and honest, so I hope he'll get an Oscar some day. Ethan Hawke's performance in Boyhood seemed to be all about a moustache and I find his work dull as dishwater. Edward Norton is an actor I like, just not in Birdman. Duvall - The Judge is a perfect example of a terrible movie that only stayed afloat because of good actors. Not Oscar worthy.

Best Supporting Actress: I guess it's Patricia Arquette's year. Enh. If I had a vote, mine would go to Emma Stone who was the only thing worth watching in Birdman. Keep plugging Keira Knightley. You're getting better.

Adapted Screenplay: Hopefully, Whiplash or Inherent Vice (neither of which I saw) were better than the other three nominees. Of the three I saw, I can't choose as I didn't think any of them were very good.

Original Screenplay: I'm guessing Grand Budapest Hotel will win. It was unique, I'll say that for it. I also thought Nightcrawler and Foxcatcher were pretty strong.

Best Animated Feature: Didn't see any of them. Ditto: Documentary.

Best Animated Short: The Dam Catcher was charming and touching. It's my vote.

Costume and Production Design: Both to Grand Budapest Hotel.

Editing and the Sound categories: American Sniper. They have to give it something, don't they?

Makeup and Hair: Grand Budapest Hotel.

Cinematography: I might actually give that one to Birdman. Impressive work even if it didn't do anything to enhance the story.

Everything Else: Who cares. In fact, who really cares about any of this stuff, other than the studios? Think you'll remember any of the winners a month from now?

Anyway, those are my predictions. Let's hope someone, somewhere makes a movie in 2015 that will be worthy of an Academy Award.

### **DON'T BOGART THAT JOINT, MY FRIEND – Easy Rider (1969)**

I had not seen Easy Rider for at least 30 years and when I sat down to watch it a couple of days ago, I wasn't expecting much. I was so wrong. Rather than a psychedelic stroll down memory lane, Easy Rider remains relevant; vibrantly capturing a moment in time that proves the axiom "plus ca change, plus c'est la meme chose."

Let's start with the cinematography. Bravo, Laszlo Kovacs. Easy Rider was only his second feature. Much of the film looks like a painting, with a deep and rich color palette that drugs the



viewer until being walloped with the handheld, grainy Mardi Gras sequence that is the cinematographic realization of the acid trip the characters take. We lost Mr. Kovacs too soon.

Similarly, the music was anthemic, without being obvious. Yeah, there's the Byrds, Dylan, , Hendrix, and a lot of the usual suspects, but thank God, no "For What It's Worth" or "Going Up the Country." Kudos to Steve Barri and Steve Blauner for the track selection.

As to the acting, I've never thought much of Dennis Hopper as an actor (True Romance excepted) and he is the weak link in Easy Rider. But, man, what a sure handed director. Great shot selection. Terrific pacing (thanks also to my former teacher and BBS editor Donn Cambern whose editing in Easy Rider rivals anything being done today. Did you catch Peter Fonda's premonition during the trip?) and creator of a mise en scene that rivals anyone. It's too bad Dennis didn't direct more. He had real talent in that regard.

While I didn't particularly like Dennis' performance as Billy, it struck me that his character is just as bourgeois, uptight and angry as those he professes to rail against. I would have no trouble believing Billy turned into an investment banker. On the other hand, Peter Fonda gives a star turn as Wyatt. I had no idea Peter could really act, but he gives a movie star performance in Easy Rider as the mythic Captain America.

Speaking of movie stars, Easy Rider made Jack Nicholson's career. Reportedly, before Easy Rider Jack was ready to give up on acting and stick with writing and directing. I'm glad he didn't. He is at once both utterly charming and pathetic in Easy Rider, reminding me of a lot of the cornpone yahoos I went to law school with down South. His Academy Award nomination for Easy Rider was well deserved.

If there is any criticism to be had of Easy Rider, it may be that the script has not held up as well as the rest of the movie. With the exception of the centerpiece speech in which Jack Nicholson explains the threatening nature of freedom (and the writing is really good in that speech), the rest of the script groans a little. There's a lot of people calling each other "man" in the movie and more than one instance of "groovy", as well as an early sequence involving a bunch of Hispanics that make a Cheech and Chong routine sound progressive. In short, the best parts of the script are those in which no one speaks. Check out Phil Spector sampling the coke before he buys. Not a word is said in the whole sequence, yet the communication is clear.

Easy Rider is a really well-made movie that hasn't lost a step in 40 plus years. I don't think there's much being made today of which we will be able to say the same thing. See it.

## **PEOPLE LIKE VIOLENCE BECAUSE IT FEELS GOOD - The Imitation Game (2014)**

I hadn't planned on writing anything about this movie because I didn't think there was anything worth writing about. But, since a friend asked me to articulate what I didn't like about The Imitation Game, I may as well construct a posting.

It's not that I didn't like the movie, exactly. It was fine. Well crafted, nice to look at, Keira Knightley actually acted. It's just that I thought the movie was overly reverential, too timid, and not very exciting - more appropriate for Masterpiece Theatre than a feature film.

In and of itself, I don't find the invention of the computer to be interesting enough to warrant a 2 hour film. For me, it's kind of like a movie about the invention of the microscope. Therefore, the only emotional hook into the movie for me was the fact that the Benedict Cumberbatch character was homosexual. However, that aspect of Turing's emotional makeup (granted, Turing appears to have had very little emotional makeup) was only explored in a very superficial and predictable way. Perhaps it has to do with Benedict Cumberbatch being the flavor du jour. His Turing is a riff on his Sherlock Holmes character without the dash. My guess is the studio is ok with his character being gay, as long as no one has to see any gay activities. The price of stardom.

Granted, there was a demure and elegiac schoolboy crush sequence, but that didn't tell me how that experience informed the man Turing became and the character we see during WWII; and besides, I just found it to be merely run of the mill English schoolboy stuff one finds in a lot of literature and film - "Goodbye To All That" and "The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel" spring immediately to mind. The only other opportunity to explore whatever Turing felt about his sexuality was in the post-war sequence where I found it difficult to understand whether Turing was depressed because he was a crazy genius or because he was gay.

The most interesting thing in the movie to me was a throw away line where Turing tells the other researchers that he has sex with men. OK. How did he accomplish that during wartime when he was under heightened security scrutiny - especially since he had such a disagreeable personality? Who were the men he had sex with? What was/were the relationship(s) like? etc. To me, Turing dealing with being gay and the problems that entailed, set against a backdrop of cracking the Enigma Code would have been a more interesting story than what I was given - cracking the Enigma Code and Turing just happens to be gay and, oh yeah, he was punished for it.. I just thought the film overly touted the gay man aspect and the "isn't it terrible that the guy who cracked the Enigma Code was punished for being gay", without really exploring that story; leaving me feeling like I had been suckered by a bait and switch.

## **MONOMYTHIC – The Wizard of Oz (1939)**

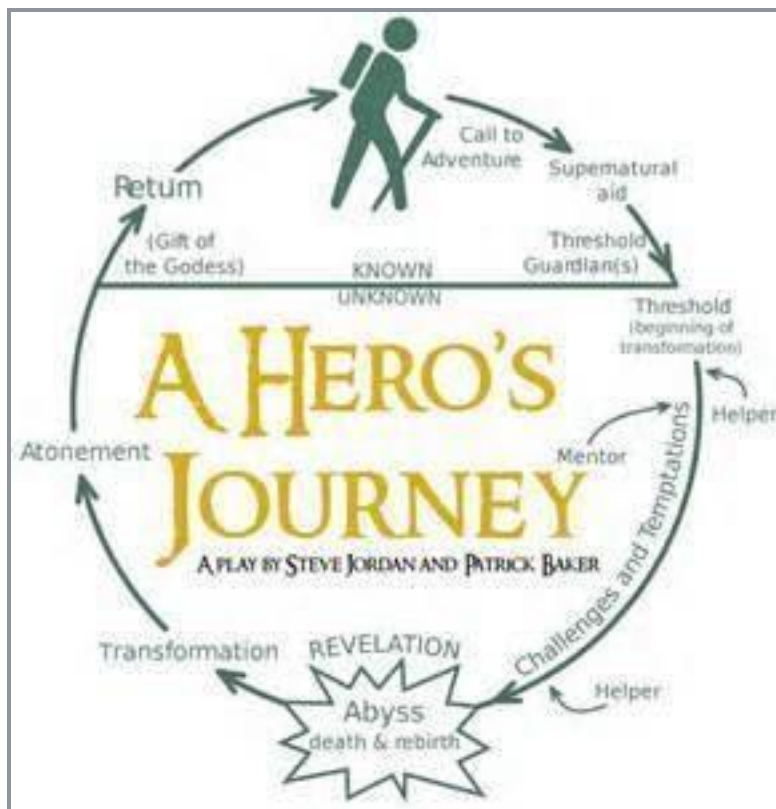
I finally saw The Wizard of Oz on the big screen and it was well worth the wait. Shown in the original aspect ratio, it was a feast for the eyes and, knowing the movie so well, I was able to enjoy the details that have been otherwise hidden from showings on TV – the Balloon Exhibition sign on Professor Marvel's wagon, Toto with a red tassel in her mouth as she enters the Wicked Witch's castle after the Scarecrow, Tin Man and Lion overwhelm the Winkie Guards, the glossy sheen on the floors in Oz and Munchkinland, the plastic flowers, the details of the prosthetics and makeup. Great stuff.

Over dinner before the viewing, my best friend Greg Gross and I were discussing 1939 in film. As you know, it was a great year for the movies. To whet your appetite, here is a list of the Best Picture Nominations:

- Dark Victory
- Gone With the Wind (The winner)
- Goodbye, Mr. Chips
- Love Affair
- Mr. Smith Goes to Washington
- Ninotchka
- Of Mice and Men
- Stagecoach
- The Wizard of Oz
- Wuthering Heights

So, what was the best movie of 1939? Macys or Gimbels? How can one possibly say? I will say though, that for my money, The Wizard of Oz was the best screenplay, and it wasn't even nominated. Why do I say this? Because it is almost perfectly constructed and is the best example I can think of the monomyth – the hero's journey.

The monomyth has appeared in literature since the ancients and cuts across all cultures and geographies. One finds the monomyth in the songlines of the Pacific Rim's aboriginal peoples, in the Norse Sagas, in The Odyssey, in Joyce and Kerouac. It has been codified as in this chart:



As you can see, The Wizard of Oz has all the elements: Dorothy's called to adventure when she sings Over the Rainbow. Auntie Em and Uncle Henry are her threshold guardians. The cyclone beings her transformation. She meets her three helpers and mentor along the way to Oz. You get

the idea. Next time you watch the movie, bear the chart in mind as you enjoy a brilliantly constructed script from Hollywood's Golden Era.

### **GOD, COUNTRY, FAMILY – American Sniper (2014)**

What I like about the best of Clint Eastwood's directorial efforts is that he sets up a simplistic scenario, takes the viewer on a direct path through the narrative, then complicates things by examining both sides of the moral question at issue. Accordingly, I was very interested in seeing how he handled American Sniper. I was disappointed. If it had been a lesser filmmaker, I would have just taken the Rambo ride and not have worried too much about it. However, Clint Eastwood is a better director than he shows in American Sniper.

The film is a straight up jingoistic biopic about a not very interesting, square jawed guy named Chris Kyle who killed a lot of people and never seemed to examine his own feelings about his vocation. In a larger context, the film never addresses the competing arguments for and against U.S. involvement in Iraq for so many years. Come to think of it, the film is a throwback to Clint's days as an actor – moralistic killing machine wipes scumbags off the earth without much thought as to the reasons for or against, except that we're Americans (fuck yeah!) and therefore we're RIGHT.

The plot is pretty simple: Redneck dad teaches Chris how to hunt. Chris is congratulated when he kills an animal. Chris beats up bully who picked on his little brother. Redneck dad explains the world is divided into sheep, wolves, and sheep dogs. Chris decides he's a sheep dog.

Chris then becomes a hard drinking rodeo redneck who kicks his ho girlfriend out of the trailer when he catches her cheating on him. He then enlists, despite being age 30. Why? I don't know and the movie didn't tell me.

He then becomes a Navy Seal, despite being afraid of water, because the recruiter says a lot of guys quit the Seal program. And Chris don't quit (fuck yeah!).

After training, Chris meets his only slightly less ho-ish bride to be in a bar. Then he goes to Iraq and kills a bunch of people. BTW, his first kill is a little boy. So, why does he have qualms about almost killing another little boy later in the movie? Again, I don't know and I'm not told.

In between tours, Chris is silent and smolders with suppressed rage. He even beats up a dog. Yadda, yadda, yadda – troubled vet has trouble adjusting to civilian life. To solve this problem, he goes back to Iraq and kills more people. Finally, he comes home to confront his demons, helping out other troubled vets by means of target practice therapy. In the end, one of Chris's charges kills him. Oh, the irony. Despite the downer ending, American Sniper is an NRA wet dream.

It's a Clint Eastwood film, so there's not much point in going into the technical aspect of the filmmaking. Clint's a consummate pro, so he knows how to make a movie. However, three things stand out: 1. Clint sets the climactic battle sequence in a sand storm, so the viewer cannot see much of what is going on. While this device may have been a cinematic metaphor for what

Chris was going through – i.e. scared shitless to the point where he finally wants to come home after 4 tours and 164 confirmed kills – I really wanted to see Bradley Cooper (as Chris) go through the emotional paces; especially since he isn't given much to do in the movie except be stoic and tight lipped. 2. The narrative was jerkier than in most of Clint's films, jumping back and forth between Iraq and the States, without much acknowledgment of elapsed time (years) between the main character's 4 tours. 3. The revenge aspect of the story was accomplished from such a remove that, while I could stretch credulity enough to believe the kill shot was taken from a mile and a quarter away, I could not stretch it enough to believe its confirmation. This took me out of the story, puzzling how Chris could have confirmed the kill of a guy surrounded by carpets a mile away.

All that aside, what troubles me most about this movie is the same thing that troubles me about the Seal team who killed Osama Bin Laden. Don't get me wrong. I think the world's a better place without Osama Bin Laden in it. But those guys could have gotten free beers and steaks for the rest of their lives from other warriors. There is absolutely no need for me to know who those guys are and there sure as hell is no need for them to have made money off of doing what is perceived to be their patriotic duty. To me, it cheapens their accomplishments by cynically wrapping up the very serious business of assassination in the American flag (just like the movie poster for American Sniper).

Similarly, I'm not sure I ever needed to know the Chris Kyle story. I'm sure he was a good man at heart, and I'm totally convinced he believed in the righteousness of his cause. But, to me, the mere telling of his story cheapens his legacy. If the movie is to be believed, Chris Kyle didn't think he was a hero. Why should we? Because he killed a whole bunch of Iraqis? I think he would argue that all he did was the job he was assigned to do. If one is talking about genuine patriotism that should be enough and there's no need to have a movie about it.

To me the true heroes are the men and women who serve, come home, get on with it the best they can, sometimes in spite of horrifically disfiguring wounds, take care of their families as best they can and are self-aware enough to ask whether what Bush put them through did any good at all. Where's their movie? But that's just me talking to an empty chair. Just like Clint.

### **BIRD BRAIN DEAD – Birdman (2014)**

It's that time of year, again, when Hollywood sells us shit they tell us is roses. I was really looking forward to seeing Birdman, as the premise sounded promising, but there's so much wrong with this movie, it's hard to know where to begin.

For starters, it's boring. It's another backstage story about a has been movie star trying to rejuvenate his career. In this case, Michael Keaton, the eponymous Birdman superhero of yore, has adapted a Raymond Carver novel for the stage.

Who is Raymond Carver, you might well ask? While I know the name, I don't know any of his work. So maybe shame on me for being ignorant, but I bet if one polls the American reading public, he or she will find that only a small percentage of readers know anything about Carver's work. And therein lies the problem. The book/play is supposed to be the message of the movie –

something about the need to be loved and recognized 24/7 and how we get really bummed if that doesn't happen. While my impulse is to tell Raymond, and, by extension, the filmmaker, to grow the fuck up, it wouldn't really matter because the underlying thesis of the film is premised by an obscurity acting under the assumption of familiarity, dooming this pile of nothingness to failure.

At any rate, Michael also directs and stars in the adaptation – on Broadway, no less - because he has mortgaged his Malibu beach house to rent the St. James Theatre. OK. Great. Another movie star who can't act appearing on Broadway. How novel.

Edward Norton plays a Broadway superstar with erectile dysfunction who poo poos all things movies because they're not "real." While I've known plenty of theatre actors who are dicks, I haven't run into any in quite a few years who seriously think the way Edward does. He's just a cliché from 60 years ago.

The females in the cast are largely wasted because they have no three dimensionality. They're just cardboard cut outs. The exception is Emma Stone, who gives the best performance in the movie as Michael Keaton's daughter who is fresh out of rehab and trying to stay clean and sober. It would have been a better film if it had been about her character.

In short, the characters might have been interesting if they had been portrayed in an authentic manner and had the writer known anything about the theatre or what it's like to be a stage actor. With the exception of one really great scene between Michael and Lindsay Duncan about the strange tango between actors and critics, the script was no deeper than 42nd Street – and not nearly as enjoyable, because it takes itself way too seriously.

The filmmaking was uniformly self-conscious and self-indulgent. There was some nice camera work when the action left the theatre (the scene where Michael buys a bottle was particularly nice) but all the hand held work never allowed me to enter the story as I was always aware of the camera movement. Similarly, since the filmmaker clearly knows nothing about the theatre, all the scenes from the play were flat, unimaginative, and riddled with community theatre blocking that the inevitable triumph of Michael's comeback lacks all believability.

All I can say about Birdman is that I'm glad I saw it as a screener because I would have been really pissed had I had to pay for it. Give me Warner Baxter any day.

## **IF YOU DON'T HAVE GOOD DREAMS, YOU GOT NIGHTMARES – Diner (1982)**

Diner is one of my favorite movies, but I've deliberately eschewed seeing it for many years because of my suspicion that I've overly romanticized it through self-identification. Upon my first viewing of Diner in more than 20 years, my suspicion was somewhat confirmed, but I still love it.

Diner takes place in 1959 Baltimore over 4 nights between Christmas and New Years, following the ups and downs of a group of 20 something males. The central metaphor of the movie is the local diner, where the group hangs out all night talking about sex, sports and music. The group consists of familiar types – the James Dean wannabe who's more talk than actual rebel, the



young married who can't figure out how to talk to his wife, the sensitive one who's knocked up a girl, the genius slacker, and the soon to be bridegroom who is "technically" a virgin. Their travails are perfectly underscored with a soundtrack of hits of the day.

The acting is uniformly great. Steve Guttenberg, as the dorky bridegroom to be with an encyclopedic knowledge of Baltimore Colts trivia, has never been better. Daniel Stern, as the guy who knows the flip side of every 45 but can't figure out why he has nothing to say to his wife, gives his usual great performance (what happened to him anyway?). Kevin Bacon (from whom I'm 2 degrees) is perfect as the aimless trust fund guy who can beat the bozos from Bryn Mawr and Cornell at the College Bowl. Timothy Daly smolders with controlled rage as a guy with too much on his plate. Mickey Rourke gives a performance that reminds us why he used to be a movie star. What a pity.

What struck me most on this viewing is a scene that occurs near the end of the movie that operates as a bridge between the familiarity of the characters' old world of the 1950s and the uncertainty of what's coming in the 1960s. The Timothy Daly character and the Steve Guttenberg character are in a low-end strip club watching a tired old dancer sleepwalk through the motions. Timothy can't bear the turgid beat, so he jumps on the stage, hijacks the piano, and launches into a barrelhouse number that invigorates the dancer, the band, and the whole joint.

What occurred to me on seeing the congratulatory wedding banner in the next scene – "For the 1960s and Forever" – is that the strip club scene punctuates the fact that not only the characters are going to change, but the times themselves, and the characters, only vaguely aware that something's up, nonetheless embrace the future because they know they'll still have the diner, and by extension, each other, no matter what the future brings.

Diner made Barry Levinson's bones as a director. The cinematography is striking, and the production design is gritty and authentic. It's definitely a guy's movie; nostalgic and romantic as a Billy Joel song and funny in the way guys talk to their friends that women don't understand. But it still holds up.

### **YOU KNOW WHAT THEY USED TO CALL ALCATRAZ IN THE OLD DAYS? - The Birdman of Alcatraz (1962)**

I had never seen The Birdman of Alcatraz, but it's been on my list for a while. It's a Frankenheimer film, so you know it's well crafted. Burt Lancaster got an Oscar nom (he lost to Gregroy Peck). The supporting cast is made up of dependable old pros – Thelma Ritter, Whit Bissell, Edmond O'Brien, Neville Brand and, especially, Karl Malden as a warden with whom Burt has a complicated relationship alternating between grudging respect and a venal need for revenge. The cinematography is of the in-your-face Playhouse 90 style where focus pulling and camera angles generate artificial excitement for what is essentially a lackluster narrative. Telly Savales is predictably creepy as an inmate who has been in stir way too long. Those are the good things about the movie – which are enough to justify spending two and a half hours watching this well-intentioned failure.

What I didn't like about the movie is that by the time Burt gets to Alcatraz, his bird days are over. He does all the bird stuff while he's in Leavenworth, which begs the question why isn't the movie entitled *The Birdman of Leavenworth*? Also, the sinking of the *Lusitania* is mistakenly reported as having sunk in 1916, rather than 1915. A minor point I know, but it took me out of the movie wondering why the screenwriter didn't check his facts and why a director of Frankenheimer's ability let that misstatement of fact fall through the cracks. Finally, the plot line about Burt's jailhouse marriage to Betty Field was, I suspect, creepy by 1962 standards, made even more so from a contemporary perspective now that Charles Manson is a giggling groom.

The movie starts out as a character study of Robert Stroud (portrayed by the usually robust Burt showing admirable nuanced restraint). Stroud spent something like 53 years in solitary confinement, having been spared the death penalty through the efforts of his mother (Thelma Ritter) with whom, in the best fucked up jailbird tradition, it is hinted he has had a psychologically abnormal relationship. During his extensive residency in Leavenworth, Burt becomes interested in birds. First, as a salve for the bleakness of his worthless existence, but, through the decades, he gradually becomes an expert in avian diseases and their cures; not to mention keeping psycho Telly at bay. In the best early '60s liberal tradition, I assume the lesson we're supposed to learn from Stroud's evolution from unrepentant badass murderer to Dr. Doolittle is that all life is worth preserving.

By the time Burt gets to Alcatraz, however, the movie turns into a polemic for prison reform. The birds have flown the coop, and I was left wondering why Frankenheimer didn't trim the movie by 40 minutes and stick to what was interesting – Burt's story – and leave the politics on the cutting room floor.

As previously stated, the movie held my interest and I'm glad I saw it. I just don't think I need to see it again.

## **TWO AND A HALF HOURS OF MY LIFE THAT I WON'T GET BACK – *The Place Beyond the Pines* (2013)**

The cinematography was pretty good. That was the only good thing about this movie.

What a freaking mess. I didn't recognize the names of the directors (both of whom were also some of the co-writers), but I'll bet you a dollar they are the dilettante children of Hollywood parents who sat around getting high and wrote a "script" that is so derivative, fraught with Kerouac angst and Malick obscurity, that the bullshit literally drops off the screen. I bet if you check their reference list for this movie, you'll find, at minimum, "*On the Road*", "*Badlands*", "*Rumble Fish*", "*Copland*", "*Drive*", and "*21 Jump Street*" (the TV Show, not the movie).

As a character that only exists in movies, Ryan Gosling (who I sometimes like but who is an actor that obviously needs a real director) plays Luke – a millennial equivalent of a geek - making his living as a motorcycle stunt driver for a carnival, endlessly riding around in a cage with other such drivers. Hamsters on a treadmill. Get it?



Apparently, Luke is a star on the carny circuit, scrawling “autographs” that look like tattoo hieroglyphics for his adoring fans. I just know the screenwriters gave a great deal of thought to all of the bitchin’ tattoos with which Luke’s body is covered.

One night, Eva Mendes shows up looking smoking hot. We know Luke and Eva had a relationship because of the stellar dialogue that went something like this: Luke: “Hey.” Eva: “Hey.” Cut to Eva and Luke on a motorcycle. Even though it’s clear Luke wants to screw Eva, Eva explains that she now has a man. Luke, displaying a gamut of emotion ranging from A to A, decides to leave town with the carnival, only to change his mind when Eva’s mother tells him that he is the father of Eva’s kid. Blame Granny for the rest of what follows.

Luke decides he’s going to stay in town to take care of his son. Eva, ever the damsel in distress, gets into Luke, screwing him in his newfound digs – a trailer in the woods - but, after post-coital bliss and some real family bonding involving the introduction of sugar into the baby’s diet, she decides Luke needs to vamoose. Luke, ever the good father, decides the best way to take care of his son is by becoming a bank robber, even though this degenerate, borderline psychopath loser is too stupid to check out the logistics of the banks before he robs them. Thus, he gets caught. Duh.

Bradley Cooper, as a law school graduate and licensed attorney, plays the cop who brings down Luke. Why Bradley is a cop, after going through law school and the bar exam, is never adequately explained. Nonetheless, Bradley feels pangs of guilt after Ray Liotta shakes down Eva for some dough Luke stashed in the baby’s crib. Bradley tries to do the right thing, but, of course, the corrupt police department can’t allow that. So, the movie shifts to Copland as Bradley begins his crusade to cleanse Schenedtady of all those dirty cops, culminating in Bradley’s run for attorney general 15 years later, by which point, Luke’s kid, now 17, and Bradley’s kid hook up.

Luke’s kid is basically a good guy - if one discounts his propensity for stealing Oxy from the local pharmacy and procuring X for Bradley’s kid.

Bradley’s kid, channeling Johnny Depp, speaks with a goombah accent that makes Joe Pesci sound like Henry Higgins. Why? Who knows, and we’re way past caring by this point. Nonetheless, Bradley’s kid seemingly sees the errors of his ways when Bradley wins the election. He’s so proud.

Meanwhile, Luke’s kid connects with his grandfather, who seems to have forgotten the kid was coming over, and buys Luke’s old motorcycle, riding off into the autumn foliage with brooding self-satisfaction. For where is he bound? West, man. Just like Kerouac. Cool. What a crock.

## **FILM NOIR**

Since Greg Gross and I just had a discussion about what constitutes film noir (I think I take a more expansionist view than my classicist friend), it might be instructive to see what others have said about the "genre", for lack of a better word.

Film Noir - film nwär/ noun: a style or genre of cinematographic film marked by a mood of pessimism, fatalism, and menace. The term was originally applied by a group of French critics to American thriller or detective films made in the period 1944–54 and to the work of directors such as Orson Welles, Fritz Lang, and Billy Wilder; a film marked by a mood of pessimism, fatalism, and menace.

From Wikipedia: Film noir (/film nwar/; French pronunciation: [film nwaʁ]) is a cinematic term used primarily to describe stylish Hollywood crime dramas, particularly those that emphasize cynical attitudes and sexual motivations. Hollywood's classical film noir period is generally regarded as extending from the early 1940s to the late 1950s. Film noir of this era is associated with a low-key black-and-white visual style that has roots in German Expressionist cinematography. Many of the prototypical stories and much of the attitude of classic noir derive from the hardboiled school of crime fiction that emerged in the United States during the Great Depression.

The term film noir, French for "black film", first applied to Hollywood films by French critic Nino Frank in 1946, was unrecognized by most American film industry professionals of that era. Rather, cinema historians and critics defined the category retrospectively.

Before the notion was widely adopted in the 1970s, many of the classic films noirs[a] were referred to as melodramas. Whether film noir qualifies as a distinct genre is a matter of ongoing debate among scholars.

Film noir encompasses a range of plots: the central figure may be a private eye (The Big Sleep), a plainclothes policeman (The Big Heat), an aging boxer (The Set-Up), a hapless grifter (Night and the City), a law-abiding citizen lured into a life of crime (Gun Crazy), or simply a victim of circumstance (D.O.A.). Although film noir was originally associated with American productions, films now so described have been made around the world. Many pictures released from the 1960s onward share attributes with film noir of the classical period, and often treat its conventions self-referentially. Some refer to such latter-day works as neo-noir. Problems of Definition: The questions of what defines film noir and what sort of category it is provoke continuing debate. "We'd be oversimplifying things in calling film noir oneiric, strange, erotic, ambivalent, and cruel": this set of attributes constitutes the first of many attempts to define film noir made by French critics Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton in their 1955 book *Panorama du film noir américain 1941–1953* (A Panorama of American Film Noir), the original and seminal extended treatment of the subject. They emphasize that not every film noir embodies all five attributes in equal measure—one might be more dreamlike; another, particularly brutal. The authors' caveats and repeated efforts at alternative definition have been echoed in subsequent scholarship: in the more than five decades since, there have been innumerable further attempts at definition, yet in the words of cinema historian Mark Bould, film noir remains an "elusive phenomenon ... always just out of reach"

Though film noir is often identified with a visual style, unconventional within a Hollywood context, that emphasizes low-key lighting and unbalanced compositions, films commonly identified as noir evidence a variety of visual approaches, including ones that fit comfortably within the Hollywood mainstream. Film noir similarly embraces a variety of genres, from the

gangster film to the police procedural to the gothic romance to the social problem picture—any example of which from the 1940s and 1950s, now seen as noir's classical era, was likely to be described as a "melodrama" at the time.

While many critics refer to film noir as a genre itself, others argue that it can be no such thing. While noir is often associated with an urban setting, many classic noirs take place in small towns, suburbia, rural areas, or on the open road; so setting cannot be its genre determinant, as with the Western. Similarly, while the private eye and the femme fatale are character types conventionally identified with noir, the majority of film noirs feature neither; so there is no character basis for genre designation as with the gangster film. Nor does film noir rely on anything as evident as the monstrous or supernatural elements of the horror film, the speculative leaps of the science fiction film, or the song-and-dance routines of the musical. Identifying Characteristics: In their original 1955 canon of film noir, Raymond Borde and Etienne Chaumeton identified twenty-two Hollywood films released between 1941 and 1952 as core examples; they listed another fifty-nine American films from the period as significantly related to the field of noir. A half-century later, film historians and critics had come to agree on a canon of approximately three hundred films from 1940–58. There remain, however, many differences of opinion over whether other films of the era, among them a number of well-known ones, qualify as film noirs or not. For instance, *The Night of the Hunter* (1955), starring Robert Mitchum in an acclaimed performance, is treated as a film noir by some critics, but not by others. Some critics include *Suspicion* (1941), directed by Alfred Hitchcock, in their catalogues of noir; others ignore it. Concerning films made either before or after the classic period, or outside of the United States at any time, consensus is even rarer.

To support their categorization of certain films as noirs and their rejection of others, many critics refer to a set of elements they see as marking examples of the mode. The question of what constitutes the set of noir's identifying characteristics is a fundamental source of controversy. For instance, critics tend to define the model film noir as having a tragic or bleak conclusion, but many acknowledged classics of the genre have clearly happy endings (e.g., *Stranger on the Third Floor*, *The Big Sleep*, *Dark Passage*, and *The Dark Corner*), while the tone of many other noir denouements is ambivalent. Some critics perceive classic noir's hallmark as a distinctive visual style. Others, observing that there is actually considerable stylistic variety among noirs, instead emphasize plot and character type. Still others focus on mood and attitude. No survey of classic noir's identifying characteristics can therefore be considered definitive. In the 1990s and 2000s, critics have increasingly turned their attention to that diverse field of films called neo-noir; once again, there is even less consensus about the defining attributes of such films made outside the classic period. Visual style: Black-and-white image of a man with a heavily bandaged nose sitting and talking on the phone. He wears a cream-colored suit and vest and boldly patterned tie; the collar of a white shirt is visible. Behind of him is a bookcase; in front of him, the edge of desk. A series of diagonal shadows descending from upper left falls over most of the image. Shadows of window blinds fall upon private eye Jake Gittes, performed by Jack Nicholson, in *Chinatown* (1974).

The low-key lighting schemes of many classic film noirs are associated with stark light/dark contrasts and dramatic shadow patterning—a style known as *chiaroscuro* (a term adopted from Renaissance painting). The shadows of Venetian blinds or banister rods, cast upon an actor, a

wall, or an entire set, are an iconic visual in noir and had already become a cliché well before the neo-noir era. Characters' faces may be partially or wholly obscured by darkness—a relative rarity in conventional Hollywood filmmaking. While black-and-white cinematography is considered by many to be one of the essential attributes of classic noir, the color films *Leave Her to Heaven* (1945) and *Niagara* (1953) are routinely included in noir filmographies, while *Slightly Scarlet* (1956), *Party Girl* (1958), and *Vertigo* (1958) are classified as noir by varying numbers of critics. Film noir is also known for its use of low-angle, wide-angle, and skewed, or Dutch angle shots. Other devices of disorientation relatively common in film noir include shots of people reflected in one or more mirrors, shots through curved or frosted glass or other distorting objects (such as during the strangulation scene in *Strangers on a Train*), and special effects sequences of a sometimes bizarre nature. Night-for-night shooting, as opposed to the Hollywood norm of day-for-night, was often employed. From the mid-1940s forward, location shooting became increasingly frequent in noir.

In an analysis of the visual approach of *Kiss Me Deadly*, a late and self-consciously stylized example of classic noir, critic Alain Silver describes how cinematographic choices emphasize the story's themes and mood. In one scene, the characters, seen through a "confusion of angular shapes", thus appear "caught in a tangible vortex or enclosed in a trap." Silver makes a case for how "side light is used ... to reflect character ambivalence", while shots of characters in which they are lit from below "conform to a convention of visual expression which associates shadows cast upward of the face with the unnatural and ominous". Structure and narrational devices: A man and a woman, seen in profile, staring intensely at each other. The man, on the left, is considerably taller. He wears a brown pin-striped suit, holds a key in one hand and grips the woman's arm with the other. She is wearing a pale green top. Lit from below and to the side, they cast bold, angled shadows on the wall behind them. Barbara Stanwyck and Burt Lancaster were two of the most prolific stars of classic noir. The complex structure of *Sorry, Wrong Number* (1948) involves a real-time framing story, multiple narrators, and flashbacks within flashbacks. Film noirs tend to have unusually convoluted story lines, frequently involving flashbacks and other editing techniques that disrupt and sometimes obscure the narrative sequence. Framing the entire primary narrative as a flashback is also a standard device. Voiceover narration, sometimes used as a structuring device, came to be seen as a noir hallmark; while classic noir is generally associated with first-person narration (i.e., by the protagonist), Stephen Neale notes that third-person narration is common among noirs of the semidocumentary style. Neo-noirs as varied as *The Element of Crime* (surrealist), *After Dark*, *My Sweet* (retro), and *Kiss Kiss Bang Bang* (meta) have employed the flashback/voiceover combination.

Bold experiments in cinematic storytelling were sometimes attempted during the classic era: *Lady in the Lake*, for example, is shot entirely from the point of view of protagonist Philip Marlowe; the face of star (and director) Robert Montgomery is seen only in mirrors. *The Chase* (1946) takes oneirism and fatalism as the basis for its fantastical narrative system, redolent of certain horror stories, but with little precedent in the context of a putatively realistic genre. In their different ways, both *Sunset Boulevard* and *D.O.A.* are tales told by dead men. Latter-day noir has been in the forefront of structural experimentation in popular cinema, as exemplified by such films as *Pulp Fiction*, *Fight Club*, and *Memento*.

Plots, characters, and settings:

Crime, usually murder, is an element of almost all films noir; in addition to standard-issue greed, jealousy is frequently the criminal motivation. A crime investigation—by a private eye, a police detective (sometimes acting alone), or a concerned amateur—is the most prevalent, but far from dominant, basic plot. In other common plots the protagonists are implicated in heists or con games, or in murderous conspiracies often involving adulterous affairs. False suspicions and accusations of crime are frequent plot elements, as are betrayals and double-crosses. According to J. David Slocum, "protagonists assume the literal identities of dead men in nearly fifteen percent of all noir." Amnesia is fairly epidemic—"noir's version of the common cold", in the words of film historian Lee Server. Black-and-white film poster with an image of a young man and woman holding each other. They are surrounded by an abstract, whirlpool-like image; the central arc of the thick black line that define it encircles their head. Both are wearing white shirts and look forward with tense expressions; his right arm cradles her back, and in his hand he holds a revolver. The stars' names—Teresa Wright and Robert Mitchum—feature at the top of the whirlpool; the title and remainder of the credits are below. By the late 1940s, the noir trend was leaving its mark on other genres. A prime example is the Western Pursued (1947), filled with psychosexual tensions and behavioral explanations derived from Freudian theory. Films noir tend to revolve around heroes who are more flawed and morally questionable than the norm, often fall guys of one sort or another. The characteristic protagonists of noir are described by many critics as "alienated"; in the words of Silver and Ward, "filled with existential bitterness". Certain archetypal characters appear in many films noir—hardboiled detectives, femme fatales, corrupt policemen, jealous husbands, intrepid claims adjusters, and down-and-out writers. Among characters of every stripe, cigarette smoking is rampant. From historical commentators to neo-noir pictures to pop culture ephemera, the private eye and the femme fatale have been adopted as the quintessential film noir figures, though they do not appear in most films now regarded as classic noir. Of the twenty-five National Film Registry noirs, in only four does the star play a private eye: The Maltese Falcon, The Big Sleep, Out of the Past, and Kiss Me Deadly. Just four others readily qualify as detective stories: Laura, The Killers, The Naked City, and Touch of Evil.

Film noir is often associated with an urban setting, and a few cities—Los Angeles, San Francisco, New York, and Chicago, in particular—are the location of many of the classic films. In the eyes of many critics, the city is presented in noir as a "labyrinth" or "maze". Bars, lounges, nightclubs, and gambling dens are frequently the scene of action. The climaxes of a substantial number of films noir take place in visually complex, often industrial settings, such as refineries, factories, trainyards, power plants—most famously the explosive conclusion of White Heat, set at a chemical plant. In the popular (and, frequently enough, critical) imagination, in noir it is always night and it always rains.

A substantial trend within latter-day noir—dubbed "film soleil" by critic D. K. Holm—heads in precisely the opposite direction, with tales of deception, seduction, and corruption exploiting bright, sun-baked settings, stereotypically the desert or open water, to searing effect. Significant predecessors from the classic and early post-classic eras include The Lady from Shanghai; the Robert Ryan vehicle Inferno (1953); the French adaptation of Patricia Highsmith's The Talented Mr. Ripley, Plein soleil (Purple Noon in the U.S., more accurately rendered elsewhere as Blazing Sun or Full Sun; 1960); and director Don Siegel's version of The Killers (1964). The tendency was at its peak during the late 1980s and 1990s, with films such as Dead Calm (1989), After



Dark, My Sweet, The Hot Spot, Delusion (1991), Red Rock West and the television series Miami Vice. Worldview, morality, and tone; Film noir is often described as essentially pessimistic. The noir stories that are regarded as most characteristic tell of people trapped in unwanted situations (which, in general, they did not cause but are responsible for exacerbating), striving against random, uncaring fate, and frequently doomed. The films are seen as depicting a world that is inherently corrupt. Classic film noir has been associated by many critics with the American social landscape of the era—in particular, with a sense of heightened anxiety and alienation that is said to have followed World War II. In author Nicholas Christopher's opinion, "it is as if the war, and the social eruptions in its aftermath, unleashed demons that had been bottled up in the national psyche." Film noirs, especially those of the 1950s and the height of the Red Scare, are often said to reflect cultural paranoia; Kiss Me Deadly is the noir most frequently marshaled as evidence for this claim. Black-and-white image of a man and a woman, seen from mid-chest up, their faces in profile, gazing into each other's eyes. He embraces her in a dip with his right arm and holds her right hand to his chest with his left hand. He wears a pin-striped suit and a dark tie. She wears a white top. On the left, the background is black; on the right, it is lighter, with a series of diagonal shadows descending from the upper corner. "You've got a touch of class, but I don't know how far you can go." "A lot depends on who's in the saddle." Bogart and Bacall in *The Big Sleep*.

Film noir is often said to be defined by "moral ambiguity", yet the Production Code obliged almost all classic noirs to see that steadfast virtue was ultimately rewarded and vice, in the absence of shame and redemption, severely punished (however dramatically incredible the final rendering of mandatory justice might be). A substantial number of latter-day noirs flout such conventions: vice emerges triumphant in films as varied as the grim *Chinatown* and the ribald *Hot Spot*.

The tone of film noir is generally regarded as downbeat; some critics experience it as darker still—"overwhelmingly black", according to Robert Ottoson. Influential critic (and filmmaker) Paul Schrader wrote in a seminal 1972 essay that "film noir is defined by tone", a tone he seems to perceive as "hopeless". In describing the adaptation of *Double Indemnity*, noir analyst Foster Hirsch describes the "requisite hopeless tone" achieved by the filmmakers, which appears to characterize his view of noir as a whole. On the other hand, definitive film noirs such as *The Big Sleep*, *The Lady from Shanghai*, *Scarlet Street* and *Double Indemnity* itself are famed for their hardboiled repartee, often imbued with sexual innuendo and self-reflexive humor.

The foregoing raises a few points of consideration in my mind. 1. The classical definition and analysis of "film noir" is self-limiting because it is based on a formulation conceived and articulated in the mid 1950s. Accordingly, no films after that time could have been included in the authors' formulation. 2. However, if one accepts the classical formulation of what constitutes film noir, there is no reason to conclude that post mid 1950s films cannot qualify. Hence, I would argue that *Chinatown* and *Body Heat* (to name but two) both qualify as films noirs. 3. It's hard to ascribe the term to film noir to many post 1980 films as mainstream movies have backed away from the essential pessimism inherent in the classical definition of film noir - although I would argue that a few Coen brothers movies qualify; most notably, *Blood Simple* and *No Country for Old Men*. Likewise, *Silence of the Lambs* (how much more unsettling can an ending be than to have a cannibal on the loose during an impending hurricane?), but not Tarrantino movies, which

always have something approximating a "happy" ending, or at least a predictable ending based on well established Hollywood narrative norms. Neither would I include Taxi Driver because it has a "happy" ending. 4. I doubt that filmmakers in the classical noir period consciously set out to make noir films. A lot of them were German expats (e.g. Lang, Wilder), who came of creative age during the advent of Expressionism, and who would have naturally been influenced by it.

Expressionism was essentially a poverty-stricken art form as there was no ready money available in Germany during the period 1918 - 1933. Art, theatre, and movies in post WWI Germany were, by necessity, made on the cheap. That ethos was carried over into Hollywood noir films as brilliant filmmakers were not given any money to work with. They had to figure out how to make a visual mark with no money, much like the nascent film geniuses of our generation who cut their teeth on no-budget AIP pictures. So, that's my two cents - which is probably only worth a penny.

### **YOU REALLY SHOULD SPEND MORE TIME CONCENTRATING ON YOUR MUSIC Head (1968)**

Thanks to my best bud Greg Gross, I'm starting to work my way through the BBS Collection. I started with Head, figuring it would be the most annoying based on my preconceived notions about '60s psychedelic movies. I was wrong. Yeah, it's definitely of its time, what with the smash cuts and the polarized negatives creating groovy day glo sequences set to lesser known Monkees songs, but, underneath the clichés, (which, by the way, aren't nearly as overdone as they could have been), and despite the collective tongues often being firmly planted in their respective cheeks, there's something more profound at work in Head.

At bottom, Head is a meditation on the psychological effects of stardom and the impulse, if not near obsession, of those anointed by it to exterminate it. All men kill the things they love, and we literally watch the Monkees commit career suicide. They say as much in the movie and seem both relieved and amused.

Bob Rafelson and Jack Nicholson (reportedly under the influence of acid as they were writing the script in Harry Dean Stanton's basement) concocted a subtly clever examination of the hollowness of teeny bopper superstardom, the ennui of the Sunset Strip party scene, and an idealized neo-Eden that was a southern California of the mind crammed down our throats by a relentless array of media advertising to an extent previously unknown in American culture, juxtaposed with a protest against the Vietnam War (repeatedly showing the iconic image of the ARVN officer blowing the brains out of the suspected VC agent in the streets of Saigon) and a larger platonic meditation on the nature of existence (Mickey Dolez summarizing Plato's Cave in '60s speak). Fascinating stuff, and easy to understand why the central image of the piece is the 4 Monkees jumping off the Vincent Thomas Bridge (the same bridge Tony Scott took a dive off of for perhaps the same reasons.)

Owing to Rafelson's fear that he'd never get a chance to direct another feature, there's several movie styles at work in Head – the western, the silent slapstick, the Fred and Ginger number, the nod to Metropolis, the Lawrence of Arabia sequence, the Dr. Strangelove annihilation of a Coke

machine., etc. – the film could have been a huge mess in the hands of a less competent filmmaker.

The best fun to be had in *Head*, though, is in spotting the actors in the cameos. It isn't often you get to see the Monkees, Victor Mature, Sonny Liston, Ray Nitschke, Teri Garr, Toni Basil, Jack Nicholson, Dennis Hopper, Frank Zappa, Annette Funicello, Timothy Carey, and Vito Scotti in the same movie. Zappa, walking a cow, sums up the whole Monkees dilemma as he runs into Davy Jones on a studio backlot when he asks why Davy hasn't spent more time on the music. Apparently, all the Monkees must have asked the same question because the TV show was canceled during production of *Head*. You get the feeling the Monkees didn't care as Peter nonchalantly walks into a men's room humming *Strawberry Fields Forever*. *Head* may not be to everyone's taste, but I found it fascinating to watch and profound in the issues it raises. Hey Hey.

### **AND THE BELLS IN HELL GO DING-A-LING-A-LING – Oh! What a Lovely War (1969)**

When I turned on *Oh! What a Lovely War* I was settling in for what I thought would be a tedious, overly mannered take on what, at one time, was called "The Great War." After all, it was directed by Dickie Attenborough, who is not one of my favorites. How wrong I was. What a gem of a film this is! Kudos to you, Sir Richard.

*Oh! What a Lovely War* is a vaudeville take on WWI, often set at the amusement park at Brighton Pier, bursting with color, song, dance, and a few jokes, seamlessly transitioning into the battlefields, salons, and the nebulous Crystal-Palace like setting of the diplomatic sequences. Underneath the pastiche, however, is a capsule history of WWI that any layman can understand, told in an imaginative, non-cloying way.

All of the songs that are used in the movie were current during WWI and there's not a dud in the bunch. The choreography is simple, yet imaginative and easy enough that even John Mills can pull it off. All of the dialogue by the historical characters were actually said by those people, and you get all of the famous quotes (e.g. "the lamps going out all over Europe", "there is some corner of a foreign field that is forever England", etc.), taking on a new solemnity with the perspective of 100 years, another World War, unresolved crises in the Balkans, etc., etc., etc., ad nauseum.

All of the soldiers in *Oh! What a Lovely War* are named "Smith", amplifying the upper-class twittish callousness of the senior command who just know that a breakthrough will occur in 1915 or 1916 or 1917 by consistently throwing another 300,000 Smiths into no man's land, with each battle totted up neatly on a headquarters scoreboard with graphics like: "Paschendale Killed – 250,000, Ground Gained - 0."

With Turgidsonian logic, John Mills, as Sir Douglas Haig, explains how the Allies will win the war by mathematics – since the Allies have more young men than Germany, they'll keep throwing them at the Germans until the Germans only have 5000 men left. By that time, the Allies will still have 10,000 men and will win the war by default – which is kind of what happened.

No one actually dies on screen. Rather, some just disappear into a mist of poison gas, others pin a poppy to their uniform. The final shot is both staggering and sobering, considering the film was made without CGI. If you're a fan of British actors (which I am, except when they're playing



American characters), you'll get a treat with performances by the young Vanessa Redgrave, Ian Holm (virtually unrecognizable as Poincare), Edward Fox, and Maggie Smith. The older actors – John Gielgud, Jack Hawkins, John Mills, Ralph Richardson, and Laurence Olivier (who I actually kind of liked, for once) give performances that are more nuanced than we are accustomed to which I attribute to their sense memory as they were all children during WWI.

I can't say enough good things about Oh! What a Lovely War. It's a winner all the way around. Do yourself a favor and don't miss it.

## **PLAYS THAT WILL NEVER BE WRITTEN, SONGS THAT WILL NEVER BE SUNG – The Normal Heart (2014)**

While I often find HBO movies don't live up to their hype, I am pleased to say that is not the case with The Normal Heart. Quite simply, The Normal Heart is the best HBO movie I have yet seen. In Larry Kramer's adaptation of his multiple Tony award winning play, the movie follows the early years of the AIDS epidemic – before we knew the causes, when treatment modalities were only guessed at and when every research dollar was hard won, without assistance from the Reagan administration, the NIH, or the WHO.

The performances are uniformly outstanding. Mark Ruffalo is an actor I like who I too often see in material that is not as good as his talent deserves. Not so in this case. Under Ryan Murphy's superb direction and with Kramer's words carrying the moral weight of the Archangel Michael's righteous wrath, Mr. Ruffalo is at once outraged, bellicose, tender, frightened, empathetic, resigned, embittered and, ultimately, ennobled by his personal and political struggle with what at the time seemed like an endless tidal wave. He should be a strong Emmy contender, if that sort of thing matters.

Similarly, the usually lightweight Julia Roberts is outstanding in what I think is her best performance ever. With none of her Pretty Woman glamor or spunkiness, her portrayal of the tough minded, polio-ridden doctor is heartbreaking.

Jim Parsons is likewise terrific as the first director of the Gay Men's Health Crisis in a performance that makes up for all the silly stuff he has to do on Big Bang Theory. More please.

Joe Mantello almost steals the whole thing. In one of the best written scenes I've heard in a long time, Mr. Mantello's meltdown is a tour de force that should be long remembered. Although he didn't win the Tony for playing the same role on Broadway, it is a fitting testament to this consummate theater professional to have his work so well-deservedly memorialized.

The AIDS crisis has been highly politicized since its onslaught began in the early 1980s. Whatever your personal views about its initial target population, the fact that 36 million human beings have been infected since 1981 should give you pause. In reality, the dialectic has not been about gay or straight for decades, despite the best efforts of those persons who like their cosmology simple. Rather, it's about lost opportunity, lost friends, lost family, lost loved ones. If you don't feel that our culture has been diminished as a result, I dare say you may be lost as well.

## **MOTHERFUCKER! - Mamma Mia! (2008)**

It is now official. Mamma Mia! is the worst movie I have ever seen.

Let's analyze this: the 6 adult actors in this waste of time have, between them, 4 Oscars, 16 additional Oscar nominations, 2 Tonys, 1 Emmy, 3 BAFTA Awards, and numerous Golden Globes and SAG awards. So, it's not that they can't act. And yet, they can't save this dreck. It's ABBA on a Greek island for criminy's sake! It's supposed to be FUN. Instead, these poor accomplished actors are desperately running around in this piece of garbage, trying to generate something resembling a joie de vivre while staring into the camera like deer in the headlights with a mounting fear that this is how their careers end. I saw more confident performances when I was in high school.

It hardly matters that Pierce Brosnan is a worse singer in this movie than Russell Crowe in Les Mis, because nothing can save Mamma Mia! Nor is there any real need to mention the consistently talent-free Amanda Seyfried (why does she have a career?) or the young man who plays her fiancé, except to say that if that young actor intends to continue playing romantic leads who are supposed to be heterosexual, he needs to learn how to act in such a way that he stops coming across as being gay.

That said, I don't think it's really the actors' fault that Mamma Mia! is a piece of crap. The director, maybe? I can't figure it out. Phyllida Lloyd directed Dame Meryl to her third Oscar in The Iron Lady, which I thought was one of the better biopics I've seen in recent years. Yet, in MM! there is no pace, the shots often don't match up, the eye lines are off, and you can tell that some numbers took all day to film because of the lighting disparity. WTF?

Dame Meryl and Christine Baranski have done musicals (anyone remember Meryl in Happy End with Christopher Lloyd?) and know their way around a song, so why weren't their talents utilized to better effect? Phyllida was supposedly in charge, so I have to lay a lot of the blame at her feet, but the departments should have had her back and the editor and the DP need to turn in their union cards.

Speaking of the departments, what was with Dame Meryl's overalls? Surely, she must have enough clout to tell the costumer that she doesn't want to prance around on a Greek Island looking like Farmer Jill. Stellan Skaarsgard was clothed like Jane Hathaway, instead of the roguish adventurer his character is meant to be and, while I get that the Colin Firth character is supposed to be a tight ass, did he really need to keep his tie on for half the movie? Not that any of the male leads should have been running around without their shirts. I saw more middle age paunch in MM! than in a 1980s WWF reunion.

I also have to pick at the choreography, which was dull and uninspired – even in the numbers including what I assume are professional dancers.

But . . . what was the real problem with Mamma Mia!? SCRIPT! SCRIPT! SCRIPT! Don't you morons ever get it? The youngest leading actor is in his mid 50s. Dame Meryl is in her 60s. Dame Meryl was supposed to have had a fling 20 years prior to the events of the movie, meaning

she would have spawned Amanda Seyfried when she was in her 40s, in the late 1980s. And yet, the photographs of the 3 guys have them outfitted in 1960s hippie style or early 1970s glam. Does any of that make sense?

And another thing. .... Oh, forget it. Who cares? The producers clearly didn't, so why should I? I only mention all this because MM! underscores a blatant cynicism on the part of the people who produce mass entertainment that us yokels will buy anything when, in reality, they ought to thank their lucky stars that they get to do what so many others with comparable or greater talent will never have a chance to do – meaning they should take some pride in what they do and create something that will have some lasting meaning, rather than churn out garbage like MM! which, unfortunately, will also endure – like a petrified dinosaur turd. Has the entertainment industry really sunk so low? With Mamma Mia!, the answer is apparently “yes.”

### **TURN TOWARDS HOME AND GO THERE - Dean Spanley (2008)**

I haven't seen a movie I enjoyed as much as Dean Spanley in ages. It's a simple, touching, and utterly charming movie about fathers and sons, the secret life of dogs, the fragrance of Tokay, the transmigration of souls, and the cathartic power of releasing long suppressed grief.

The writing is terrific, and the acting is sensational. In a single scene, Art Malik sets up the argument of the piece by hardly saying a word. Like one of the good souls out of Dickens, old pro Judy Parfitt is at once effervescent and severe as the housekeeper who talks to her dead husband. Bryan Brown, as the rakish "Conveyancer" with a bomb girlfriend, is charming and dependable. Jeremy Northam and Peter O'Toole, as father and son, are terrific. Filmed 5 years before his death, Peter O'Toole shows he can still do it with just a look of his eyes. Finally, as the eponymous Dean Spanley, Sam Neill gives an Oscar worthy performance as he reveals what happened to one of the 7 great dogs and the elder son of Peter O'Toole.

Without giving too much away, the routine of Jeremy Northam's weekly visits to Peter O'Toole is upset after the two attend a lecture on the transmigration of souls. Jeremy senses that there is more to Dean Spanley than meets the eye, especially when the Dean is under the influence of Tokay. Jeremy's suspicions are confirmed when the Dean reveals the secret life of Wag the dog. I'll leave it there and encourage you to see the film. You'll love it.

### **TELL ME YOU LOVE ME, BILLY - Seance on a Wet Afternoon (1964)**

Kim Stanley and Dickie Attenborough have to be the stupidest kidnappers who ever lived. Like the underwear gnomes, they really don't have a plan, except to: 1. Kidnap a rich kid; and 2. Profit. They can't pull off their disguises. They can't maintain the illusion that the kid is in a hospital room. They forget to lock the door to the room in which they're holding the kid when the kid's mom is in the house attending a seance in the hope that the kid (although not known to be dead) will somehow communicate with mummy from the beyond.

Dickie is dubious of the plan and is clearly uncomfortable with the morality of "borrowing" the kid, but he actually turns out to be pretty adept at the whole kidnapping thing, despite his obvious remorse each step of the way. Kim is bug jumping nuts, but Dickie's too whipped to tell

her to piss off. Once Dickie kidnaps the kid (by duping the chauffeur), Kim goes to the parents' house and tells them about her psychic ability. Great. Now the parents, as well as the police and a bunch of reporters, have seen her face. Dickie totes the kid around in a motorcycle side car whenever he feels guilty, eventually dumping her where she can be found by a bunch of Boy Scouts, then confessing all to Patrick Magee based on Kim's spazzing out at a seance. The parents are weedy (mom) and heartless (dad). Frankly, the kid doesn't stand a chance. When Kim and Dickie debate how to dispose of the kid when she unexpectedly becomes sick with fever, neither consider just anonymously leaving her at a hospital emergency room. Oy. These people are idiots.

I'm not sure why Kim is in this very British movie. Dickie must have wanted her as he produced the goofball thing, but I have to think there had to have been dozens of British actresses who could have played the role, and Kim's accent is so inconsistent ("it was a wet afternoon after the rain") it took me out of the movie.

To her credit, Kim does her Actors' Studio best work in the seance scenes, which were pretty effective and an interesting reminder that there once was a time when there was an American Theatre whose actors actually got starring roles in movies (For the record, Kim lost the Oscar that year to Julie Andrews for Mary Poppins (also nominated were Debbie Reynolds - Unsinkable Molly Brown, Anne Bancroft - The Pumpkin Eater, and Sophia Loren - Marriage Italian Style).

The movie is filmed in the style of the British "Kitchen Sink Dramas", popular in the late 1950s. Dickie's being all internal the whole time and the dialogue sounds more like a play than a movie. If you're a fan of The Servant, Georgy Girl, The Entertainer, or Look Back In Anger, you might find Seance on a Wet Afternoon to be a curious period piece. Otherwise, you'll have more fun watching Throw Momma from the Train.

## **WHAT DO YOU DO WHEN YOU SEE A SHOOTING STAR? - Wings (1927)**

My quest lately is to complete my viewing of every film that has won an Oscar for best picture, and, for some reason, I had never seen Wings. What a treat. I can't imagine a better film from 1927 to have won the first best picture Oscar. The acting is great, the script is pretty good for a silent movie, and the stunts were incredible - especially considering the movie was filmed before Lindbergh crossed the Atlantic.

Although a heavy Brooklyn accent prevented Clara Bow from transitioning from silents to sound, in 1927 she was the "It" girl and it shows. Her charisma jumps off the screen. Buddy Rogers is a better actor than Richard Arlen and I found it easier to believe his performance, although I must say his was the better developed role.

The story is pretty simple - two guys in love with the same girl go off to fight WWI. Left behind is the plucky girl next door who is in love with one of the guys, who is oblivious. Undeterred, she goes to France and becomes an ambulance driver. Through the fortunes of war, she becomes the oblivious guy's guardian angel. Through a twist of fate, the two guys square off against each other, with tragic consequences. Older, sadder, and wiser, the true lovers are reunited.

Gary Cooper has a one scene role as a doomed flyer. The lore is his performance in Wings made him a star, although I have to say I am not a huge Gary Cooper fan, so I don't see it.

For me, silent movies are usually fascinating time capsules but bear little relevance to my current cinematic sensibilities. Wings is a welcome exception. It's a template for almost every war movie that followed. Technically, the stunts are thrilling and some of the camera angles are revolutionary, including the POV shots of the pilots taken remotely while they were thousands of feet in the air.

If you're a fan of war movies, silent films, William Wellman, or cinematic history, you should see Wings. You'll find it's worth your while.

### **IS THIS PURE EVIL? - Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde (1941)**

No. The only evil thing about this really terrible movie was that it was so horribly miscast that not even Spencer Tracy and Ingrid Bergman could save it.

Apparently, the thesis of the movie is that all one needs to do to unleash the inherent evil lurking inside us all is to generally behave like a 12-year-old boy and occasionally imprison and brutally rape a saucy barmaid who is too stupid to escape her circumstances on the multiple occasions she is given to run away.

The one interesting thing about the movie was the level of repressed sexual hysteria made manifest throughout - from C. Aubrey Smith's ringing endorsement of Victorian mores from the pulpit which leads off the movie, to Jekyll's fantastical hallucinations during his periodic descents into Hyde-ism - which are about as subtle as montages of trains going into tunnels and collapsing towers.

Especially interesting was a fantasy/montage sequence of Jekyll becoming Hyde where gushing water splashes Ingrid Bergman's face - a sequence which takes place immediately after a "realistic" scene between Jekyll and Ms. Bergman during the entirety of which Ms. Bergman is on her knees at Jekyll's crotch level begging him to save her. Yikes. Never fear, however. All is made right at the end of the movie when Ian Hunter dispatches Jekyll and the Victorian moral code is reestablished.

We all know Ingrid Bergman could act and was a real movie star. This movie was made the same year as Casablanca, so all I can figure is that she must have had a contractual obligation to play the role of the doomed Cockney barmaid. However, her performance is not even kitschy funny. It's just dreadful. She can't handle the accent. At all. So why did the studio (MGM) put her through this? Oh yeah... money.

Similarly, Lana Turner was also a movie star, but never could act, so her damsel in distress routine in this movie isn't nearly as bothersome as most of her other performances. Where's Johnny Stompanato when you need him?

Spencer Tracy was not only a movie star, but a bona fide actor as well. Accordingly, he is sometimes able to transcend the hokiness of the dialogue and make Jekyll a believable and

sympathetic human being; just not often enough to make this movie anything but tedious. His Hyde consists of facial expressions Michael Douglas used in *Liberace* and, while the makeup is pretty good, it is not transformative enough to prevent me wondering why no one else in the movie recognizes Hyde as Jekyll. Kind of like why no one recognizes Clark Kent as Superman wearing glasses.

All in all, Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde made me wish I could have drunk Jekyll's potion and watched another movie.

## **WHEN SHALT THOU SEE THY WHOLESOME DAYS AGAIN? - The Oscars**

Hello all. You may have noticed that I haven't written anything lately. That's because I haven't seen anything worth writing about. This is the worst year for movies that I can remember, and nothing I've seen that is nominated for Oscars has grabbed my attention, much less my excitement. I've seen all the nominated films and performances, except for *Her* and *August: Osage County*, which I doubt I'll see since I abhorred the play and walked out at intermission. So, apologies to Meryl Streep and Julia Roberts if you gave the performances of your careers.

For what it's worth, here's my take on the noms for Best Picture:

*American Hustle* - I really hated this movie. Nothing more than a bunch of movie stars playing dress up. Since I also hated *The Fighter* and *Silver Lining Playbook*, it may just be a David O. Russell thing, but I didn't believe anything about this movie - from the inaccurate costumes and set design (note: putting a bottle of *Fresca* on a white formica table does not necessarily equal "'70s") to the over the top performance by Christian Bale, who, I guess, was modeling his character on Marlon Brando at his fattest, nothing about this movie worked for me. I thought the only performances worth watching were Jeremy Renner and Jennifer Ehle in a wasted role. Amy Adams, as the femme fatale, was about as fatale as an after-dinner mint.

I won't go off on Jennifer Lawrence, except to say that it is beyond me why she has a career. Did she really beat out Jessica Chastain last year? It struck me while watching this movie that Russell was trying to make a Scorsese film and doesn't have the chops to do so, as evidenced by De Niro's performance in the only scene that worked, because he does know how to make a Scorsese movie. It'll probably win Best Picture, which is a shame.

*Captain Phillips* - The smaller question is how can one make a boring movie about a ship hijacking? The bigger question is, after having done so, why was this yawner released?

*Dallas Buyer's Club* - It's not that McConaughey doesn't deserve an Oscar for his body of work, it's just that he doesn't deserve it for this. *Killer Joe* was the best movie I saw last year with two Oscar worthy performances (McConaughey and Gina Gershon), and it didn't do bupkus. Go figure. I think I was supposed to care about the leading characters in *Dallas Buyers Club*, but I didn't, so the movie didn't work for me. I guess Jared Leto will also get an Oscar for wearing a dress, but I just found his performance to be a gimmick, with no depth. Also, DBC was a sloppily made movie - the endless rain showers each time Matthew goes to the hospital over what is supposedly a prolonged period of time, in the SUMMER, in DALLAS, when it doesn't

EVER rain! Note to filmmaker: If you're going to shoot a movie that takes place in Dallas, don't leave New Orleans street signs in the background. Oy.

Gravity - At least I cared about what happened to the astronauts, and the special effects were boffo. It's my vote for Best Picture, but it still isn't 2001: A Space Odyssey.

Nebraska - Almost a really good movie, and Bruce Dern was sublime. I want to believe he'll get the Oscar, because he deserves it, but I doubt it will happen. Dern's performance was the best leading performance I saw this year, and June Squibb was terrific. Still, the movie left me wanting something more than what I got.

Philomena - Enh. I guess they needed something to fill out the 10th slot, so they keyed on Stephen Frears and Dame Judi playing dumb. Fruitvale Station would have been a better choice.

12 Years a Slave - Reverent to the point of tedium. However, Michael Fassbinder was great. He should win because he did exactly what a supporting actor is supposed to do - crank it up and let her rip - but he won't because he made us believe the character, and God forbid we should have a real emotional response to a performance.

The Wolf of Wall Street - Great fun and Leonardo Di Caprio gave one of his stronger performances of late. But it's not a Best Picture.

Best Actress: Cate Blanchett is my vote. It's hard to do what she did in Blue Jasmine. None of the other noms even came close.

So, that's my take for whatever it's worth - which, admittedly, isn't much. Enjoy the Oscars. I'll be watching TCM or MLB.

### **THE BLACK PANTHERS WERE RIGHT?!? - The Butler (2013)**

All together now: "black people are noble, white people are demons."

Lee Daniels is a better filmmaker than this. Precious was one of the best movies I've seen in recent years, so I'm baffled as to why he chose to take a cheap, sentimental, and trite route through a story with as much breadth as The Butler. It will get nominated for a ton of Oscars (because cheap sentimentality in the guise of "Important" always does. Forest Gump, anyone?) and will make a zillion dollars, so maybe that's enough for Lee, Forest, Oprah, et al., but it made me lose a little respect for all of them.

The performances were, for the most part, good, especially Oprah, Forest Whitaker and Clarence Williams, III. In fact, I wish Oprah would act more. I always like her work - simple and truthful.

Robin Williams' Eisenhower and Alan Rickman's Reagan were reduced to cartoons that not even those accomplished actors could save. Jane Fonda was interesting in a throw away role as Nancy Reagan. John Cusack was an appropriately sinister Nixon.



Poor David Oyelowo, though. He's an appealing actor who got the worst end of the script stick. He's too old for the role, he was totally unbelievable as a militant, and the scene with his brother who was about to go off to Vietnam made me want to barf it was so badly written. Not to mention, I bet you know how that story line is going to go, even if you haven't seen the movie. I think Oyelowo's is supposed to be the role that is the conscience of the movie, but it is so ham handedly written and so miscast, that I couldn't have cared less.

I also have to say that, while Cuba Gooding, Jr. and Lenny Kravitz were pretty good, I cannot understand why Forest Whitaker ages appropriately throughout the butler part of the story, that spans 30 plus years, and Cuba and Lenny never age. Ditto, Whitaker's boss and even Oprah, who never ages until her last scene, the end result of which you can spot a mile away.

All in all, I wanted to like this movie because I like the cast, filmmaker, and it is a cool story that is worth telling. It was just told badly.

### **WE'VE ALL CROSSED THRESHOLDS WE WISH WE DIDN'T - Rain (1932)**

Wow. What a tremendous movie. It is truly "modern" - in outlook as well as execution. Based on the Somerset Maugham book, and faithful to its stage adaptation, Lewis Milestone's direction is so far ahead of its time, that, if I didn't know better, I would have sworn I was watching Elia Kazan's work in the 1950s. Milestone's shot selection is terrific, with an expressionistic foreshadowing reminiscent of *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, inventing, in the process, the fallen woman with a heart of gold template that informs the future Oscar winning performances of Elizabeth Taylor, Shirely Jones, and Julia Roberts; all the while echoing the whore as Madonna archetype found in so much of post Great War Western art.

If you only know Joan Crawford's work from later in her career, when she became a drag queen prototype, check out her Sadie Thompson - the proverbial fallen woman with a heart of gold, trying to go straight in a world that just won't let her. Along with *Mildred Pierce*, it's her finest work.

The always tremendous Walter Huston is at once driven and terrifying, a vengeful archangel Michael waging God's war on sin as he harnesses His fury, symbolized by the monsoon from which the film's title is derived. The scene between Huston and Ms. Crawford, when Sadie repents her life of wickedness, is so transcendent, it could have been filmed yesterday.

The supporting cast is likewise perfectly cast and acted. Nothing at all like what you'd expect from what could easily have been just another overwrought potboiler from pre-Hays Code Hollywood.

The cherry on the sundae is Guy Kibbee's world weary philosopher. Kibbee's hotel proprietor is a South Seas Marlow, perpetually on the verge of whispering "exterminate all the brutes" as he quotes Nietzsche.



Rain was a critical and commercial flop. It received no Oscar nominations and was neglected to the point where its copyright slid into the public domain. That figures. The Rite of Spring didn't do well when it premiered, either.

Rain doesn't show up too often, but the next time it does, give yourself a treat and watch it.

### **A SHARK ATE MY PARROT. DAMN. - Kon-Tiki (2013)**

As trite as it must now seem in an age where the spirit of adventure is played out on a cellular level, there was once a time when manly derring-do braved an ocean, and the world cheered. The current cinematic retelling of the Kon-Tiki story is not great filmmaking. The director is too fond of overhead shots and is ham-handed in making sure the viewer gets the outer space/inner space metaphor. The acting is lackluster - Norwegian non-farters as my friend William likes to say - and a couple of performances are just plain bad. The filmmakers also should have thought of the unintended hilarity of a scraggly, bearded, castaway washing up on a beach, looking like Michael Palin at the beginning of a Monty Python episode. The music is pedestrian, and the cinematography is uninspired.

However, the creation of 1940s New York on a Bulgarian soundstage was a pretty cool feat of production design, and there were moments of incredible tension in the film which I wish the director had more confidence as a filmmaker to fully explore. Think about it... five guys on a raft for 101 days. No showers, no poo-poo facilities, sharks, whales, weird creatures of the deep, not knowing if they were ever going to see land again. That kind of prolonged pressure can do things to the mind and spirit. I would like to have seen what it did to the mind and spirit of Thor Heyerdahl - especially since he couldn't swim! I now have a lot more respect for the crews of the Nina, Pinta and Santa Maria.

Kon-Tiki is not a great movie - but it is a truly ripping yarn. While watching the film, I was taken back to when I was a small boy and the story of Heyerdahl's quest to prove that Polynesia was settled from the east stoked my imagination in a way that the space program never did, inspiring me as I imagine Victorian boys to have been when they read Kipling. It's kind of like those Saturday afternoon adventure movies that were once shown on television in the days before cable. Sturdy, straightforward, no nonsense. Go see it and allow your soul to dream.

### **IT WAS NEVER ABOUT THE CAKE - Marie Antoinette (2006)**

I'm sorry I missed the screening at AFI when Sofia Coppola screened Marie Antoinette for the year ahead of me. I would like to have heard her comments.

I thought the movie was terrific. It richly deserved the Oscar it won for best costume design. Ms. Coppola has a strong visual style, and she demonstrated bold and confident filmmaking in all aspects, debunking the myths surrounding the ill-fated Marie amidst the impotence of Louis XVI's reign. Her nod to the silent Phantom of the Opera's masked ball was a highlight, elegantly portraying the first raindrops of Louis XIV's deluge that was soon to drown her and all she ever knew.

Kirsten Dunst has never been better, at once balancing the innocence of the child-queen with a dignified acceptance of her eventual fate - choosing to stick with the moronic Louis even as the only civilization she knew collapsed under the weight of its own foolishness. Jason Schwartzman's Louis was at once doltish and tragic, a clueless buffoon unaware of the tide of history that was about to run him over.

A lot of people knocked the 80s soundtrack, but I thought it brilliantly underscored a culture that was out of control, doomed to failure through tawdry excess - an apt parallel to our own frivolous obsessions. *Apres Kardashian...*

### **UPSIDE DOWN FLAG FLYING - In the Valley of Elah (2007)**

I thought it was a pretty pedestrian procedural until the last few minutes. It's not very well made - lots of mismatching shots - Susan Sarandon is wasted in a role that a local hire could have done, and Tommy Lee Jones is sleepwalking through most of it. I assume because Paul Haggis was coming off of *Crash* and *Million Dollar Baby*, that he was able to lure a lot of high-priced actors, since it only cost about \$1.57 to make. They must have spent all their money on the likes of James Franco in a one scene role and keeping Tommy Lee sober.

A couple of things made it worth two hours of my life, though. Charlize Theron is the real deal. She's a beautiful woman who doesn't mind not looking beautiful in the roles she portrays. Good for her. Not many stars are willing to do that, and she is always truthful in her performances. Her role as a cop with a conscience is the performance of the movie. In fact, it would have been a more interesting movie if the story had only focused on her character instead of Tommy Lee's.

The interesting take on the film that sort of redeemed it for me is the concept that America is lost when the honor of its military is lost. Tommy Lee is an old school Army criminal investigator searching for answers in the death of his son - an Army specialist just returned from a tour in Iraq. Through the course of the movie, we learn that the son may not have had the same values as Tommy Lee and that his death makes about as much sense as beating a baseball fan into a coma in a parking lot. It's a story of a moral man confronted by a military that has become amoral, unrepentant, and, most disturbingly, clueless as to why anyone would be upset at just another act of expedient killing. It's a Bush-Chaney version of *Clockwork Orange*, without the self-awareness of an Alex LeFarge character. That epiphany is left to Tommy Lee, who, in our worst moments of despair, may be right when he tells the Salvadoran janitor that flying the flag upside down means we're fucked and nobody is coming to the rescue.

### **STILL FLYING - Flight (2012)**

What an unexpected pleasure this movie was. The writing was absolutely terrific, especially the cigarette smoking scene with Denzel, Kelly Reilly, and the always underrated James Badge Dale. I hope John Gatins wins the Oscar. His script was nuanced and didn't offer any pat Hollywood payoffs for the very complicated characters who inhabit this movie.

For my money, Denzel Washington may be the best movie actor around. He's a movie star and does a lot of movie star roles to be sure, but every 5th or 6th movie, he'll take a chance and play

an unlikeable character, such as in *Flight*. I totally believed his arrogance, his out-of-control alcoholism, his bullshit seducer act, and his murky redemption. Terrific work.

John Goodman was a hoot as an affable dealer you know you don't want to cross. Don Cheadle went against type as a slightly wimpy dick attorney who nonetheless tries to do right by his client.

On the production end, the doomed flight sequence was believable and the lighting in the minibar was haunting, yet seductive, such that you believe what happens when Denzel opens the door.

Zemeckis' work is often a little facile for my taste, but he hit a home run in *Flight*. He let really good actors speak really good words, and his filmmaking didn't get in the way. I'm going to watch *Flight* again.

### **DON'T DO IT, WOLVERINE! - Les Miserables (2012)**

No one should be expected to pay money to endure Russell Crowe singing. It's unconscionable. Shame on you Cameron Mackintosh.

The movie is a God-awful mess. It seems to be primarily about sideburns - Hugh Jackman, Sacha Baron Cohen, even Anne Hathaway has sideburns. The movie has little else going for it visually. Just a bunch of CGI garbage that makes it look like Baron Munchausen meets Hugo.

With the exception of three - the performances suck. *Les Miserables* is arguably THE great French novel. It is about the struggle of Jean Valjean. So why wasn't this movie about Jean Valjean? The Wolverine basically disappears for much of the story and is pretty inconsequential throughout. I got no sense of Valjean's strength, his epiphany, his moral struggle, or much of anything else. Also, why does JVJ and Cosette live in the same neighborhood as Javert for at least 9 years and Javert cannot find them? Don't they ever go to the store?

Sacha Baron Cohen and Helena Bonham Carter play the Thenardiers - you know, the literary symbols of the post-Revolutionary French peasantry. Not in this one. Sacha and Helena are really good actors who were totally wasted - playing nothing but comic buffoons without any depth of character whatsoever.

And let's talk about Eddie Redmayne's Marius. Nah. Let's not. Is anyone else tired of Eddie's constant doe-eyed on the verge of tears expression that he must think equals breadth of emotion? His singing sounded like a bad amateur production of *The Student Prince* mixed with a cheesy Sammy Davis, Jr. impression.

Amanda Seyfried. Was she in it? Granted, Cosette is pretty much of a nothing role, a symbol more than a human being, so I guess Tom Hooper decided to cast a nothing actress.

I don't think I was supposed to want Gavroche to die, but the kid they cast was so obnoxious, I would have shot him myself.

On the plus side - Anne Hathaway was great. Given her competition, she will deserve the Oscar she will almost certainly get. Tom Hooper must not have been on set while she was filming.

Aaron Tveit also managed to dodge a bullet. His Enjolras was one of the very few bright spots in this mess. Ditto Samantha Barks, who, while not being very well served by Tommy H., managed to pull off an Eponine that I could root for. Speaking of which, why on earth does Marius go after Cosette when he has Eponine for the asking. I need to talk to Vic Hugo about that.

Since Cameron Mackintosh produced this crap, it must be the film he wanted to see. Either that, or he has no balls as a producer and let Tom Hooper run amok without adult supervision. Tom did a great job with *The King's Speech*. He should stick to small films and leave something like *Les Misérables* to a professional.

### **Almost a Great Movie - Anna Karenina (2012)**

It was sumptuous to look at. Beautiful costumes, art direction, and cinematography. I thought the theatrical conceit worked well as a framing device, and the director had a clear vision of the film that he executed flawlessly, often highlighting the psychological points of view in the shot composition and mise en scene.

The problem with the film, unfortunately, was the acting. Keira Knightley is a beautiful woman but not much of an actress. The kid playing Vronsky was a handsome non-event. Jude Law was understated to virtual non-existence, even though I had more sympathy for Karenin than I remember from reading the book a hundred years ago.

Clearly, the director was more interested in creating a visual feast (which he did) than in illuminating the larger, universal ramifications of Anna's plight. I really liked the filmmaking, I just left the theatre wishing I had had the meal before the desert.

### **SEEING GOD ON A GREEN SCREEN - Life of Pi (2012)**

I usually love Ang Lee movies, and *Life of Pi* did not disappoint. Even though I know that more than half the movie was shot against a green screen, I was able to suspend my disbelief and take the ride. The acting was terrific, the story is profound, and it was beautifully photographed.

I'm still mulling over the spiritual message of the film. While I know what I think, you may come to a different conclusion - which I think may be the point. The music was also great and an added bonus. If *Best Exotic Marigold Hotel* is not nominated for Best Picture, *Life of Pi* would get my vote.

### **NOTHING WILL MAKE AN ENGLISHMAN SHIT QUICKER THAN THE SIGHT OF GEORGE WASHINGTON - Lincoln (2012)**

I didn't love it, and I don't think it's an instant classic. The production design, however, was terrific. I felt cold the whole time.

I think Spielberg is at his best as a filmmaker when he's dispassionate about his subject matter - Schindler's List and Saving Private Ryan come immediately to mind. He had the chance with Lincoln to probe an exceptional and complex personality but pulled up short whenever things got interesting; opting instead to frame a complex problem, manipulated by a benighted soul, in starkly black and white terms (forgive the pun). I never got a sense of Lincoln's subtlety. I never saw the depth of Lincoln's suffering. I was merely told about it.

What I got instead was a great Lincoln impersonation by a great actor. Daniel Day-Lewis will probably win the Oscar because it's that kind of role, but I'm not sure how much acting was required. For my money, he gave a performance that was meticulously detailed, but all the seams showed. I was always aware of watching an actor portray Lincoln. I don't recall feeling that way when I last saw Raymond Massey's Lincoln. Sally Field's histrionics were justified by the historical record, but I never got a sense of Mary Todd Lincoln as a person, just the cliché that has been passed down through history. That may be Tony Kushner's and/or Doris Kearns Goodwin's fault. Nonetheless, it was Sally's job to transcend the cliché, and she didn't.

And Tommy Lee Jones... wow. What does one say except only he could have done that. He's a good actor who is rapidly becoming a joke. He got the best lines, but I thought he was little more than a cartoon. Without revealing the spoiler, I'll just say that the truly interesting story to have told about the passage of the 13th Amendment was Thaddeus Stevens' story, not Lincoln's. Had that story been told, Stevens might have been a role worthy of Tommy Lee Jones' talent. As to the ending, it would have been far more poignant to have ended the movie with the shot of Lincoln walking down the hall to catch the carriage to Ford's Theatre. Everyone knows what happened after that. I didn't need to be beaten over the head with it. To me, that was Kushner and Spielberg not trusting the story. They're better than that.

### **SEE THIS MOVIE (Argo -2012)**

For me, the test of a thriller is the sense of suspense I feel even though I know how the story ends. Argo is top notch in every sense. I was on the edge of my seat the entire time. Extremely well paced and wonderfully edited, Argo is my early vote for Best Picture.

While Ben Affleck has certainly appeared in some clunker movies, I think he is a much more gifted actor than he is generally given credit for. He is a really giving actor, often giving away his scenes to the others in order to advance the story. Such is the case here. His is not the performance you remember, even though he is the lead. Who you remember is Alan Arkin, who gets the best written lines in the movie, John Goodman with a comically suspicious world-weariness, and Victor Garber, who conveys a frightened man in a tortured soul, doing the right thing at risk to his life and his country's prestige.

One thing I think most people will agree on is that Ben Affleck is a hell of a filmmaker. The Town and Gone Baby Gone were terrific, and Argo surpasses both. The final scene at the airport is taut, harrowing, and ignites uber patriotism when the airplane leaves Iranian air space. Well, you get the idea. Go see it.

## **AMY ADAMS IS RIGHT (The Master - 2012)**

At one point in *The Master*, Amy Adams says "This is pointless". That sums up the movie in a nutshell. I have no idea what this movie was about or what the point was supposed to be, other than being a quest to belong to a family, which, more or less, is the theme of most of P.T. Anderson's movies.

While I generally like Anderson's movies (especially *Boogie Nights* and *Magnolia*), I think this film is the case of people being afraid to say the emperor has no clothes, lest they look stupid. So, instead, everyone says how great it is because P.T. Anderson is a great filmmaker, so there must be something there. Right? Right? Hello? Sheesh.

On the plus side, I loved the production design, it's blue/gray color palate perfectly capturing the drab descent into the 1950s. Phillip Seymour Hoffman is always worth watching, even when no character is written for him, as here. He made a lot out of nothing, embodying a slightly psychotic egomaniac for whom I guess L. Ron Hubbard was the prototype.

On the minus side: I suppose Joaquin Phoenix will get an Oscar nomination because it's that kind of role, but I have to say I found his performance to be a self-indulgent, bad imitation of Marlon Brando crossed with every amateur production of *Richard III* you can think of. A totally bullshit performance, for my money.

All I could think of while I was watching *The Master* was how much it reminded me of the self-indulgent, pseudo intellectual garbage that characterized much of my AFI experience; where aesthetic attack was the only defense to the absence of character and story. I'm sure many of my colleagues will think *The Master* is brilliant, and they might be right. I just can't tell, because it was totally incomprehensible to me.

## **FINGER LICKIN' GOOD (Killer Joe -2012)**

Ever wonder what happened to some of the people you went to high school with? *Killer Joe* may answer the question for many of you. This movie is as mean as a rattlesnake, uproariously funny, and a welcome return to mainstream filmmaking by William Friedkin. I loved it, but I warn you, it is not for the faint of heart.

The plot is too convoluted to summarize succinctly, but suffice it to say, Matthew McConaughey plays a Dallas detective who also moonlights as a contract killer. He is engaged by the dumbest family this side of Sam Shepard to knock off the mother for her life insurance. As collateral, he takes a flier on the teenage sister. Needless to say, things go badly from there.

Kudos to McConaughey and Gina Gershon, both of whom should not be overlooked for Oscar nominations. Go see *Killer Joe*. You'll never again feel the same about fried chicken.

## **SHIRLEY AND COMPANY WOULD BE SO PISSED - Shame (2011)**

This movie is so full of shit I don't even know where to begin. Here's the premise: Soulless guy with fucked up sister is a sex addict who can't do it with the black chick because he has actual feelings for her. Give me a break.



First of all, this movie was funded by the UK Lottery. It stars British actors. It has a British director. It's written by two Brits. So, why is the movie set in New York? They don't have sex addicts in London? Or is London not as surrealistically sterile a backdrop as the cinematography in this mess of a movie makes New York look. Oy, oy, oy, 2 hours of my life that I'll never get back.

I like Michael Fassbinder and Carey Mulligan as actors. Their performances were actually pretty good. It's just that they were in a stupid movie. And I suppose Fassbinder's performance was touted as being so "brave" because he walks around with his wiener hanging out. Sheesh.

Admittedly, I found some of the filmmaking worthy of comment - excruciatingly long takes which I suppose were intended to make the viewer feel uncomfortable with the subject matter. Instead, it just made this viewer uncomfortable with the film's banality. The production design was also noteworthy, even though not to my taste. I liked the fact there are no pictures on any of the walls.

Shame is neither pornographic nor obscene because, according to the definition for both, there has to be a reciprocal interest in the material. The biggest shame of Shame is that it isn't interesting.

### **IF IT'S NOT ALL RIGHT, THEN IT'S NOT THE END - The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel (2012)**

This movie better be nominated for Best Picture, or I'll know the reason why. It's absolutely terrific.

For various reasons, a group of Brits retire in India. How they cope - or don't - is at the heart of this marvelous movie that deals with the hopes and fears of growing old in a straightforward, unsentimental way that is at once heartfelt, funny, and wondrous. I'm not a huge Shakespeare in Love fan, but John Madden hit a home run with this one.

In a cast of heavy hitters, including Judi Dench, Tom Wilkinson, and Bill Nighy, the always wonderful Penelope Wilton stands out. She probably won't win the Oscar, because performances like this usually don't, but she should. Go see it. You'll love it.

### **ALWAYS LICK BEFORE YOU SIGHT - Sgt. York (1941)**

I'm not sure I have ever seen Sgt. York all the way through in one sitting. It's a long movie, but well worth the investment of time. What terrific writing. It's a beautifully structured script and is worth watching for that reason alone. Thank you, John Huston, Howard Koch, et al, for the best biopic script I can think of.

That being said, I've never been a huge Gary Cooper fan. He's always seemed too wooden for my taste, except maybe in High Noon, where his limited range works for the character. If Gary's performance had been a little livelier, I wouldn't have had to work so hard to suspend my



disbelief that Alvin York was a hellion before he found religion. Plus, Gary was about 20 years too old for the role. Oh well, Gary won the Oscar for Sgt. York, so what are ya gonna do?

On the other hand, I liked Walter Brennan's work far more than I usually do. It was nice to see him play a guy with some brains for once, instead of his usual variation on the theme of Amos McCoy. Margaret Wycherly, as Mother York, was simply terrific, with more gravitas than even Jane Darnell as Ma Joad. B movie gangster moll Joan Leslie was simple and understated as Gracie, and Dickie Moore was totally believable as Gary's brother - the scene where Dickie comes to fetch Gary from the bar was especially good.

Sgt. York is very much of its time, so you just have to take it on those terms. However, I suspect that it was pretty stirring when it came out on the eve of America's entry into World War II. If you like movies from Hollywood's Golden Age, take a look.

### **DUDES HAVE BEEN CHASING PUSSY FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS. MORE PROBABLY. - Heshher (2011)**

Movies like Heshher really piss me off. Really good actors signed on for this movie - Joseph Gordon-Levitt, Rainn Wilson, Natalie Portman, Piper Laurie - and yet, the film is a nothing piece of garbage.

The plot doesn't go anywhere. Presumably premised on the coming of the Messiah - Heshher/Yeshewa - get it? - good ole nihilistic, bad ass Heshher solves everyone's problems and makes them stronger persons by demonstrating he don't take shit from nobody. Cool. That's it. That's the story. Just be a bad ass and you'll get over your dead wife and mother. Smoke some pot and you can die happy and fulfilled.

Heshher is a lot of angry, immature, potty mouthed crap, without any relevance to the larger world and without saying anything meaningful about the human condition, the grieving process, or what it feels like to get old and set aside - all of which are subjects that are contained in the film which could have been explored, but weren't, most likely because the filmmakers are a bunch of 20 somethings who wouldn't know a real emotion if they got punched in the testicles with one - which would be a perfectly valid reaction to this dumb ass movie. Don't waste your time.

### **CHICO AND THE WO-MAN - 7th Heaven (1927)**

Janet Gaynor won the first Best Actress Oscar for her performance in this film (and a couple of others released in the same year.) Surprisingly, she was believable, in an otherwise hokey and preposterous story involving her love for a Parisian Ed Norton who aspires to be something more than a sewer worker. When WWI intervenes, the lovers are split apart, only to be reunited at the War's End.

Chico, portrayed by Charles Farrell (Vern Albright, for all you My Little Margie Fans), is blinded in the trenches, but has his sight miraculously restored by the sheer goodness of beatific Janet. The evil sister was portrayed by Gladys Brockwell, who gave a terrific performance that was totally believable despite the constraints of the silent movie style of acting.

Frank Borzage also won an Oscar for direction (how he beat out Wellman for Wings mystifies me). He must have discovered the art of the tracking shot while making this movie as he uses it at almost every opportunity.

The one really interesting thing about this movie is its treatment of how the Paris taxis saved the city by shuttling troops to the front when the Germans were threatening to break the Maginot Line. This film was made only 13 years after the fact, and it was cool to see a relatively contemporary treatment of the subject prior to its enshrinement in *The Guns of August*.

*7th Heaven* is fairly standard silent movie fare - heavy on morality and sentimentality - with a couple of surprisingly good performances thrown in. You could find worse ways to spend an hour and a half, but I'm still trying to figure out why a Frenchman was named Chico....

### **THE 6TH BOROUGH OF NEW YORK - Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close (2011)**

I was really looking forward to seeing this movie, so I was primed. It took me a while to get into it, but I was hooked once Max von Sydow appeared.

Tom Hanks is just the super duperist dad ever, who was unfortunate enough to have had a meeting at the World Trade Center on 9/11. His son, Oscar, a weird little chap, attempts to make sense of a senseless event by tracking down the owner of a key.

The negatives first: how did Tom Hanks, a jeweler, afford to live in an apartment in Manhattan? Why was the Jewelry store named Schell (Tom's last name) and Son? Tom's dad (Max von Sydow) flew the coop, so Tom wasn't the Son. Was Tom hoping Oscar would follow in his footsteps? IDK, but it bothered me. Why would Tom have a meeting in the WTC? Why did Tom have to be so super duper and why did Oscar have to be so weird? Couldn't a "normal" son be distraught enough over the death of his "normal" father on 9/11 and take the same journey? Wouldn't that resonate with an audience more? Oh well.

At any rate, Max von Sydow was great, without saying a word. For my money, Max is one of the 10 greatest actors of my lifetime, and he didn't disappoint me in this. Viola Davis was pitch perfect as the deus ex machina and Jeffrey Wright was great, as always.

Sandra Bullock seemed superfluous - until the end. She has the best scene in the movie which I won't spoil for those of you who haven't seen it yet. It's an intricate plot, which is hard to describe without spilling the beans. Suffice it to say that the film is a parochial Babel and is worth the work you have to do at the beginning of the movie to get the payoff at the end. Once that payoff occurs, you'll find yourself thinking about the movie for days afterwards.

Did *The Artist* really beat this movie for Best Picture? Really? Really? Of the nominated films, *Extremely Loud and Incredibly Close* would have gotten my vote.

### **ALBERT? ALBERT? ALBERT? - The Boston Strangler (1968)**

Why didn't Tony Curtis win an Oscar for this (he did win the Golden Globe)? Some of his best work in a really difficult role to pull off, especially when compared to William Hickey's hambone performance as suspect number one.

Henry Fonda is just terrific. He gives away every scene to his acting partner. You don't really see that too much anymore. Great supporting cast - George Kennedy (he really could act at one time), Murray Hamilton, Richard X. Slattery, and a young James Brolin.

Richard Fleischer's direction is very much of its time and not really to my taste - late 60's split-screen editing to indicate the psychological underpinning of the scenes, lots of close ups on eyes, etc., but the guy was a craftsman who knows how to pace a movie.

The Boston Strangler is a pedestrian, yeoman-like film with well-written scenes, made better by terrific acting. If you thought Tony Curtis was just a pretty boy with limited range, check it out.

### **MAYBE THEY'LL HAVE SOME ADVENTURES OR SOMETHING - Days of Heaven (1978)**

Produced by the late, great Bert Schneider (wouldn't you like to have his body of work?), Days of Heaven is an early exploration of the Taoist themes that dominate much of Terence Malick's work - the revelation that nature's passivity is more powerful than the ultimate insignificance of human conflict.

Linda, the girl who may or may not be Richard Gere's sister, is the narrator, ignorant of the implications of Richard Gere's, Brooke Adams', and Sam Shepard's actions, even though the audience sees the outcome approaching from a mile away. Hers is the best written role, natural without the contemplative grandeur of Malick's later narrators.

There's a great scene early in the movie where Richard Gere is having an argument with his foreman. You can't hear any of the dialogue, but the result is that Richard whacks the foreman with a shovel. Great stuff. The comparison of the inferno of a Chicago steel mill with the inferno of a Texas wheat harvest is accomplished in one shot, and the audience gets the point.

What most people remember about the film is how beautifully photographed it is, and indeed it is. Nestor Almendros died way too early. The details are just right. The bug dancer, Doug Kershaw at his ragin' Cajun best (hell in the midst of heaven?), the quiet morality of the ranch foreman.

For me, on this re-viewing after 30+ years, the ending was the most resonant part of the film. Sunday strollers at a river curiously watch a man being hunted down and shot. No big deal. The police pull the body from the river, and the strollers go back to their enjoyment - a brief hiccup in an otherwise tranquil Sunday. Life ends. Life goes on. Linda walks down the train tracks.

### **NEBULOUS NAZI NOIR - The Stranger (1946)**

What a weird, interesting little film. Directed by Orson Wells, looking like Ernest Hemmingway and still enamored of his Citizen Kane camera angles, The Stranger stars Edward G. Robinson as a Nazi hunter hot on the trail of war criminal Orson in a sleepy little Connecticut town - although I couldn't understand why Eddie tracks Orson's henchman while smoking a pipe; I would think it would kind of blow the anonymity.

Anyway, Orson has taken root as a prep school history teacher and is all set to marry Loretta Young when he blows his cover during a dinner party by proclaiming Marx wasn't German - he was Jewish!!!! Dang. Loretta won't believe her man is really a Nazi until Eddie goes to work on her. Soon, Loretta's "subconscious takes over" (Eddie's words, not mine) and she aids Eddie in bringing Orson to justice during a climactic scene that, unfortunately, is a little too reminiscent of Young Frankenstein.

Some good writing though. Orson gives a great speech about the German character and how the Teutonic race goes to meet its God; on a par with his speech in *The Third Man* where he contrasts the Swiss with the Italians. The Stranger also has a great ending involving Orson's passion for clocks. I won't spoil it, but Orson gets his comeuppance in truly Jacobean fashion. The supporting cast features Richard Long of Nanny and the Professor fame as Loretta's brother who helps Eddie, and a guy who might as well be Lionel Barrymore playing the town know it all. There's some weird homo-erotic prancing about in the first fifteen minutes, but once Eddie gets going, so does the film - it was then I felt *The Stranger* hit me right between the eyes.

### **HARDLY MINT - Super 8 (2011)**

Boy am I a dope. Instead of spending all that money on a film school education, I should have realized that the best way to get a film made is to kiss Steven Spielberg's ass. Part *Goonies*, part *ET*, part *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, with a smattering of *Alien* and *Journey to the Center of the Earth* thrown in for good luck, *Super 8* was semi-cute at best, and really tedious by the time we get to the inevitable (and interminable) resolution. I'm probably being overly grouchy, but I'm really glad I didn't pay retail. I'd write more, but I'm off to work on my new script - *Raiders of the Lost Jaws*.

### **GOD SENDS FLIES TO WOUNDS HE SHOULD HEAL - The Tree of Life (2011)**

Terence Malick movies are always, in one way or another, meditations on the nature of God and man in the universe. He explores this theme in *The Tree of Life* by examining the second most complicated relationship that exists - that between fathers and sons.

The Brad Pitt character is a hard ass with the troubled soul of a repressed poet. He teaches the young Sean Penn character to fight. He belittles him in public. He's petty and envious of people with "money." He's paranoid in that middle class way where the little guy thinks he's getting screwed by sinister unseen interests that are incomprehensible and far larger than he. Sound familiar to any of you guys born before 1965? And yet . . . there is a moment when he hugs his son and says "my sweet boy." There was a time when I would have killed to have had my father say that to me.

The details are perfect - running in the DDT cloud as the city sprays. The knees torn out of blue jeans. The kid with the mange (if you're not from the South, you might not get that one). The constant companionship of the neighborhood dog. Running through the sprinkler in the summer twilight. The conspiracy between mothers and sons to have fun when dad's not around. I suspect the movie is more about Malick's childhood than he cares to admit, but I also suspect it will

strike a universal chord with men of a certain age. Or maybe I'm revealing more about my childhood than I care to admit....

### **THEY'RE BEAUTIFUL TOGETHER, JOANNA - Kramer vs. Kramer (1979)**

What a beautiful movie. I had forgotten as I had not seen it in 30+ years. Flawless writing - the scene where Dustin Hoffman tells the kid why Meryl Streep left is absolutely wonderful. More Robert Benton movies, please. And boy howdy, do we miss Nestor Almendros. The wintry color palette was simultaneously soothing and stark. How do you cinematographers do it? I'm not sure I've seen Dustin Hoffman better. Simple and honest - none of the schtick that characterizes so much of his work. Jane Alexander, as always, was superb. 5 Oscars and on AFI's Top 100 list. And yet, I can't help but wonder if this movie would even get made today?

### **MARATORIOUS - The Girl with The Dragon Tattoo (2011)**

I've seen the Swedish version and I've seen Fincher's. My vote goes to Fincher. While Noomi Rapace was sexier, Rooney Mara felt more real, and, more importantly, she carried the movie; so much so, that I didn't feel a particular need for Daniel Craig and wished the movie had even more Salander. Although I didn't understand what the opening credit sequence was supposed to depict, I loved the use of the Immigrant Song to get me in. The shots lifted from *The Shining* increased the tension, and I thought Robin Wright was an offbeat and exactly right choice for the publisher. Christopher Plummer and Steven Berkoff were perfunctorily competent and Yorick van Wageningen was simultaneously human, pathetic and repulsive. I didn't mind the ending being changed from the book - in fact, I thought it worked better (truth to tell, the book could have used some more editing before it was published). I expected it to be good, and it was. I thought it was better than the book, which is not often the case. The most pleasant surprise was how good Rooney Mara was. Kudos to her. She kicked a lot of veterans' asses and richly deserved her Oscar nomination. If you're one of the few people on the planet who has not read the book, skip it and see this film version.

### **SOMETIMES A CIGAR IS JUST A CIGAR - A Dangerous Method (2011)**

I was really looking forward to seeing this movie, and while I liked it ok, it fell short of my expectations. Great cinematography and great costumes, but I thought the love triangle was too facile a way to access what was really interesting about the story - the causes of and fallout from the rift between Freud and Jung - without actually exploring the problem.

If you don't know the basics of Freudian vs. Jungian thought, I would think the conflict of the film would pass you by because it was taken for granted that the viewer knows what the split was all about. In case you don't, Freud was Jung's mentor, but they had a philosophical split just before WWI, the ramifications of which are still being debated today in competing schools of psychoanalytic thought.

What interested me most about the treatment of the characters was how utterly bourgeois they all were. Poor Freud, quietly envious of Jung's wife's money and feeling the lash of actual or perceived anti-semitism because he can't afford to travel first class. Poor Jung, fretting over why fellatio feels so good. Poor Spielrein, can't get a man to dominate her the way she wants. It was

all very fin de siecle titillation as Europe was squaring off for the bloodbath that sent Jung into a two year psychotic split.

While I get why the Otto Gross character was in the film (Id, Ego, Superego - boy, do I get it), I'm deuced as to why the character was portrayed by an obvious Frenchman - not that I don't like Vincent Cassel. Keira Knightley was better than I expected after she got through with her impression of the horse from Guernica. Michael Fassbender was adequate, but not impressive. Unfortunately, Viggo Mortenson's performance as Freud was so understated, there was just nothing there. The film was a great idea that was not greatly executed. If you dig psychology, you might like it. If psychology is not your bag, give it a miss.

### **BUEN CAMINO - The Way (2011)**

This movie is my vote for the best picture of 2011. It's a simple story of a man who goes to France to retrieve the remains of his recently deceased son and finds salvation by completing the son's pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. By forcing himself to mingle with the misfit band of pilgrims he meets along the way, the father re-joins the human race.

There's nothing flash in the movie - it's just a simple story told well by a sure-handed Emilio Estevez. It's elegantly shot without intrusiveness, and the acting is flawless - especially by Debra Unger and one of my current favorite actors, Yorick van Wageningen (contrast his performance in *The Girl With The Dragon Tattoo*, and you'll get some idea of his range). I was touched, moved and inspired by the quiet profundity of this film. It reminded me that it's not about the life we choose, it's about the life we live.

### **ANY FORWARD GEAR WILL DO - Drive (2011)**

Smart, stylish, tough as nails, unforgiving, and soulless. What a great movie! I thought it was the 70s again! The performances were outstanding. So much so, that Ryan Gosling got lost in the shuffle in what was essentially a thankless role.

How many girls do you know who are like Carey Mulligan's character? One in every coffee shop. Did you really have any sympathy for the Brian Cranston character - even though the movie set you up that way before pulling out the rug? What a zhlub. And didn't you at least understand the motivations of the Ron Perlman character? A gangster with a persecution complex. Really clever writing. Really stylish camera work. L.A. Noir in the New Millenium. Great stuff. Someone please explain to me why Albert Brooks wasn't nominated for an Oscar.

### **MORE FUN THAN A BARREL OF MONKEYS - Rise of the Planet of the Apes (2011)**

I really liked this movie - much to my surprise and delight. Tremendous script - tons better than most of what I saw last year - plausible story, great monkey business.

So, James Franco runs the gamut of acting ability from A to B. So, Frida Pinto played the stock beautiful sidekick scientist with no real purpose but to elicit sympathy for the leading character for whom we already had sympathy. Doesn't matter. John Lithgow was great (like when isn't he?), David Oyelowo was a believable villain. The special effects were only stupid for about 5 minutes near the end of the movie, which then recovered itself in time for the denouement, and

the conscience of the film was heartfelt without being cloying. For true Ape fans there were in jokes aplenty to keep us from taking it all too seriously. Great fun. See it.

### **SILENCE IS NOT ALL THAT GOLDEN - The Artist (2011)**

The Artist started out as a short film 20 years ago, and probably should have stayed that way. It was kind of cute and kind of a charming paean to a Hollywood that probably never existed, but it's still a gimmick, without any real point that I can see. The fact that it won the Oscar for best picture gives one some kind of idea of the quality of the best picture nominees for 2011.

God alone only knows why the Academy voters gave Jean DuJardin the Oscar for Best Actor. What he attempted to pull off is hard to do - he had to not only play the character, but he had to layer a particular style on top. He got the style part, but he didn't give me any idea at all of who George Valentin really was. Dujardin's performance was merely a surface portrayal of a "SILENT MOVIE STAR", who had only one facial expression, no matter the situation - kind of like the goofy smirk our recent President Bush always seemed to wear. In short, the vacuous look of Brice du Nice did not serve Dujardin as well with George Valentin. Consequently, I never cared about George.

Compare Dujardin's performance with that of Harrison Ford in Raiders of the Lost Ark. They both had the same assignment - to create a well-rounded, believable character within the confines of a particular style. Which performance did you believe more? For my money, the wrong guy was awarded the Oscar. As to the rest of the cast, Berenice Bejo was cute, but she better hope her husband keeps making movies cuz Marion Cotillard she ain't. John Goodman and James Cromwell, particularly, were wasted. Granted, The Artist set itself up for a fall. If we're talking about movies about movies in the silent era, will it ever really be possible to top Singing in the Rain?

### **SMILEY FACE - Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy (2011)**

OK, it wasn't Alec Guinness and it didn't have the luxury of being stretched out over eight hours. That being said, it was pretty damn good. It isn't the movie for which Gary Oldman should win an Oscar (Sid and Nancy, anyone?), but he's great in everything he does, and it was nice to see him sit still and think. Ditto the supporting cast. What a great lineup - Ciaran Hinds, Toby Jones, Benedict Cumberbatch, and Colin Firth playing the bad guy. It's nice to see good actors doing what they do well.

Where I thought the movie shone, and probably should have won the Oscar, was the set design, costumes, and art direction. I went to drama school in London during the period in which Tinker, Tailor is set and seeing it made me feel cold, slightly damp, and bleak all over again. Great work. See it if you want a movie that asks you to think as you watch. It's worth it.

### **MY FRIEND JOEY - Warhorse (2011)**



I liked it a lot better than I thought I would. Yeah, you know how it's going to end and yeah, it's manipulative, but that's what Spielberg does best, and I usually don't mind taking the ride (get it?)

I could quibble - like why would Emily Watson do this movie to essentially play Ma Joad? It's a rhetorical question. Why was the dad so old, and why should I believe he's a great guy even though he acts like a stupid drunk for most of the movie? Why did the family live in such a nice house? Why didn't the kid, who looked 30, go off to the War at the very beginning? Why were there about 5 shots lifted straight from *Gone With The Wind*? Doesn't matter. Joey (all 13 of them) was great, the war scenes were brutal without seeming gratuitous, and Benedict Cumberbatch and the kid from *The Reader* were in the film all too briefly. Maybe not worth Arclight prices, but definitely worth a DVD viewing, and a more enjoyable movie watching experience than most of the dreck that was nominated for best picture.

### **CHOOT THAT CHIT MANG! - Scarface (1983)**

OMG! What a horrible movie. I had forgotten how truly awful this movie is. A Cubano Richard III, without the wit.

Poor Al, playing a psycho with a gringa fixation. Poor F. Murray, a Syrian from Pittsburgh playing a Colombian drug lord. Poor Robert Loggia, an Italian guy playing a pussy whipped ... well, I haven't the slightest idea what he was playing. And Michelle Pfeiffer - at least she has the excuse that it was her first movie.

The Giorgio Moroder score is slightly cheesier than his score for *American Gigolo* - although it's hard to tell because they sound alike. The cinematography is flat - how the hell can you make Miami look boring? The editing looks like an episode of *Hawaii Five-O*. Oh, what the hell... I wasted three hours of my life watching this garbage. If you want a good *Scarface*, stick to Muni and Raft.

### **WANNAHOCKALOOGIE - Finding Nemo (2003)**

Those of you who know me well know the problem I have with animated movies, so I'll spare you the rant as I am clearly in the minority. *Finding Nemo* is a classic hero journey story that is as archetypal and familiar as *Odysseus*. I am puzzled, however, that Nemo is named "Nemo" - which means "no one", not "every man" - as the point of the story seems to suggest; i.e. everyone can be a hero regardless of disability or fear. Maybe Pixart is more existential than I give it credit for.

No matter. The animation is beautiful - although I would have found the contrast between the two worlds to have been more effective had the humans been actual people rather than animated. Nonetheless, I was touched by the film, as Pixart intended me to be, despite my feelings of unease that I am so easily suckered by such blatant sentimentality. But, as my wife says, "just shut up and take the ride."

## **ARACHNOPHOBIA - Black Widow (1987)**

I usually like Bob Rafelson movies. I missed Black Widow when it originally came out and had always wanted to see it. I shouldn't have bothered. This movie is a mess. Debra Winger plays some type of unspecified workaholic federal agent who exhibits no interest in men, yet who has all of the men in her office all a twitter, including the usually pretty good Terry O'Quinn who is giving it the old college try but who just has nothing to work with.

Debra, for reasons unknown, becomes obsessed with the idea that Theresa Russell -running the gamut of acting ability from A to B - is bumping off her various rich husbands. Plucky Deb sets out to nab Theresa on the government's dime. I won't say any more about the plot in case you want to bore yourself rigid for a couple of hours by watching this train wreck.

The bulk of the movie is shot in Hawaii. It's beyond me how a cinematographer can make Hawaii look like a place no one would want to go to, but the DP managed to pull it off here. The shots and the music make the whole movie feel like an episode of McMillan and Wife. The script gives no clue why any of the characters do any of the things they do, Theresa Russell's only character clue is to yell when she doesn't get what she wants, Nicol Williamson has to be the stupidest archaeologist on the planet, and even Dennis Hopper looked like he was just picking up a paycheck. I expected more from the guy who made Five Easy Pieces.

## **THOSE PESKY ATHLETE-INFESTED COLLEGES - College (1927)**

I have to confess I don't like Buster Keaton as much as I think I am supposed to. I've always found his deadpan too cadaverous looking for my taste.

College is pretty run-of-the-mill silent movie fare. Buster plays Ronald, a bookworm who tries to win the love of the flighty ingenue by becoming something he is not - an athlete. He tries and fails miserably at baseball, track, and rowing, before saving the girl from the clutches of the evil jock at the last minute. Lots of sight gags, which are fun but predictable. Everyone in the cast is way too old to be playing college students, which doesn't help the credibility of the characters. The black face sequence is just bizarre.

A couple of cool things though: The opening sequence is filmed in the rain, and I can't tell if it's actually raining or if it's movie rain. It's a fun, unexpected twist as the movie sets you up for a romp in sunny California. Also, it's clear Buster was a superb athlete - otherwise he wouldn't have been able to appear to inept at so many sports. He goes through an entire decathlon of screw ups and his rudder work in the rowing sequence is pretty ingenious. There's also a nice slow motion blanket toss. One tidbit: the pole vault into the ingenue's dorm room is one of the few instances Buster didn't do his own stunt. If you have only a casual interest in Buster, watch The General. College is a long hour and a half.

## **THE ONLY PEOPLE WHO GROW OLD ARE THE ONES WHO ARE BORN OLD ALREADY - The Bishop's Wife (1947)**

Wow. What a delightful film. I had never seen it before, and I found it thoroughly enjoyable. Cary Grant is at his most charming and gives a master class in the art of film acting by doing absolutely nothing at all. Loretta Young is at the top of her game as the potentially long-suffering title character, and I totally buy David Niven's performance as the priggish Bishop caught between duty, faith, and expediency. Not a false step in a thankless role. His metamorphosis on Christmas Eve is understated and believable without being cloying.

Speaking of cloying... there are a few vets from *It's a Wonderful Life* in this movie and the contrast between the in-your-face sentimentality of *IAWL* and the gentle lesson of *The Bishop's Wife* was a nice way to punctuate the end the holiday season. Great writing and cool camera work abounds with lots of nifty shots that wouldn't have been made before *Citizen Kane*. Watch how the frame gets filled when Cary Grant tells Debbie the story of the shepherd David. Terrific supporting work from Elsa Lanchester and Monty Wooley, who will break your heart. You might want to save this one for next December. Really great stuff.

## **THE SUN CAME OUT LAST NIGHT AND SANG**

The first movie I watched in 2012 was *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*. I haven't seen it in about 30 years, and I have only seen the original version once. I'm glad TCM showed the original version as the one where Richard Dreyfus goes into the spaceship adds nothing to my enjoyment of the movie and looks to me like a bad Devo video.

What struck me most on seeing it again after such a long time is how great the production design is. I totally buy the world of the film. I also think the story is terrific, even though I'm not big on science fiction. That said, some of the script is clunky - especially as Richard Dreyfus and Melinda Dillon get closer to Devil's Tower (BTW, does anyone else think the camera work at Devil's Tower resembles the shots from the *Wizard of Oz* when the Scarecrow, Tin Man, and Cowardly Lion are in the rocks outside the Wicked Witch's castle?). And why exactly do we need Larry? Just to say the helicopters are crop dusting? eek. Nice cameos by Carl Weathers and the mighty Roberts Blossom. Richard Dreyfus is his usual vigorous self which pays off when he meets Bob Balaban and Francois Truffaut. Kudos to my pal J. Patrick McNamara - I had forgotten how big your part was, and to my professor Seth Winston.