

GSC Films A-D

2 Days in Paris 2007 July Delpy (France) 3.5 Adam Goldberg as Jack, insecure, hypochondriacal New Yorker; July Delpy as pretty Parisian Marion manifesting the deficiencies in her love life; Albert Delpy as Marion's kooky father, an artist obsessed with sexual subjects; Marie Pillet as her equally eccentric mother who loves cats, enjoys doing laundry, and boasts about having had a "little" affair with Jim Morrison back in the day when people were "happy with their bodies" (both parent characters are played by Delpy's actual parents). Amusing and insightful comedy on the foibles of romantic relationships and French and American culture. Goldberg and Delpy arrive in Paris from Venice on a trip in Europe to try to revive their flagging romantic relationship and to show the non-French-speaking Goldberg Paris and introduce him to Delpy's family. In the course of the film, the food market with Delpy's father (much to Goldberg's dismay, flayed rabbits hanging all around). The film is extremely amusing largely because of Delpy's quirky, aggressive yet cute and sexy personality: she gets into violent, profanity-laced arguments with a racist cab driver (Delpy is fanatically committed to left-wing causes); and she gets so obnoxious in her confrontation with an ex-lover in a café (he had dumped her several years before and gone to Thailand to "have sex with 12-year-olds") that she is thrown by the management out on the street. She is also flirtatious and self-indulgent, at one point leading a good-looking Algerian taxi driver to offer to make a baby with her, if she wants one that looks like Brad Pitt. The couple constantly runs into her numerous ex-lovers; her flirtatious indulgence of their attentions causes disputes with Goldberg: every time they try to have sex, they get into an argument, e.g., over whether Delpy can be on top; at one point Goldberg discovers pornographic texts on Delpy's telephone, and he has to resort to a dictionary to decode expressions like "lécher la chatte". The interface between American and French culture gets entertaining treatment through Goldberg's experiences: his staring blankly (or suspiciously) during conversations since he doesn't speak French; his nonplussed reactions to the peculiar behavior of Julie's parents; his incredulity when faced with Delpy's outbursts; his disgusted reaction to eating rabbit and standing among animal cadavers in the street market; his totally justified but uncertain jealous reactions to Delpy's continued flirtations with her ex-boyfriends. Although the ending is not clear about the future of the couple's relationship (a long downer of a conversation is followed by a scene of the two dancing in the street), the overall trend of the relationship throughout the film is downhill – mainly through Goldberg's jealousy and insecurity at Delpy's self-indulgent behavior. A delightful film that unlike 'Before Sunrise' is not romantic but honest, real, affectionate (Delpy's picture of her parents), observant, and sometimes very funny. (2012)

2 Days in New York 2012 Julie Delpy (France) 3.0 Julie Delpy as pretty, blond, a little scatter-brained New York artist trying to make domestic commitment work with her boyfriend; Chris Rock a bit subdued and wooden as her boyfriend who hosts a talk show in New York; Albert Delpy (Julie's real father) as Julie's good-humored, balmy charming French father; Alexia Landeau as Rose, Julie's dark-haired, impulsively lecherous sister who walks mostly nude in Delpy's crowded apartment (she says she is a learning specialist with an advanced degree!); Alexandre Nahon as Manu, Rose's highly annoying supposed boyfriend who leeches off his guest and gets deported to France when "he rolls a joint" (the father) right in front of a police station. Amusing screwball-style sequel to 'Two Days in Paris' that reverses the original situation – instead of Julie introducing her boyfriend to her balmy French family, the father (the mom has died in the intervening five years) arrives with his daughter to get in the hair of Delpy and Rock. The film has many good jokes – cross-cultural and otherwise: the father is detained for four hours at the airport for trying to smuggle a large quantity of cheese and sausage into the USA, some of it taped to his body; Rock is disgusted by the sound of Rose and Manu having sex in the bathroom using Chris's electric toothbrush (the hum clearly heard); Rose catches the eye of the neighbors by "montrant ses fesses" during their visit to the apartment; Rose shows a breast (over the objections of her sister) while working out in the local gym; Delpy pretends that she has incurable brain cancer (and shuffling to prove it!) when she is attacked by a neighbor for the noise caused by her French visitors; Delpy loses it during a showing of her (boring) life photographs, attacking a visiting art critic and telling him the whole city hates him. The movie excels in showing the charming, pretty Delpy trying desperately to maintain balance and order in the midst of chaos. The theme throughout is whether the principal

couple's arrangement will prosper – no problems with their inter-racial relationship (no apparent racism in the film), but Delpy's zaniness severely tries the patience of the low-key Rock, who however finally decides to stay with her after a "discussion" with a lifesize cutout of Obama he keeps in his home office. Another plot-spiritual issue intrudes at the end, whereby Delpy has to accept her mother's death by rescuing a pigeon in distress in Central Park and transferring her mother's memory to the animal (?); there is also an indecipherable issue about Delpy's soul being sold at auction and then the considerable pains she takes to recuperate it. Entertaining, witty little film that perhaps lacks the spontaneity, freshness of the first one.

12 Angry Men 1957 Sidney Lumet 3.5 Very dramatic, one set movie (92 minutes) with dynamite (over-?) acting, produced and masterminded by Henry Fonda. Great cast of male actors including Ed Begley, Lee J. Cobb, E.G. Marshall, Jack Warden, Martin Balsam, Joseph Sweeney, Robert Webber, John Fiedler, and of course Fonda. Claustrophobic atmosphere: extremely hot with almost everyone sweating, but as we get near end, the weather breaks, the thunderstorm hits, and it cools off. Jury ready to convict poor Puerto Rican kid, but Fonda, the noble white liberal and voice of reason, gets the acquittal ball rolling. The nativist white middle class and blue collar people are prejudiced and are anxious, sometimes for personal reasons (Cobb and his son), to convict the kid. The humble people, the immigrant (watchmaker), the milquetoast, etc. are the ones most inclined to give the kid a break. Fonda and others rather improbably break down the evidence presented against the kid – the woman's eyeglasses, whether the old man could walk all the way to his front door, "I'm gonna kill ya!" Lesson in civic virtue – you have to be fair, reasonable, and operate on the principle of the reasonable doubt. Very interesting characters – Marshall as voice of reasonable conviction, Warden just wants to get to his baseball game, the old man has his own wisdom, etc. Makes you wonder about the jury system!

12 Years a Slave (AA) 2013 Steve McQueen 4.0 Chiwetel Ejiofer (AA) as Solomon Northup, dignified, patient African-American from New York, who is kidnapped into slavery in Louisiana in 1841, where he is called Platt; Adepero Oduye as woman who wails endlessly when she is separated from her children; Paul Giamatti as heartless slave dealer, who however is a charming good salesman; Benedict Cumberbatch as relatively humanitarian first slave owner of Platt (he gives him a violin); Paul Dano as very cruel, unfeeling racist overseer working for Cumberbatch; Michael Fassbender as Platt's second owner – he is scarily neurotic as Bible-thumping racist who exploits his slaves, rapes the Black women, and hates himself for it; Sarah Paulsen as Fassbender's wife, vengeful and jealous woman that encourages her husband to mistreat his mistress Patsey; Lupita Nyong'o (AA) as very thin, emotive Black mistress of Fassbender; Alfre Woodard in curious role as a Black woman who is wife to a white plantation owner and mistress of the plantation; Brad Pitt with light perimeter beard convincing as Abolitionist carpenter, who is the instrument of Solomon's liberation after 12 years. Riveting, highly disturbing film essentially about the inhumanity of slavery in the American South in the 1840s and 1850s. The film is divided into three parts: the story of Solomon's passage to slavery by crooked entertainers who approach him in upstate New York and lure him to Washington, DC, where he is kidnapped; the long middle section that has little plot curve, but focuses on Platt's epic mistreatment and suffering; Platt's chance encounter with an abolitionist carpenter, who puts him into contact with authorities in New York, who have him freed (curious that the Louisiana authorities cooperate) and reunited with his family. The film stands out mainly for its unblinking visualization of the sufferings of slaves: instead of the 'Gone With the Wind' image of the happy Mammy, we have Platt having to pretend that he is illiterate and from Georgia, with a noose around his neck standing on his tiptoes to keep from being strangled (the white mistress of the plantation looks on impassively), Platt being forced by the insane Fassbinder to beat Patsey until the blood runs and the welts are gaping on her back. All the while, the camera returns relentlessly to the pained, patient, and dignified face of Solomon, who has vowed that he will do all he must, including playing the dumb, passive 'nigger', to survive so he can return to his family. The film brings home relentlessly and unsparingly the inhuman visage of American slavery, including the use of the term "nigger" to refer to a passive and stupid black-faced, supposedly subhuman species that is constructed to work obediently and nothing else. The film's production values are first-rate: the elegant master houses on the plantation (the film was made on location in Louisiana), the rickety slaves' quarters,

the oppressive humid heat, the sweat pouring off the faces of the characters, the flat, featureless landscapes, the bayous surrounded by trees with hanging moss -- all thrust our senses into the story. The performances -- apparently pumped up by the director to make his point -- are all eloquent and convincing: Nyong'o is aggressively emotional; Ejiofer carries the weight of the drama with his consistently dignified, patient, melancholy performance; Fassbender's character is dynamic and riveting in its psychotic religiosity, lust, racism, hatred, and self-loathing. Not always a pleasant experience, but unforgettably disturbing. (2014)

13 Rue Madeleine 1947 Henry Hathaway (20cFox) 3.5 James Cagney dry, crisp, stiff-legged, acrobatic (fistfights with Germans!), completely committed as organizer of Army secret service contingent being trained for service behind German lines; Richard Conte strong acting as cool, ruthless German secret service agent posing as cadet in American spy schools; Frank Latimore as callow secret agent who is killed halfway through film; Annabelle; Sam Jaffe a bit disheveled as French Resistance leader; Karl Malden and AG Marshall looking pretty young in bit roles. Excellent postwar realist-style film with stentorian March of Time narrative voice, quite a bit of narrated training footage of American secret agents, dry-as-dust oriented acting, crisp editing, some dead time in editing walking down corridors or driving down highways; and of course virtually all the film shot on location in real light (it appears that the sequences taking place in France were actually shot there). As a result, the well-restored film has an immediate, realistic feel that draws the viewer into the action. Heart of the film is Conte's infiltration of the American organization, and then the battle between him and Cagney over whether the Germans get wind of Allied plans for the invasion of Normandy. Climax of film is violent, realistic and convincing: Annabelle is killed in the plot to extract a French collaborator back to London; Cagney is captured, but when subjected to torture he doesn't give in; the Americans then ruthlessly bomb the Gestapo headquarters in Le Havre (13 rue Madeleine) killing Cagney, Conte and everyone else in the building. The film is quite patriotic praising these heroic men who sacrificed themselves for their country, and implying that such might be required again (photo of National Archives inscription "Past is Prologue"). Film has great suspense: e.g., whether Conte knows that Latimore suspects him as they await in the airplane a parachute jump; the surprise when we learn that Jaffe is the local Resistance leader and not a wobbly-kneed collaborationist mayor. Film benefits from two strong actors playing opposing leads: Conte's complete dedication, intelligence, and determination stack up well against Cagney. One of the best World War II films; and an excellent example of the postwar realist style. (2010)

20th Century Women 2016 Mike Mills 3.0 Often moving, quirky, impressionistic film about a 50s-something woman trying to come to terms with youth culture in 1979. Annette Bening in subtle, affecting portrait of widow Dorothea born in 1924; Lucas Jade Zumann as her only son, Jamie, trying to understand and accept his mother; Greta Gerwig as Abbie, 25-year-old punkish photographer with red hair who is boarding in Dorothea's 70-year-old house; Elle Fanning as Julie, teenage girl who although she has sex with lots of guys, refuses to have sex with Jamie when she spends the night with him; Billy Crudup as William, another boarder and potential Dorothea mate -- soft-edged descendant of the hippie era. The film takes place in the beautiful, laid-back LaLa Land of Santa Barbara in 1979. It does not have a strong narrative line. Some things happen: Dorothea's old Ford Galaxie bursts spontaneously into flame in a parking lot outside a supermarket; Julie repeatedly climbs to scaffolding on Dorothea's house where she spends the night with Jamie; Julie has a pregnancy scare, but the test is negative (looking for the ring in the test tube); Abbie is diagnosed with cervical cancer, but is cured; she initiates a sexual affair with William (she then makes him role play as a photographer who can't keep his hands off her); Jamie becomes obsessed with feminist literature given to him by Abbie, but when he talks about "clitoral stimulation" in front of a peer, he gets beaten up; Jamie finally persuades Julie to run off with him "up the coast", but even when they bed down in a motel in San Luis Obispo, she tells him she feels too close to have sex with him. Every character is given a light-hearted biographical introduction, and at the end the narrator (Jamie) sketches out the next 20 years of the main characters' lives -- Dorothea, who is rarely seen without a cigarette in her mouth, announces that she dies of lung cancer in 1999 (she apparently is talking from beyond the grave). Dorothea, interpreted by Bening as a complex, sincere, highly observant middle-aged woman, is the focus of the narrative. With no long-term relationship with a

man, she is acutely aware of the deficiencies of her connection with her son, who along with Abbie is buried in the punk rock culture of 1979. She tries her best to understand and empathize with the younger generation: she listens to punk rock music (Why can't music be beautiful? Is that really interesting?), she goes dancing with Abbie and Jamie in a punk nightclub; she asks Elle and Abbie to become Jamie's unofficial guardians to help him grow up (hence the radical feminist literature); all the time puffing on cigarette after cigarette. In the ending, Jamie narrates that he came to a new understanding with his mom but he does not elaborate. Low-key, although colorful and often engaging portrait of a woman and the transitional age of 1980 (from Jimmy Carter, once seen delivering his materialism speech on TV to Ronald Reagan). The absence of a strong narrative makes it sometimes hard to stick with it. (2017)

21 Grams 2003 Alejandro Iñárritu 2.5 Sean Penn, Benicio del Toro, Naomi Watts, Charlotte Gainsbourg. Depressing movie about downward spiral of several characters wracked by past problems (Toro and Watts) and by guilt coming from having regained life from getting someone else's heart (Penn). Why does Penn have to connect with the wife of the man who was killed (by Toro) in an auto accident? Fate or coincidence seems to rule in the movie. Is there some sort of redemption in the end? If so, I rather missed it. Acting is good, but a bit too intense and heart-rending for my taste. Penn is low key, but still pulling out all the stops. Del Toro is perhaps most convincing and charismatic as the reformed druggie, ex-con who is trying to put his life back together by being an evangelist, but then finds his life shattered by the accident. I found Watts hard to watch. Editing style is extremely fragmented, beginning with three confused time frames, then gradually simplifying and becoming intelligible as you go along. Hard to figure out what the function of editing was aside from showing that you are the master! (2006)

The 28th Day 2001 Danny Boyle (Britain) 2004 2.5 Cillian Murphy, Naomie Harris. Presumably genetic manipulation in Cambridge lab unleashes a fast-acting deadly rage infection on humanity that turns its victims into rabid devouring zombies who are eventually destined to die away. Can the big three (then two, then four, then three) survive? Naomi is the tough realist who kills infected humans in ten seconds; Jim is softer and would probably have died without her. Movie avoids gratuitous sex scenes. Ends with nightmare sequence with rogue surviving army unit that wants to use the women for survival (is that so bad?). Big shootout at the end and the three principals survive! while jet fighter (from where?) circles overhead. Visual style is dark, dull, with intense close-ups and fast cutting that always leave you wondering what is happening and deny you a good look at the monsters, etc. Pretty routine despite approbation of some reviewers. (2006)

36 Quai des Orfevres 2004 Olivier Marchal (France) 4.0 Daniel Auteuil as sympathetic, sensitive Paris police commander who is much in love with his wife and who sometimes does not play by the book when dealing with informants; Gérard Depardieu as unscrupulous former friend and rival who will resort to any outrage in order to be promoted; André Dussolier as handsome but pusillanimous boss who despises Depardieu but keeps his mouth shut out of fatalistic conviction that he cannot make a difference; Valeria Golino as Auteuil's beautiful wife who is murdered by Depardieu. Appealing, exciting, and yet realistic film about the impact of ambition and personal rivalries inside the anti-crime division of the Paris police force. Auteuil and Depardieu are ordered by Dussolier to stop the bloody armored car holdups of a violent gang with the promise that the successful one will be promoted to take Dussolier's place; Depardieu acts in the most unscrupulous fashion, interfering with the arrest of the gang by Auteuil's unit (and in the process causing the death of Auteuil's best friend) and then ensuring that Auteuil's is indicted and goes to prison – seven years – for unwittingly abetting a three-person hit by one of his informants; Depardieu then moves to track down a gangster named Silien (Roschdy Zem) through Auteuil's grieving wife and then inexplicably (from simple hatred for Auteuil?) shoots her in cold blood while she lies injured in a crashed car; when Auteuil is released from prison, he goes to a police ball to kill Depardieu, but instead leaves him a revolver to commit suicide; Depardieu instead unleashes his rage as Auteuil walks away, whereupon Depardieu is gunned down by two assassins, presumably members of a gang that he had pursued. The social and cultural picture of police life is completely realistic with little of the star glamor accompanying the confrontation of DeNiro and Pacino in the previous American film

'Heat' that Marchal cites as the inspiration for his film. The shootouts are brutal, colorful, and exciting, virtually the equal of the unforgettable violence of 'Heat'. Most memorable are the characters of Auteuil and Depardieu and their interaction. Although he regularly violates police procedure when dealing with snitches, Auteuil is a quiet, thoughtful, honorable man strongly bonded to his wife and daughter and incapable of a ruthless or immoral action except when taking revenge. Depardieu on the other hand is a violent man consumed by ambition and rivalry with Auteuil; his subsequent death at the hands of assassins unrelated to Auteuil has to be seen as the workings of immanent justice punishing an evil man. A real thespian treat to watch France's two most famous actors, Auteuil holding center stage most of the time, but Depardieu unforgettably painting his character in minimal screen time. The film expresses the passion of the filmmaker, particularly his love for the police and for the real-life figure embodied in the Auteuil character. (2014)

The 39 Steps 1935 Alfred Hitchcock (Britain) 4.0 Classic first Hitchcock cross-country romp filled with humor and invention (successors are 'Saboteur' and 'North by Northwest'). Robert Donat tall, good-looking Canadian (talking like a Brit) filling the role as the innocent accused trying to clear his name; Madeleine Carroll as glamorous blond (in showy dresses with large bows) that becomes handcuffed to Donat in second part of film; Lucie Mannheim as the mysterious foreign-accented lady who stumbles into Donat's apartment in the beginning of the film; Godfrey Tearle as the elegant Professor with a partially missing little finger – he is the leader of the plot to steal plans of an aircraft motor in behalf of a foreign power; John Laurie and Peggy Ashcroft as forbidding Scottish crofter and his young wife, the latter of whom develops a silent, eye-fueled connection with Donat when he visits while fleeing from the police. Short on characterization, the film emphasizes a linear narrative decorated with inventive, clever, and humorous misdirections and surprises from beginning to end. The film begins in a raucous London music hall, where on stage Mr. Memory spouts facts (he always tells the truth), but then Donat is visited by Mannheim, who explains to him the plot and points him to Scotland before she is stabbed to death. With the famous audio cut (scream to train whistle) when the charwoman discovers the body, Donat sets off for Scotland on The Flying Scotsman. He encounters the matter-of-fact women's underwear salesman on the train to Edinburgh – they embarrass an Anglican clergymen by their frank talk; the semi-romantic interlude of the visit to the Scottish crofter's cottage; the unannounced visit to the "manse", where Donat stumbles upon the leader of the plot (recognizable because part of his little finger is missing), who shoots him in the chest (but he is saved by the hymn book left in the crofter's overcoat); Donat confesses his situation to the local sheriff, who has him arrested; Donat jumps out of the window, hides himself in motion in a Salvation Army march, and then ducks into an Assembly Hall, where in perhaps the film's most humorous scene he is mistaken for a political speaker and rouses the crowd with an improvised generic speech devoid of content; arrested by a couple of men, who turn out to be secret agents rather than policemen – they handcuff Carroll and Donat together; bickering the two escape cross-country and hole up in a country inn, where the matron defends them against their pursuers, saying that she needs to protect cute, runaway couple. (Can't help wondering what they do about going to the bathroom.) After Carroll frees herself from the handcuffs, the two then return to the music hall where the film began. Cornered by the police in the audience, Donat shouts to Mr. Memory, "What is the 39 Steps?!" He of course has to answer truthfully, resulting in his being shot by Tearle, and then the latter's arrest. Dancing girls are brought out to distract the audience, and in a shot from the rear, Carroll's hand reaches out to grasp Donat's, from which the handcuffs are still dangling – he is "cuffed" forever by Carroll, who has now come around. Hardly a minute passes without a new surprise; romance too with the crofter episode, and the gradual development of the antagonistic relationship with Carroll that has its piquant moments, which must have been sexier in 1935 when young men and women were not permitted such intimacy; the second half of the film reads like a romantic comedy. A satisfying structure that uses several McGuffins (the missing half finger, the musical theme from Mr. Memory's act, the handcuffs, etc.) and at the end returns us to the scene of the film's beginning with a delightful conclusion. A delectable, ground-breaking, small-budget film that this viewer has seen too many times. (2016)

The 40-Year Old Virgin 2005 Judd Apatow 3.0 Steve Carell amusing, clueless, self-deprecating, well intentioned 40 year old who works as the stock clerk in a stereo store and who has never

had sex with a woman; he collects action figures which he has never played with, he watches 'Survivor' with the elderly couple in the apartment above him; he smiles, seems happy and never takes a risk; Catherine Keener as 35 year old divorcee with obnoxious (sort of) children – she is simple, charming, winsome and pretty easy to fall in love with; Paul Rudd as electronics store clerk who can't get over his girlfriend he split up with two years ago; Romany Malco as another sidekick who cheats constantly on his wife; Amusing, occasionally satirical comedy about even the worst of nerds being able to find true love. Carrell works with a bunch of horny young males who are determined that he will discard his despised virginity (they discover his awful secret when he describes the breasts of a woman he had sex with as being like "bags of sand"). Carrell goes through several sometimes hilarious adventures where he is looking for cheap sex in bar pickups, all of which connections end in hilarious disaster; he establishes a relationships with charming Keener, milks a lot of laughs because of his delay in having sex with her; and he finally finds true love in several scenes of genuine romantic warmth, marries her, and in a marvelous ending leaves her completely exhausted on their wedding night (unfortunately the ending is somewhat spoiled by adding some easy parodies of dancing and singing from 'Hair'). A lot of sophomoric sex jokes based on body fluids, but because everyone is so sweet and good-natured, they are genuinely affecting: especially good laughs from the hair waxing scene (Carrell makes it work even submitting to waxing one of his nipples) and from the scene in which Carrell's date with a drunk barfly ends with her half-digested daiquiri on his head. In the line of the Ferrelly Brothers' body fluid comedies, but transcending them with superior taste, comedy with some satirical reference, and genuinely affecting true romance. (2007)

42 2013 Brian Helgeland 2.5 Chadwick Boseman as nice-looking, callow, laid-back, boring Jackie Robinson who doesn't respond to racist slurs from "red-neck assholes"; Harrison Ford hamming it up gloriously as Dodgers owner Branch Rickey, who has a shrewd eye for profit and whose reverence for the Bible commands racial tolerance; Christopher Meloni as colorful Leo Durocher reading the riot act to the Dodgers players when they object to Robinson's inclusion on the team; Alan Tudyk also colorful as racist Phillies manager going over the top in use of the 'nigger' word when he insults Robinson on the field; Nicole Behrie as the quintessential pretty and loyal wife standing behind her man. Fairly entertaining, but disappointingly shallow and Hollywood-hammed version of Jackie's Robinson's experience breaking into the racist world of major league baseball in the 1940s. The film follows him from his hiring to play on the Montreal farm club through the first season at Brooklyn in 1947. It includes fairly convincing scenes of his playing baseball – getting hits, (hitting outs), getting hit by pitches from racist pitchers, but particularly rattling opposing pitchers by aggressive base-running. The film focuses repetitively on the racist milieu of organized baseball: Robinson not allowed to stay in establishment hotels with his teammates, players from his own team objecting to his presence until Durocher sets them straight, razzing and name-calling from opponents on the field, opposition pitchers throwing at his head, death threats sent to him and Rickey. Rickey repetitively tells Jackson that since he is a pace-setter, he has to remain calm and resist talking back in the face of race-baiting; by and large he succeeds, although once at the price of shredding a bat against the wall in the player tunnel. The film sticks to the official story celebrating Robinson's restraint and his eventual triumph over the nay-sayers with crowd-pleasing scenes (e.g., his teammates learning to stand up for him in the face of insults), not to mention the rising music and the slow pan across the noble faces of the good players, etc. More honesty and depth, less obvious crowd-pleasing and hewing to the Hollywood style would have been appreciated. The performances of Ford, Meloni, and Tudyk were very entertaining. (2013)

42nd Street 1932 Lloyd Bacon (Warner Brothers) 3.5 Ruby Keeler, Dick Powell, BeBe Daniels, Warner Baxter, George Brent, Una Merkel, Guy Kibbee, etc. Warners musical snappily directed with choreography and staging of final musical numbers by Busby Berkeley. Backstage musical as director excitable Baxter needs to put on one more show so he can retire. During rehearsals plot carried by trials of director, the life of Daniels, who has two boyfriends, than breaks her leg and cedes the lead regretfully but nobly in last minute emergency to inexperienced Keeler. Story is passably entertaining; bit about the director is carried off best, thanks perhaps to good performance by Warner Baxter. Music by Harry Warner – sounds 20s, a bit tinny, and always high-spirited. "You're Getting' to be a Habit with Me" appears in many of the rehearsal scenes. Perform three production numbers in last

15 minutes, all filled with cute songs, light-footed tap, and trademark BBerkeley chorus maneuvers: “Shuffle Off to Buffalo” a kind of precursor to ‘Pettin’ in the Park’ with Keeler very sexy and cute (they were just married and much of it imaginatively staged in a sleeping car on a train to Niagara Falls) – “I’ll go home and pack my panties, you go home and get your scanties, and away we go”, with the other ladies in the Pullman car making cynical remarks about their soon being on the way to Reno; “I’m Young and Healthy (and so are you)” (“I’m young and healthy and you got charms; it’d really be a sin not to have you in my arms”) focuses on the corps de ballet gathering around the hyper-cute Toby Wing; and title song “42nd Street” (Ruby Keeler intones “Come and meet those dancing feet, on the avenue that I am takin’ you to, 42nd Street” and then taps away in her clunky style) talks about the weirdness of New York, and includes a kind of inchoate ballet sequence detailing the life and various personalities on 42nd Street (influence on MGM musicals of early 50s?), even a scene involving an attempted rape of a cute girl, who is then stabbed to death in the street, and a horizontal model of the Empire State Building separating the chorus girls. Good Depression era escapism. Pep talk line; “You’re going out a youngster, but you have to come back a star!” (2005)

The 49th Parallel 1941 Michael Powell (Emeric Pressburger) (Britain) 3.5 Eric Portman outstanding as outwardly decent but actually fanatic Nazi German officer, Lieutenant Hirt, in Canada; Laurence Olivier with Pepe le Piau accent as good-humored French Canadian joker murdered by the Germans; Niall McGinnis as Vogel, the decent German who had been a baker before being drafted into the navy; Anton Walbrook as the quiet, charismatic leader of a Hutterite community in Manitoba; Leslie Howard as outspoken intellectual writer fishing in the mountains of Alberta; Raymond Massey as a Canadian army deserter, who outwits Portman just when he thinks he has escaped to the neutral USA. Very entertaining, travelogue-like, often moving, extremely effective propaganda film made to strengthen the Canadian commitment to World War II and to nudge the USA into it (the film wasn’t released in the USA however until March 1942). Begins with a monologue about the pacific 49th parallel between Canada and the USA implying that Americans are close to begin brothers of the Canadian belligerents and then beautiful black-and-white shots of the Rockies through mist. Film follows the ever-dwindling German party from East to West and then back to the border at Niagara Falls, where remaining survivor Hirt is captured. Each stop makes an explicit contrast between the racist, intolerant, snarlingly violent Nazis and the variety, tolerance, and peacefulness of democratic (Canadian or American!) society (but the Canadians – Howard and Massey – have no trouble beating the Germans in a fair fist fight!). On Hudson Bay the Inuits are good-natured, loyal, and among those shot in the back by the ruthless Germans; in the Hutterite community Hirt gives a rousing Nazi speech (well conceived and delivered) to the assembled community, but he is rejected by this pacific people who are grateful for their acceptance as immigrants in Canada, and when Vogel tries to join the group as a baker, the Germans “court martial” him and shoot him; one of the surviving Germans is identified in Banff by an Indian, who also seems to be loyal; Howard is the type of the democratic intellectual, intelligent, willing to discuss any question, including if he is a brave man or a coward, and who shows his courage while subduing one of the Germans; Massey may be AWOL and may gripe about the army but he is a patriot who wants the Nazi to be captured, and he outwits the now frightened German causing the American authorities to send their railway car back to the Ontario side. A moving propaganda film that lets the variety, humanity, and beauty of Canada (and by implication of the USA) speak for itself against the harsh, hate-spewing lockstep of the Nazi Germans. (2011)

99 Homes 2014 Ramin Bahrani 3.5 Andrew Garfield as soft-spoken conscience-stricken guy who loses his home and then gets into shady real estate operations; Michael Shannon in forceful performance as aggressive, in-your-face real estate dealer specializing in foreclosing on homes for the banks (who stay in the background throughout the film); Laura Dern looking a bit slender and young as Andrew’s anguished mother; Tim Guinee as a homeowner that resists with a weapon when he is cheated out of his home. Well-acted, well-written, gripping film dealing with the social and psychological impact in Orlando of the housing foreclosure crisis in the Great Recession. After he is tossed out of his house by Shannon with police officers (whom he has on speed dial on his phone), Garfield – desperate for money – goes to work for Shannon, gradually immersing himself deeper in his suspect, although mostly legal,

business operations: they include speculating on foreclosed homes, stealing appliances from foreclosed properties and then selling them back to Fannie Mae, courting the business of big operators buying up low-value homes, and finally even forging court documents so he won't lose business. Garfield has increasing conscience qualms about throwing honest people with families out of their homes (one victim is being evicted for having borrowed \$30,000 to add a patio). The film ends with a confrontation between the gun-wielding Guinee and the police, which is courageously defused by Garfield. No one injured, but the film ends inconclusively with Shannon looking chastened (Is he going to change?) and Guinee being carted off to the police station (Will he be prosecuted? Will he get his home back?). The film has an convincing sense of place in the middle- and working-class residential neighborhoods of Orlando – sunny skies, swimming pools, canals behind the houses, etc. Interesting and moving scenes – families grieving and protesting when being evicted from their homes, the anger of the dispossessed, the cramped, depressing conditions of evicted families living in a cheap motel (who pays the bills?), the heartless rush of the judges to dispose of eviction cases (one wonders about their objectivity), etc. Shannon is powerful and disturbing – aggressive, relentless, piercing eyes, very profane language; he tells Garfield that he mustn't think of the houses as homes inhabited by people, but as boxes manipulated for gain; and yet his well-written dialogue reveals him as a sometimes thoughtful person wondering what he is doing. Gripping drama portraying real people dealing with real social problems. (2016)

100 Bloody Acres 2012 Colin and Cameron Cairns (Australia) 3.0 Damon Herriman as nervous, incompetent Reg; Oliver Ackland as Sophie's sanctimonious fiancé, James; Anna McGahan as pretty, flirtatious redhead Sophie, the only character never stained with blood; Jamie Kristian as off-the-wall, drug-using Wes; Paul Blackwell as foul-mouthed, gruff-voiced, intimidating ogre Linds, who is obviously psychopathic; Chrissie Page as the horny old lady Nancy. Sometimes amateurish, but bloody and gory, humorous and entertaining Australian horror movie. Takes place in dry outback, decayed small business installations, driving Australian jalopies down dusty roads, visiting kitschy white trash amusement park featuring puppet versions of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs. The three kids – James with fiancée Sophie, and unpredictable, heedless Wes – stumble upon Linds' small business: he makes fertilizer with the by-products of human bodies that he feeds through a blood-caked, ancient-looking grinder that reduces the bodies to a liquid. Throughout the film radio commercials play on the radio advertising the fertilizer with a jingle – “Morgan's organic fertilizer”. Most of the film is taken up with the attempts of the young people to escape a grizzly death in the grinder. The plight of the captives inside the warehouse building drags on a bit, but there is plenty of gory killing: a stupid policeman that stops Linds on the road is shot through the neck; Wes has his hand chopped clean off by Linds' axe, and he scampers around looking for the hand that has been carried off by the little dog Maigret before he is shot in the chest by Linds; in the grand finale Reg and Sophie foil the slow-moving Linds, who falls into the machine splattering blood over the bystanders. A lot of effective black humor: the satirical treatment of commercial advertising by associating the Morgan jingle with the grisly origins of the fertilizer; when the elderly Nancy arrives to comfort Linds in a maternal way, he responds by...giving her oral sex, which she responds to noisily (her lover then shoots her in the back); the sexual confusion that swirls around Sophie: while fiancé James is hanging on a chain over the grinder, all he can think and talk about are the particulars of the time that Sophie had sex with Wes; Sophie tries to get free by seducing Reg, who, resentful of the disdain that his brother treats him with, eventually changes sides to assist in the dispatching of Linds; Sophie seems grateful and happy when Reg, still hanging upside down on a chain, hands her an engagement ring (taken from James?). Has Sophie really exchanged bridegrooms? Has Reg really been redeemed? The suspense editing is sometimes awkward, scenes can be derivative; but often very funny send-up of slasher movies that knows how to make the viewer squirm. (2014)

101 Dalmatians 1961 Several directors 3.0 Voices of Rod Taylor (Pongo, the narrator); Betty Lou Gerson (Cruella de Vil); et al. Entertaining, sometime exciting, often moving (sentimental) shorter Disney animated feature. The songwriter falls in love with a pretty girl walking by his London window; in an amusing romantic sequence they marry, and their Dalmatians mate and give birth to 15 pups; the outrageously hyperactive and loud, evil Cruella de Vil roars in proclaiming her love of Dalmatian puppies (she wants to make a fur coat out of their skins), and eventually she has her two

nincompoopish Cockney assistants dognap the pups and 84 more and imprison them in an abandoned country house (the addition of the two parents make it 101 – 84+15+2); with the help of dog communication network (they send messages by a sort of barking Morse Code) the Colonel Blimp inspired dog and his snappy sergeant major cat free the kids; and Pongo and wife lead them through a driving snowstorm (pity aroused by the long lines of little pups toughing it through the high winds); and they all live happily ever after lying around the songwriter's house watching television. Backgrounds derived from the new post-mid-50s style – wispiest, more expressionist lines, pastel colors, less flat bright colors than in the high Disney animated style; nevertheless vivid images of London, its rows and parks, and the English countryside. Movement is sometimes a little jerky, but facial expressions are priceless expressive, especially in Pongo who doesn't need to say a word to get the point across. Being Disney, much warm, fuzzy family togetherness – in several scenes all the characters are gathered around a warm hearth with the television playing in the background. Music is sparse with only “Cruella De Vil” being memorable. Very amusing use of British military tropes to create humor – the blustery good-humored, marginally competent ‘Colonel’ dog and his attentive, comically competent assistant sergeant major cat saluting snappily when telling his boss what to do. Classic satire on television: shots of the immobile backs of the pups as they watch television with only their tails moving, and then their excitement when the “Kanine Krunchies” commercial is aired. (2007)

101 Reykjavik 2000 Baltasar Kormakur (Iceland) 3.0 Hilmar Snær Guðnason as Hlynur, a world-class slacker in contemporary Iceland; Brúdur Vilhjálmsson as Hofi, his much neglected girlfriend from a good bourgeois family; Hanna María Karlsdóttir as Hlynur's mother, who has just discovered she is a lesbian and in love with Lola; Victoria Abril (Spanish actress) speaking English as Mom's lover and the person that partly gets Hlynur out of his funk – he has a one-night fling with her and gets her pregnant. Entertaining, occasionally irritating, off-beat Icelandic comedy about a 28-year-old fellow who still lives with his mother and mostly lies around in bed watching porno (we catch him masturbating at least once when he refuses to take a phone call from his girlfriend); when he goes outside into the snow, it is to have sex with Hofi (pretty rare) or to go get drunk and laugh a lot at the local pub (much more common); he is supposed to be looking for a job, but he lives off regular checks from the Icelandic welfare state; he rarely leaves his neighborhood, except once or twice to climb to the top of a nearby snow-covered mountain and complain about life being just an interval between the death before birth and the death after death. The film takes place in a specific Icelandic context: the young people seem trapped and unhappy, saying for example that there are not even any birds in Iceland and no one would live here except those who were born there (most of the film takes place in the dead of winter with some spring-seeming scenes toward the end); one sees also the familiar Icelandic obsession with genetic connections – much discussion of incest and the puzzle of Hlynur's relation to the baby that he fathers with Lola and is raised by her and his mother. Some of the funniest scenes are Hlynur's experience dining in bourgeois families, where no one seems to have anything to say – very amusing scene with Christmas dinner with his own relatives, where a lull in the vapid conversation motivates his sister to play the videotape of last Christmas' family get-together, where...they talk about the same inane things (reminiscent of Claude Chabrol's French bourgeois families). Hlynur is a bit hard to take with his exploitation of the community (Lola tells him to his face that he is a parasite), his extremely insensitive treatment of his girlfriend, even when she is pregnant, and his inveterate passiveness; but he does have a glint in his eye and a piquant sense of humor. At the end of the film he finally gets a job as meter maid in Reykjavik, and in the last scene he is writing a revenge ticket for Hofi and her husband's car; he walks away from the car with a smirk on his face. He hasn't learned very much and we wonder how long the job will last. The film's recounting of the life of young people in the city interspersed with surreal moments sometimes evokes Fellini's ‘Amarcord’. (2009)

3:10 to Yuma 2007 James Mangold 3.5 Russell Crowe as intelligent and self-aware gang leader being taken by Pinkerton men to catch the 3:10 train from Contention to Yuma to be tried and hanged for his robberies of railroad payrolls; Christian Bale as interior man who appears to have lost the respect and confidence of his wife and son in his ability to survive on the frontier; Ben Foster is dynamite as the ruthless Charlie Prince (how many people does he kill in the film?), who is assistant to Crowe and

apparently in love with him; Peter Fonda appears early in the film as grizzled bounty hunter more interested in the reward on Crowe than in bringing him to justice; Logan Lerman as Bale's son, who rather idolizes Ben Wade and is looking for a heroic deed by his dad so he can admire him as much. Engrossing psychological Western (remake of 1957 version) with plenty of action (lots of gun fights and dozens of men killed), suspense (will the escort deliver Ben Wade to the train in contention?), and strong acting, especially between Bale and Crowe. Crowe is the charming and intelligent crook; Bale is the insecure but essentially courageous rancher just waiting for the chance to prove himself. As Bale helps escort Crowe to the train, the two develop a bond, and – somewhat unrealistically – make Freudian-like revelations to one another: Crowe reveals that his mother abandoned him when he was a child (thus explaining why he became a ruthless killer?), and Bale reveals that he came to Arizona to find a hot and dry climate for his younger son (!). A lot of (somewhat repetitive) adventures as the group makes its way toward the destination city, and once the group is holed up in the Contention hotel, events become less plausible – we are led to believe that Crowe cooperates with Bale in making their way to the train because he has become conscious of why he is no good and is thus bonded with Bale. Film is reminiscent of 'High Noon' with several references to the time once the group makes it to Contention. Ending is exciting: Prince shoots Bale several times, and then throws Crowe his gun; Crowe – a master of course of the handgun – then – surprise! – shoots his four remaining men, taking extra care to dispatch Prince with a point-blank shot in the chest (he had previously expressed his contempt for his gang); Lerman tells his dying father that he did it – he put him on the train!; after killing his men, Crowe surrenders and jumps on the train, but then as it puffs off, he whistles to his horse, who prances off after the train; the film then ends leaving us with the conviction that Crowe will escape again. A lot of gritty action, gunfights, and dead bodies. Events sometimes suffer from improbability. The film however thrives on good direction and terrific acting – Crowe, Bale, Foster, Fonda, and Lerman. Despite the improbabilities, we root for the good guys and admire Bale's courage and grit. The film is revisionist in that: focuses much more on the inner psychological events of gunmen; and it has a somewhat jaundiced view of the taming of the West – the railroad company ruthlessly seeks profits, etc. (2007)

(500) Days of Summer 2009 Marc Webb 4.0 Joseph Gordon-Levitt as Tom, cute, earnest young guy working in greeting card business in LA determined to test the validity of the romantic ideal; Zooey Deschanel as Summer, adorable though unfathomable object of his affection – she establishes a romantic relationship with him although insisting that she doesn't want anything serious; Geoffrey Arend and Matthew Gray Gubler as two high school friends (also working in the same shop) whom he keeps informed about the status of his relationships with Zooey; Chloe Grace Moretz as Joseph's precociously wise younger sister who gives him advice. Outstandingly engaging anti-romantic comedy structured as an out-of-order flip through the scrapbook of the 500 days of Summer's and Tom's relationship, told from the point of view of the incurably romantic Tom, who is convinced that Summer is the girl of his dreams the first moment he sees her. The story progresses from the beginning eye contact, flirting and kissing next to the copy machine, to the hesitant first date, their good times together (sharing a devotion to the Smiths, making a quirky visit to IKEA, having sex in the shower after watching a sex tape, joking about Summer's fondness for Ringo Starr), their inexplicable break-ups, partial reconciliations, Summer's impulsive decision to marry another guy while not telling Tom, to finally a painfully recovered Tom's meeting a pretty girl before a job interview, and the two of them about to go out for coffee (big smiles from the new pretty girl and promise of happiness/fulfillment to come). Film is light-heartedly critical of the romantic ideal current among teenagers that there is a girl out there meant for you from eternity; Summer is reluctant to commit, says she doesn't want a "serious" relationship and is incapable of saying 'I love you' ('I like you' is the most she can manage); the rub is that as soon as she meets another guy after her breakup with Tom, she agrees to marry almost immediately; the conclusion appears to be that she just wasn't in love with Tom. Tom goes on to meet another girl – by chance and personal decision (he consciously makes the decision to ask her out), as the script emphasizes – and he will presumably decide if she is "the one" on a more empirical level. So love exists; it's just that chance and your own behavior will play a big role in determining who you hook up with. The message however is not at the center of the film's charm. Throughout the film spontaneity plays an important role, from the unpredictable flipping back and forth to days in the relationship (e.g., from 'day 214' to 'day 305' and

then back to ‘day 15’) to the charming and impish unpredictability of Summer set against the disappointed, pained bemusement of Tom, who “wants to know that she will still love me when she wakes up tomorrow morning”. Perfectly acted and directed with a pleasing light touch. (2011)

À bout de souffle 1960 France: Jean-Luc Godard 3.0 Jean-Paul Belmondo in his first iconic role as petty criminal on the run in Paris; Jean Seberg as his girlfriend who sells copies of the New York Herald Tribune on the Champs-Élysées but who really wants to be a reporter. One of the inaugural New Wave pieces, which already has many of the hallmarks of Godard’s style, but is more accessible than most; it does not have the heart-rending emotional appeal of Truffaut’s ‘400 Coups’ (1959). After rewatching the film for the first time after almost 50 years, it seems to have very light content. It appears to be a homage to American B movies, gangster pictures and Humphrey Bogart (hence all the rubbing of one’s lips by Belmondo), and of course also a sort of tragic love story followed by betrayal. But the real focus is on the film and its style. Black and white cinematography (Raoul Coutard) is outstanding – clear and delicately shaded; an awful lot of shots of the busy streets of Paris in the late 50s (the town looks great). Characters tend at times to look at the camera when they talk. The jump cuts are ubiquitous: even when characters are conversing, the editor breaks many rules, not worrying about spatial confusion and often jumping ahead without natural transitions; movements in the streets jump ahead constantly, cutting from Belmondo running next to a wall to his running in an open field without transition, Seberg and Belmondo sitting in a café and suddenly they are walking in a different street. Hard to know what Godard’s intention was: to show that personal stories really don’t make sense; to hammer the tradition of Hollywood and ‘le film bien fait’ with its continuous, dominant story line; to speed up the action (which it certainly does)? Some of the editing seems just clumsy. Images are often accompanied by cool jazz music. Belmondo is his classic character – an eternal adolescent (constantly bugging Seberg for sex), impulsive (whenever he needs a car he just steals it), aimless and fatalistic (he has no plan for escaping from the cops once he has killed the policeman on the highway), ready to say and do almost anything, not very good-looking, and charming. Seberg is pretty with her very short hair and the 50s skirts she wears toward the end of the film; her character seems a bit artificial – she pretends to be an intellectual (asking Belmondo constantly whether he has read certain famous authors; of course he hasn’t; all he is interested in is sex) but she certainly doesn’t look it. When she finds out that Belmondo is wanted for murder, she betrays him to the police, explaining to him while they wait for them to come, that she did it to make sure that she doesn’t love him any more (?). Touching ending with Belmondo shot in the back and running down the street; he falls and dies with Seberg standing over him, rubbing her lips with her fingers and then hearing Belmondo’s lines about “dégueulasse”. Classic, but a bit empty, and puzzling. (2006)

À bout portant (Point Blank) 2010 Fred Cavayé (France) 3.0 Gilles Lellouche as a sort of Parisian everyman – a nurse in training furiously determined to recover his pregnant wife when she is kidnapped by hoods; Roschdy Zem charismatic as crook in hospital at beginning of film – he has a lot of screen time with Lellouche; Gérard Lanvin as (vicious but rather clueless) head of the corrupt cops – his scruffy bearded presence also makes a big impression; Elena Anaya as Lellouche’s pretty, often very scared, pregnant wife. Extremely kinetic film about a nurse’s aide whose wife is kidnapped and who then races around Paris for an hour and a quarter seeking to rescue her and in the process uncovers a crime committed by a group of ruthless corrupt Paris cops. Film begins with a high-velocity chase of Zem by two hoods; Zem ends up in the hospital after being hit by a motorbike, and his friends kidnap Lellouche’s pregnant wife to force him to smuggle Zem out of the guarded hospital; which he does, but Lellouche then finds himself tied to Zem; the chase becomes especially frantic when he discovers that the men chasing Zem are corrupt cops who had murdered a prominent businessman with the help of Zem; the chase ends in a chaotic police station in which Lellouche rescues his wife, who is about to be thrown out of a window, and Lanvin is uncovered and arrested; a postscript has Zem find Lanvin several years later and he murders him out of revenge for the brutal death of his brother. The film is short on narrative coherence and character interest. Trying to understand what exactly the bad cops are up to, why they are chasing Zem, why they kill the other police lieutenant, why Zem appears to become somewhat attached to Lellouche, how Lellouche got hold of the incriminating evidence at the end that he used to get Lanvin – all is a bit hard to follow. But not to fear, the meat of the film is in the furious action, beginning with the

feverish and violent initial pursuit of Zem, Lellouche running at full tilt through the streets of Paris and the Paris metro, the (barely explained) finding and murder of the grotesquely fat gangster watching Renee Fleming perform the famous aria from 'Wally' (a homage to the famous 'Diva'?), Lellouche jumping from a window clear across the street into a window in another building, Anaya's desperate attempt to keep from being defenestrated by one of Lanvin's henchwomen, etc. Never a dull or restful moment for catching up with the plot; very entertaining.

A nos amours 1983 Maurice Pialat (France) 2.5 Sandrine Bonnaire as confused teenager with a nice body who has no ambition in her life and places all her stakes on relationships and sex with men; Maurice Pialat as her father -- he has a close, but confused relationship with his daughter: affectionate but guarded and often hostile; Dominique Benehard as Sandrine's emotional, violent, momma-attached brother; Evelyn Ker as the hysterical and self-hating mother of Sandrine. Seriously overrated post-New Wave film about teenage girl who cannot find her way in life, engages in a series of unsatisfactory sexual relationships with young men (presented in the film as due to her conflicted relationship with her father and mother); she gets married to the sweet Jean-Pierre (Cyril Collard), but with her father's apparent approval, in the end she takes off to San Diego (to do what?) with one of her husband's friends. Sandrine comes from a violently broken family, about as dysfunctional as they come: the father, who runs a clothing business, slaps his daughter in the face and cannot abide by his wife; she feels terribly rejected when her husband leaves her and she begins to abuse her daughter, with whom she gets into several violent fights; the brother seems strongly attached to his mother, takes her side in the many disputes and physically attacks his sister. The film's style is improvisational -- the dialogue is low-key, conversational, run-of-the-mill; a lot of shots of Pialat looking intently at Sandrine's face and then of Sandrine smiling uncertainly. The smile is what made her famous, as a couple of the characters remark in the film. Many of the plot developments seem spontaneous and unmotivated: although he seems reasonably content in his atelier, Pialat suddenly leaves his family; he returns toward the end to deliver a hostile speech to his daughter, her husband, and several of her friends and in-laws; and in the end Sandrine has dumped her husband, is running off with another man, and in a forced-seeming scene on the bus to Orly airport, Pialat seems to be giving his blessing. Moving is partly voyeuristic -- looking at the amours and the body of an attractive young woman. Its point? If this is the state of French families, we had better do something about it.

ABC Murders 1992 BBC TV 2.5 David Suchet in one of the earlier Poirot episodes on British television (a total of 61!). Pretty good entry in the long-running TV series. Suchet is of course the focus -- fussy, compulsive, natty and perfectly turned out in his dated formal clothes, walking with mincing mini-steps, ears and brain ("Little grey cells") tuned to the clues left behind by the murderer. Pretty good plot -- murders committed by unidentified assailant in apparently unconnected locations, but each presaged by a taunting note to Poirot, and the progression of the murders based on the alphabet beginning with 'A'. Poirot, who cooperates willingly with the somewhat dense but well-intentioned police inspector and has a more normal sidekick who helps him along, is initially baffled by the pattern of the murders, but he of course catches on, not believing that the wall flower door-to-door salesman who actually confesses to them is really the guilty one. It turns out that the string of apparently random murders was concocted to cover the 'C' murder, which involved the desire to accede to a sizable estate. Sets and costumes evoke the upper class British 1930s in their self-conscious BBC fashion. A fair amount of easy-going humor, especially the assistant who expends much energy trying to find someone to listen to his story about killing a caiman in Venezuela. Entertaining but not going any deeper.

À nous la liberté 1931 René Clair 3.5 Henri Marchand plays the naive and sad-faced Emile who falls madly in love with the girl in the window, Raymond Cordy as Louis, who becomes an important phonograph industrialist after he escapes from prison. Classic early French sound musical that often feels like a silent movie despite some dialogue. Clair is inventive and interesting with sound -- some dialogue (obviously) dubbed in, but indulges in long pantomime sequences where actors move to the accompaniment of Georges Auric's score; there are few musical numbers -- the "À nous, à nous, la liberté" number that is repeated as a theme song throughout is the closest to a musical number.

In life, liberty is all that counts
 But man invented the prison cell,
 Codes and laws, do's and don'ts,
 Work, offices, and houses as well,
 Don't you agree, what life can be?
 My old Friend, life is great,
 When you are free to be yourself,
 So come on, let's emancipate,
 ...Fresh air is good for the health,
 Everywhere life is a melody,
 Everywhere it's wine and romance

So here's to us two and liberty!" (literally, "À nous, à nous la liberté")

The use of sound and music reminds one of transitional Chaplin films in the same period. Best sequence is when Emile is lying in a field next to a factory after being released from prison; flowers sing to him (actually eliminated in Clair's 1950s cut); two cops come to arrest him, telling him that work is obligatory; cut to school master saying the same thing to children, adding that "work is liberty" which the children dutifully repeat; then Emile ends up in jail, hears the girl at the window "singing" (she is actually listening to one of friend Louis' phonograph records) and falls in love with her. Much anti-industrialist criticism: the military organization of the prison at the beginning is exactly the same as the factory, where workers line up, are watched over by police, and work on the assembly line putting the same screw on the phonograph model (again reminiscent of Chaplin); in contrast to civilization is the concept of liberty (the song is repeated many times), nature in the fields and flowers, love for a pretty woman, good fun and high jinx of the two men together when they play like children, etc.; and there is a rather facile ending where the work in the factory is done by machines and the men spend the day fishing in the river and dancing with their girlfriends on a terrace. There is also considerable mocking of the moneyed bourgeoisie at a formal dinner (reduced to chaos by the two friends) and their thirsting after money at the dedication of the new factory, where the ceremony is broken up by greedy men chasing 1000 Franc notes flying around the grounds. In the end, the two men have their hobo clothes back on, and are taking off down the road where they can enjoy their liberty unfettered by the rules and discipline of civilization. A sometimes sprightly, witty atmosphere, not very serious, and more Rousseauian and lightly anarchist than dangerous or Marxist. Set among the interesting scenes there are quite a few dull ones with rather insipid dialogue or with silent movie-style chases. This type of sound movie musical did not hold up well against the Hollywood version with its songs, set number, dance sequences, etc. (2006)

Abbott and Costello Meet Frankenstein 1948 Charles Barton (Universal) 2.0 Bud Abbott the domineering skeptic ridiculing every suggestion of the presence of monsters and Lou Costello scatter-brained and scared shitless most of the time; Bela Lugosi as a dissipated and old-looking Dracula who with his mesmerizing eyes (much mocked in the film) wants to revive the Monster but more subservient than in the first film; the awkward actor Lon Chaney as the Wolfman, who, when he is not raging wildly as his full moon self, is trying to thwart the nefarious plot of Dracula; Glenn Strange as the stiff-limbed Monster (Karloff no longer available); Jane Randolph as Joan Raymond, an insurance investigator. Pretty intolerable Universal horror movie spoof: put Abbott and Costello in the midst of a bunch of the studio's spooks, add a couple of good-looking actresses as romantic magnets, and then allow chaos and clichés to take their course. The plot centers around Dracula's absurd plan to revive a more compliant Frankenstein monster, which however is foiled mostly by the machinations of the Wolfman, who even in his incompetence succeeds in dragging Dracula with him to his watery grave. The Monster also dies (why the film is named after him remains a mystery). Abbott is his usual boring straight man; Costello gets most of the attention with his absurdist dialogue ("I work 16 hours a day because I belong to two unions"), his stuttering and sudden shrieks of fear whenever in the presence of one of the creatures, his slapstick pratfalls. The standard procedure is to have one or more monsters lurking in the background while Costello quakes with fear and Abbott coolly denies that anything is wrong and insists that the creatures don't exist. A lot of sexual rivalry between the two principals – Dracula's experiment assistant convinces Costello that she is in love with him (she really wants him for a brain-exchange experiment), as

does Randolph when she arrives to investigate the goings-on; poor Abbott just fumes with impatience that the women seem to prefer the short, dumpy Costello. Perhaps the most amusing aspect of the film is the use of the creepy sets from the Universal films – the castle with the huge creaking doors, the torture dungeon, Frankenstein’s experiment room crackling with sparks and electrical discharges. Hard to believe this film was a huge money maker and spawned a series of other horror spoofs starring the Abbott and Costello team.

About Schmidt 2002 4.0! Jack Nicholson, Hope Davis, Dermot Mulroney as Randall. Outstanding observation of Middle Western, middle America slightly updated for the 21st. Outstanding performance by Jack Nicholson, leaves behind his zesto persona and disappears into his quietly desperate character, aching to make even a little difference as a human being after the death of his wife and the disappearance of his comfortable middle class life. He realizes that his life-long job was boring and unsatisfying, and he doesn’t get along well with his wife – he doesn’t even like the way she smells! Doesn’t get along very well with his daughter either, who is insensitive, selfish, basically wraps packages for a Denver computer firm despite her pretense at importance; she treats him as a kind of pest. Instead, he “adopts” Ndugu through a TV program, and he corresponds with him and expresses his fears, resentments and hopes to him. He shows his desperate loneliness when he force kisses another man’s wife in trailer park, then flees into the prairie. Thoughtful mood of first part of film turns to comedy when Warren arrives in Denver for his daughter’s wedding to the incompetent, hilarious Randall, who received “participant” ribbons for his youth soccer, who tried his best to get Warren to invest in a pyramid scheme, and whose highest degree was for a two-week course in water bed maintenance (?). His mother, predatory earth mother Kathy Bates, almost steals show as she wades in with the Nicholson character; she tells him had her first orgasm at the age of six, and she attributes the success of her son’s and Warren’s relationship to their healthy sex drive; she terrifies Warren when she slips her formidable nude body into her hot tub where Warren is relaxing. Very amusing comic moments during wedding preparations. Bates’ relationship with loquacious ex-husband is hilarious. Warren’s voiceover observations to Ndugu in Tanzania very heart warming and honest. End of film is simple and beautiful, as Warren returns to Omaha after the wedding, and looks into camera for long, beautiful close-up with his shedding copious tears at his wasted (?) life and with the hope that he can still experience something better in his “few remaining years.” Film is perfectly cast, and beautifully directed. Wonderful flourish is Nicholson abandoning his usual scene-chewing character and giving it to Kathy Bates, who outNicholson Nicholson! Barely a flaw to be detected.

Abrazos rotos 2009 Spain: Pedro Almodóvar 2.5 Lluís Homar as ‘Harry Caine’, focused, blind ex-film director (2008) who insists on telling his whole story (in flashback 1994); Penelope Cruz beautiful with wonderful screen presence as his lover in 1994 and the star of the film that he makes at that time (she is often dressed and made up to resemble Audrey Hepburn); Blanca Portillo as Harry’s caretaker, admirer, good friend, and ...; José Luis Gómez as Cruz’s lover in 1994 – he turns out to be pathologically, ridiculously jealous. Almodóvar’s most recent combination soap opera–film noir. Filmed in the usual Almodóvar style – bright rich colors that one suspects are supposed to have symbolic significance, self-conscious design that makes one think an interior designer has just been let loose on the set, variety of visual textures, lurid events involving sex, love, jealousy, resentment, and death with the threat and suspicion of murder. Film has strong start with the introduction of Harry Caine having character-revealing sex with a sighted woman that he picked up off the street. The viewer soon learns that he has a big loss in his life, and then we are taken on a kind of roller coaster ride in 1994 to explain what. He fell in love with Gomez’s girlfriend, Cruz, and when Mateo (Harry Caine’s name in 1994) decides to cast Cruz in a soap opera-style film of his own, Gomez keeps close tabs by becoming the producer: he even gets his gay son (a very unattractive bespectacled Ruben Ochandiano with an effeminate-looking haircut) to film Cruz’s and Mateo’s actions and then show them to Gomez on an old-fashioned color projector. Unexpected events then are heaped upon us: Cruz is killed in a car accident and Mateo is blinded (hence his condition at the end of the film; we wonder whether Gomez staged the accident in revenge); it turns out that Harry’s helper, Diego, is actually his son by Portillo (they had had a brief love affair about 6 years before 1994), and that Gomez has intentionally ruined Mateo’s film (using all the wrong rushes, scrambling the editing, etc.) so that it was a flop. The grand conclusion has Harry, his newfound son, and his mother re-editing the film as a tribute to Cruz and his love for her (the ending reminds

one of Cinema Paradiso'); despite its inane content, we are led to believe that the film will be a masterpiece. Almodóvar's film has its strong moments – the complex plot is fun, but overall it reminds one of a high-quality Mexican telenovela that is hard to care about; the ending also rings false. One is tempted to say that the film got good reviews because of the director's fame rather than the merits of the film.

Ace in the Hole 1951 Billy Wilder (co-wrote) 3.0 Kirk Douglas impactful and overacting as Chuck Tatum, big city newspaper reporter caught in Podunk Albuquerque; Jan Sterling unattractive as unaffectionate and cynical wife of man trapped in the mine; Porter Hall as decent, ethical publisher of the 'Albuquerque Sun'; Ray Teal as bullshitting local sheriff who carries around a pet rattlesnake in a paper box. Billy Wilder gone ballistic, highly satirical and hard-hitting in critique of the American press and public opinion. Douglas as big city newspaperman with a drinking problem arrives in Albuquerque and takes a job at the Sun in hopes of moving back into the big city; he hits upon a potential story with a man hunting Indian pottery trapped in an old mine; he concocts a plot to publicize the story and to drag it out by having the rescue crew drill a long shaft instead of just approaching the victim through the galleries that Tatum uses to get to him; film ends with the death of the trapped man through pneumonia; Tatum goes through an inexplicable change regretting his past sins; after making sure the dying Catholic man has extreme unction, he himself dies from a wound inflicted by Sterling. Film is an over-the-top denunciation of amoral newspaper rapaciousness – cooking the story so that it lasts long enough to sell a lot of copy – and of the gullibility and viciousness of the American public – the spectators at the mine want us to believe that they are flocking like geese to the disaster site for the sake of the victim, but in reality all they care about is the thrill of seeing the suffering of some poor bastard. The price of entrance to the disaster site doubles and finally quadruples, and circus rides – including a ferris wheel – arise to take advantage of the presence of the public; meanwhile, the trapped man slowly dies as the supposed rescuers retard the relief operation so as to maximize their profits. The DVD is beautifully restored by Criterion – sharp and detailed; the shots of the crowds converging on the mesa and milling about are excellently choreographed. The moral dilemma is presented in a rather hokey fashion: the good guys (the Chicanos praying for the salvation of the trapped man, the upstanding newspaper publisher who has an embroidered sign 'Tell the Truth' hung on the wall of his office) are saintly, and the bad guys (cynical sheriff, the wise-guy, often overacting Douglas, the amoral wife Sterling) are truly detestable. The switch at the end whereby Douglas is converted to decency and then dies in a fabulous fall to the floor in which his face completely fills the frame is a little hard to believe. Nevertheless, the film has impact and holds the viewer's interest; and it is a good example of where the cynical Wilder was inclined to go unless restrained by a co-writer. (2011)

Across the Pacific 1942 John Huston 2.5 Humphrey Bogart often smirking as American agent taking a ship from Halifax to the Panama Canal to foil a suspected Japanese plot against the Canal; Sidney Greenstreet, very large inhabitant of the Philippines who wants to cooperate with the Japanese; Mary Astor typically unsexy as woman implicated in the mess more or less against her will; Victor Sen Yung (Charlie Chan's #2 son) as second-generation Japanese American, who of course is loyal to Japan and is part of the plot – he wears very thick glass lenses that magnify his eyes! Pretty humdrum thriller that maintains interest mainly because it reunites three of the big four cast members from 1941's 'The Maltese Falcon' (Peter Lorre did not come aboard). The first two-thirds of the film take place on a Japanese freighter carrying conspirators and bombs for the attack against the canal – there are some evocative shots of the ship at docks in Halifax and New York; the last third is in and around Colon in the Canal Zone – the Pan-American Hotel has memorable decors with its elegant hallways and shuttered windows. Much of the film is taken up with half-hearted, wit-focused flirtation between Bogart and Astor; some of the lines are clever, but neither shows any chemistry with the other, so that when they walk off hand-in-hand at the end, the viewer could not care less. The treatment of the Japanese characters is mixed: Sen Yung has to wear those terrible caricatured glasses, and the Japanese are all sneaks ruled by their tribal loyalty; but they all speak some English (often Pidgin English), and the film treats Japanese Ju-Jitsu and Japanese poetry as something interesting that deserves to be explained to the American viewer. The film ends with the outbreak of war with the Japanese, and Bogart has to exercise all his hero's muscles to shoot down the little plane (actually a cheapo model) that is about to take off to bomb the Gatun Locks. Afterwards, he reunites with a morally compromised Astor (she knew about

the plot all along, and never revealed her identity or told Bogart about the plot?) for a bright future. Film's interest is mainly for the Hollywood historian or the Bogart/Huston fan. (2010)

The Act of Killing 2012 Joshua Oppenheimer 2.0 Probably dishonest, certainly exaggerated indirect documentary treatment of the great massacre of Indonesian Communists in the late 1960s. The filmmaker follows a North Sumatran gangster, Congo, and his mobster confederates for several years focusing on their role in the mass murders 40 years before. The author interviews the gangsters extensively, encourages them to produce a fiction film (that he obviously finances) detailing and celebrating their supposed role in the killings, and follows them through city streets as contemporary gangsters exact protection money from frightened, supine Chinese merchants. There is no newsreel footage from the 1960s and no authorial discussion of that event; the film has no voiceover, but allows the mobsters to speak for themselves. The most shocking aspect of the film is the glee with which Congo and his men celebrate what they have done: before Oppenheimer's camera they reenact the murders, even demonstrating how they strangled their victims with wire to keep from making too much of a bloody mess in the place of execution. Oppenheimer (along with the producers who come up with the money) also encourage -- perhaps goad is a better word -- the principals to produce a film reenacting the subject: scenes depict recruitment of terrified women and children, interior torture scenes shown with extensive (unconvincing) makeup, bizarre David Lynch-style scenes with Indonesian dancing girls emerging from the mouth of a huge metal fish (one supposes to make the film look authentic), Congo's fat associate appearing in grotesque drag, etc. The film depicts musingly the abysmally bad taste of the mafia bosses. The viewer never gets to view the film-within-a-film in its entirety. It is obvious that the anti-Communist veterans are in no danger of being pursued for their crimes; a devastating picture emerges of a contemporary Indonesia dominated by an anti-Communist ideology (the men deserve praise as patriots doing the necessary dirty work), mafia toughs operating urban protection rackets, and huge right-wing paramilitary organizations like Parasila that have connections in the government. Much, if not all, of the film, however, smells of a con game. There is so much pretence and posturing that it is difficult to doubt that much of it comes from the filmmaker rather than the principals. Is it credible to say that Congo and his men wrote, produced, and directed the brutal film-within-a-film without overall control from Oppenheimer? The treatment of Congo rings false -- the script vividly contrasts his grisly descriptions of the executions with shots of him playing with his grandchildren (such a sweet guy when not strangling his victims), and tossing and turning in his bed (presumably from a developing bad conscience); and then he retches and appears to vomit in remorse and disgust (although nothing appears to come out of his mouth) when at the end he again describes the executions he organized on a rooftop: the whole seemingly designed to create a satisfying narrative curve from monstrous hard-heartedness, to dawning regret, to disgust with what he has done. We are supposed to say -- what a coup this unknown documentary filmmaker has pulled off! The film makes interesting observations about Indonesia, but its credibility is undermined by what seems to this viewer the filmmaker's dishonesty. (2014)

Adventure in Manhattan 1936 Edward Ludwig (Columbia) 3.0 Jean Arthur as apparently down-and-out "lady in distress" that McRae meets in the streets -- she is really an actress performing in a play produced by secret arch villain Owen; Joel McRae cool, natural, smart as hot-shot crime writer wearing nice trench coat and fedora hat -- he claims he can predict when a crime will happen; Thomas Mitchell as sharp-tongued, aggressive newspaper editor looking for a scoop on the jewelry theft and ranting when he doesn't get it; Reginald Owen as suave master criminal who is also a play producer and a keen appreciator of art -- he plans the theft's drilling noises to be covered by the World War I play he is producing right over the bank vault! Light-hearted detective-style film in the manner of 'The Thin Man' with McRae and Arthur more or less working together to foil Owen's robbery plans while they gradually and reluctantly come together à la romantic comedy (an element not present in the Thin Man series). Film exploits the newspaper environment, where everyone is obsessed with getting the scoop and the cynical reporters are constantly wise-cracking and teasing. The suspense is created by McRae predicting the date and nature of the crime planned by Owen -- theft of the Sunburst Diamond, which for some reason is located in a vault located directly under the theater where Owen is producing a war play (very convenient since the gunfire in the battle Scenes can be used to cover up the explosions of the vault-crackers below). By befriending Owen as well as McRae, Arthur inadvertently extends the suspense by giving Owen information that causes him to postpone

the heist. Owen and his men are of course foiled in the end by the couple. More entertaining is the developing relationship between McRae and Arthur: they indulge throughout the film in light-hearted, humorous repartee; Arthur insists on maintaining arm's length from McRae until the end of the film, when in a humorous three-way conversation on the phone, she gets past (barely) her reluctance by saying just before the fade-out "I hate you ... Darling." Film is in good condition with two attractive stars and an entertaining screenplay. The long scene of a clowning McRae hosting Arthur for "lunch" in his apartment should have been cut drastically.

Adventureland 2009 Greg Mottola 3.5 Jesse Eisenberg as James, low key, clipped accent, bemused by life and environment, a romantic who quotes Shakespeare, virgin with an awkward kiss, embarrassed by his constant "boner"; Kristen Stewart pretty as Em, sexually looser and more experienced in "intercourse" apparently because her dad is married to an asshole stepmom, whom she can't stand; Ryan Reynolds as hunk married guy that Kelsey has sex with and who advises Jesse on how to get girls; Margarita Lavieva very effective as superficial boy-loving babe that all the theme park kids lust after; Ryan McFarland as Jesse's friend who is "a kind of Russian nihilist" and likes to talk in pessimistic existentialist language; Bill Hader amusing as the nerdy adult head of the theme park. American coming-of-age film that is also a romantic comedy. Often endearing little film whose story line is about the search for love, a permanent connection with the opposite sex; specifically whether Jesse and Kelsey will connect despite the obstacles, despite all the mistakes that especially Em made during the long summer working in Adventureland; and when they meet in New York at the end, they finally take their clothes off and they are a couple. Film illustrates teenage culture in the 80s (?) – dumb summer jobs in amusement park; everybody constantly uses the f... word; guys enjoy hitting each other in the balls; girls are attracted to "cute", "sweet" guys; smoke dope to deal with life and loosen up the conversation, play video games in the arcade, casual sex, Catholic girls will do anything but not have "intercourse", making out in the car, parties in parents' home, getting drunk and falling down in the parking lot and often throwing up; majoring in Russian literature and Slavic languages with no job prospects; want to go to graduate school but doesn't have the money; the adult men are usually pushed around by the women. Definitely a kids'-eye film, although parents are reasonably benevolent like Jesse's parents (except that they say they can't help him pay for graduate school), or superficial assholes like Kelsey's stepmother. Constant soundtrack with youth-oriented songs related to story and lots of passages where kids are riding in their car with just music playing on the soundtrack. The film has a satirical tone. Amusement park is a meaningless, empty place for losers; no one seems to have the slightest idea what they want to do with their lives and they don't make much progress by the end of the film. Except that the two principals look happy together; looks as if love conquers all. (2009)

The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert 1994 Stephan Elliot (Australia) 2.5 Terence Stamp as aging, weary and sharp-tongued drag queen, Guy Pearce as exuberant young gay drag queen full of vinegar, Hugo Weaving as the third who turns out to be a father and still married to his Alice Springs wife, the immortal Bill Hunter as Bob, a great admirer of Stamp's character. Road movie about three drag performers driving from Sydney to Alice Springs in a marginal school bus. Film is superficially entertaining as we get beautiful cinematography of the Outback, lots of bitchy comments from the principals (Stamp with his world weary performance is the best), predictably suspicious encounters with the natives, who are not fond of gays in the Outback, outrageous costumes against the backdrop of the lavender painted bus and of spectacular Outback scenery, lots of lip-synched rock songs.. There isn't much plot to get involved in – Weaving's reconciliation with his world wise son is predictable, Stamp decides to stay in Alice with his car mechanic boyfriend as an antidote to his sadness at aging, the performance in Alice Spring turns out to be reasonably successful. The music is good, but the three men perform only by lip-synching while they dance in desultory fashion. Everything and everybody is a bit too cute: the principals are bitchy but nothing nasty, and there is no sex in the film; the Outback characters start off slow, but they all warm up to the chutzpah of the drag queens. With the exception of some hard-to-understand lines, the film seems scrubbed for more or less general audiences. Harmless fun some of the time. (2009)

The Adventures of Robin Hood 1939 (WB) Michael Curtiz 3.0 Errol Flynn, Basil Rathbone, Olivia de Havilland, Claude Rains, Una O'Connor, Melville Cooper as Sheriff of Nottingham,

Eugene Palette as Friar Tuck! Quintessential Hollywood adventure movie, very similar to the Zorro films (and 'Prisoner of Zenda,' etc.) – adventure, action and completely superficial! Flynn is dashing, athletic and acrobatic (he reportedly does his own stunts), charming, panache, pencil moustache like Douglas Fairbanks, blinding smile, honeyed words to Marion, sense of humor and fair play, although he doesn't take his opposition as lightly as Fairbanks' Zorro; his men – Little John, Will, and Friar Tuck -- are motley lot all dressed in green tights, with sense of humor and good fun and able to drop out of trees at the drop of a hat. Clearly a melodrama since bad guys are really detestable (John and Guy of Gisbourne are power-hungry, greedy, cruel, generally irredeemable) and good guys good humored and always fighting for right and the well-being of the long-suffering Saxons (common folk) against the arrogant Normans, who seem to enjoy abusing them. Subtext seems to be equating John and Normans with contemporary 1938 dictators, and need to defend justice, freedom, and generosity to the poor (Robin Hood does take from the rich and give to the poor). De Havilland's role is pretty thankless – empty, truly in love with Robin, loyal to the end; Rains and Rathbone excellent as bad guys pronouncing their lines with relish. A lot of adventure – swordfights, especially the last one where Robin and Gisbourne clash expertly up and down staircases ending with the death of the latter; also exciting archers' contest, in which Robin splits the arrow of his antagonist to win. Richard II at end is solid, statuesque, fair and well-spoken (like Sean Connery!). He decrees that from now on there will be no more Saxons and nor more Normans, but only Englishmen enjoying their rights! (2006)

The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes 1939 (Britain) 3.0 Basil Rathbone, Nigel Bruce, Ida Lupino, George Zucco 3.0. Good second film in the Holmes series (20c Fox). BR outstanding as wiry but powerful and intelligent Holmes, although much more pleasant and sensible than subsequent BBC TV episodes; NB is a silly and dense Watson as kind of Sancho Panza foil. Good humorous interludes, especially with Holmes' research into music and flies, and Watson turning the "Elementary, my dear Holmes" on the protagonist at the end! Plot fairly interesting, although South American originated threat against Ida Lupino much more intriguing than Moriarty's plot to steal the crown jewels from the Tower of London! And there is little resemblance between the original Holmes stories and the scenario. The fog of London, and the hansom cabs racing through the streets provide very effective atmosphere. A very nice entertainment – higher quality, it would seem, than the later entries in the series. (2005)

The Adventures of Tintin 2011 Steven Spielberg 3.5 Jamie Bell as the voice for the fearless and curious, although rather featureless Tintin; Andy Serkis as the alcoholic, cantankerous, but good-hearted Captain Haddock; Daniel Craig sneering and leering as the evil Sakharine; Nick Frost and Simon Pegg hilariously bumbling as faithful Interpol police inspectors, Thomson and Thompson. Very entertaining high tech motion capture adaptation of three of the famous Hergé Tintin graphic novels. The plot line is completely linear with few complications: Tintin discovers clues for the existence of a huge treasure lost at sea, and – opposed at every turn by the evil Sakharine – he sets off through the world to find the directions, parts of which are hidden inside the mast of three models of the ship lost at sea in the 17th century. The narrative takes us through several locales in the vicinity of what appears to be Paris, onto a cargo ship, then a charming 1930s biplane (one of this viewer's favorite scenes), which deposits Tintin and Haddock more or less intact near a Moroccan city, then back to a European port, where Haddock and Sakharine have a heroic duel with two huge cargo cranes, and finally to Haddock's ancestral home, where the partners find only a small portion of the anticipated treasure; when Tintin finds directions for the rest of it and he asks Haddock whether he is ready for more adventure, the latter replies that his appetite for it is limitless! The outstanding characteristic of the film is the brilliant, eye-popping motion capture animation: every frame is filled with enough information, movement, and textures to warrant several reviewings. The characters are individually animated, keeping interest alive and adding to the humor: the preening vanity of the Italian Nightingale singer, who is so pleasing to the sheik, the cantankerous antics of Haddock who must overcome his alcoholism and his feelings of worthlessness, the good-natured-bumbling of the bubble-nosed police duo (most every character except Tintin has the bubble nose), the constant intelligent and helpful antics of Snowey, who is always prancing next to his human master and often warns him of danger or saves his life, etc. The action animation defies expectations, particularly the extended flashback depiction of the 17th-century sea battle between the ships of the ancestors of Haddock and Sakharine – swirling clouds, the entangled ships leaping over the

waves, the brilliant flash of the guns and the burning of the ships, the swashbuckley swordfights of the two principals; also memorable is the athletic contest between Tintin et al. and Sakharine and his eagle for the treasure directions in the Moroccan city; and the relentless and destructive duel with the cargo cranes that lays to waste a large portion of the port. The only criticism of the film is its lack of adult values – romance, women, significant issues, etc. The film is straight adventure with no detours and never stopping to take a breath; everything is always in motion and the viewer is barely able to take a breath. The close similarities to the Indiana Jones series is obvious, but without wisecracks and the romantic angle. It would appear that Spielberg got his inspiration for ‘Raiders of the Lost Ark’ largely from the Tintin books and that he has waited a long time to turn them into a faithful film. (2012)

Advise and Consent 1962 Otto Preminger 3.5 Henry Fonda in almost cameo role as mild-mannered candidate for Secretary of State being vetted by the Senate; Walter Pidgeon as central character – fair-minded and honorable Senate Democratic majority leader whose job it is to guide the appointment through the Senate (the political parties’ names are never identified); Don Murray very sincere as junior Senator who has problems with Fonda and doesn’t know what to do; Charles Laughton stands out as a Southern senator with a twinkle in his eye, a great drawl, a dry wit, and a sense of honor; Gene Tierney in small role as the girlfriend of Pidgeon; Franchot Tone as ailing president who appoints Fonda and then dies at the end at the same time as the vote; Lew Ayres as upstanding and honorable Vice President remarking constantly his lack of power; Burgess Meredith in memorable cameo as mentally disturbed witness who accuses Fonda of his Communist roots. Classic political film reflecting political culture in the US in the early 60s; somewhat reminiscent of ‘Mr. Smith Goes to Washington’. Sweeping, accurate and interesting portrayal of the American political landscape, in which there is a lot more mutual respect and reaching across the aisle than there has been since Nixon and Newt Gingrich. It is important that a candidate for Secretary of State not be at all implicated as a Communist even when he was in college; and a homosexual love affair in the wartime army is enough to discredit Don Murray’s entire career and to cause him to commit suicide – he is so ashamed that he can’t even admit it to his loving wife. Plot is complex: Fonda’s approval is held up because Murray, the chair of the subcommittee, realizes that Fonda – otherwise an honorable man – lied when clearing himself of charges that he was a Communist Party member. The ending of the film is muddied by the suicide of Murray (thus depriving the pro-Fonda people of his important vote) and then the death of the President, thus inducing the Vice President not to break the tie since he would rather appoint his own man. Unlike ‘Mr. Smith’, there is no unalloyed triumph of virtue – Fonda would be a good Secretary of State, but he is willing to lie under oath, and the initial villain, Laughton, shows that he is basically principled; but the difficult choices of honorable men are highlighted, their efforts go to naught, and they are there to continue the struggle in different circumstance. Preminger’s moving camera stands out: elegant, fluid, the long takes and the deep focus force the viewer to take an active part in the scene. Film seems a bit long, and some scenes could be eliminated. (2007)

An Affair to Remember 1957 Leo McCarey (20cFox) 3.0 Famous romantic movie that drags in many episodes but crackles in final sequence thanks to Cary Grant’s moving performance. Cary Grant his traditional well-dressed (always suit and tie), well-coiffed, tanned, and charming, understated self (he also is an artist painter) as middle-aged playboy, who falls deeply in love with...; Deborah Kerr, as usual a bit starchy, as cautious single woman plighted to a New York businessman; Richard Denning as the handsome, tolerant and understanding boyfriend; Neva Patterson as glamorous, wealthy woman that Grant is supposed to marry; Charles Watts as silly middle-America ship passenger constantly on the prowl for Grant’s autograph. The film is divided into two parts: the initial charming but very slow-moving reluctant courtship occurring shipboard as Grant and Kerr cross the Atlantic (two times?) on the S.S. Constitution and then spend way too much time in Grant’s grandmother’s self-consciously picturesque Riviera home; and the concatenation of misunderstandings and accidents that get in the way of the couple’s plan to meet on the 102nd floor of the Empire State Building after six months allowed for straightening out their personal affairs. The initial courtship is frustrating since Grant and Kerr are condemned by the Hays Code to spend their nights alone in their roomy, luxurious cabins and the screenplay expends great energy finding reasons for them to stay apart (we can’t be seen or photographed

together for fear that our fiancés will find out about us). The obstacles continue cropping up women's-movie-style once they arrive in New York: Kerr is unable to keep their date at the Empire State Building when she is hit by a car right outside, and then she refuses to contact Grant because she doesn't want him to know about her being crippled; Denning is loyal and has the money to set her on her feet again, but she won't accept that because it would make Grant feel bad. The film however has a moving final sequence: Grant appears unexpected at Kerr's apartment to give her the shawl that his grandmother has promised her; his ironic dialogue and Kerr's reticence presage the two parting amidst a huge misunderstanding, but the discovery that she has one of his paintings hanging in her bedroom saves the day. The look of intense suffering and relief on Grant's face is eloquent, and the camera movement up close to the back of his head and his back then revealing Kerr on the sofa for the reconciliation and declaration of undying love is not to be forgotten. Is there a dry eye in the house? First-class 50s color production with an excellent (although overused) theme song sung by Vic Damone over the titles, memorable shots of the S.S. Constitution plying the Atlantic, panoramic shots of Central Park in the snow, and numerous shots of the Empire State Building reminding the viewer that Grant and Kerr and are meant for each other. A classic despite its limitations. (2016)

The Affairs of Anatol 1921 Cecil B. DeMille 3.0 "As the cinema found a new maturity in the post-WWI era, Cecil B. DeMille reigned as the master titillator, with racy dramas of love, sex and betrayal set within the swank nightclubs and sumptuous palaces of society's highest strata, but with a strong moralistic bent". "This film represents the DeMille touch in its purest form." Gloria Swanson as Reid's wife – she has modest screen time compared to the other actresses; Wallace Reid as wealthy inhibited ladies' man who wants to "help" pretty party girls; Bebe Daniels as nightclub performer Satan Synne who has multiple strands of pearls wrapped around her turban but who turns out to be a good girl; very pretty Wanda Hawley as mindless party girl; Monte Blue in brief role as conservative farmer; Agnes Ayers as another scheming woman good at manipulating men. Slow-moving film has theme of temptation and narrow avoidance of moral disaster. Anatol tries to help Emilie (big star Wanda Hawley), a trashy childhood classmate who loves to drink and party, by teaching her to play the violin, etc.; he narrowly avoids relationship disaster with his wife. Then they go to the country, where essentially the same thing happens with horny farmer's wife Agnes Ayers, who steals Reid's wallet while distracting him with kisses (classic example of silent film "overacting" – clutching at her breast, back of the hand over the forehead (ca. 1.0 hours), arched eyebrows, etc.). Anatol then goes to a nightclub full of loose showgirls, where he meets his third temptation, Satan Synne, who needs money! Satan Synne's locked boudoir filled with references to the devil, where guests drink absinthe, and where a leopard lies at the foot of Satan's bed. After another close brush with temptation, he returns to his wife, who has been partying a bit herself; they have a spiteful face-off, but reconciliation and trust reign with the help of a Hindu hypnotist. Usual series of intertitles commenting humorously, light-heartedly on the situations – e.g., "the question is whether Emilie will be saved or Anatol lost." "Confession may add to the wealth of the soul, but it will impoverish the jewel box." "There may be joy in heaven over one sinner that repents—but Anatol is not in heaven." Anatol goes to a place "where the entertainment provided, makes the Feasts of Babylon look like a cafeteria!" "The devil is not a man, but a WOMAN! That's what every woman knows, but doesn't tell!" (1:26) "Wormwood, insidious as the lying eyes of a woman." "It's the Devil's sleeping potion – which puts man's memory to sleep!" Nice visual touches, e.g., Reid shows Swanson his pocket watch on which his wife's portrait has been defaced; constant visual reference to jewelry as indicative of a misbehaving woman; the absinthe bottle hanging upside down dripping onto a cube of sugar; Reid looks in mirror and sees a reflection of himself as a skeleton! Slow-moving and repetitive; interesting mainly for historical significance.

Africa Screams 1949 2.5 Abbott and Costello, Shemp Howard, Joe Besser. Supposed to be a good example of A&C high jinx. The boys give a woman the impression that they know about an African treasure; they go there with the party, encounter lion tamer (Clyde Beatty), giant orangutan, crocodile, lions, monkeys, cannibals, etc.; lots of danger which they of course avoid. The plot is pretty irrelevant. Some funny moments from Shemp Howard (a gunner who is nearly blind), Joe Besser (extremely gay acting butler and factotum for the bad guys), but emphasis is on the comic duo. Abbott is

the straight man, who about halfway through the movie however is overcome by greed that reduces him to blithering. Costello's routines are pretty funny; lots of facial stuff, but particularly adept on the slow uptake, e.g., talking impersonally about the danger of lions for a minute or so before he notices that he is standing next to one; running away from the cannibal camp before he realizes that Abbott is still tied to the stake (Costello thought that Abbott had untied his own bonds). Once or twice they have rapid exchanges. Fairly clever final sequence, where back in New York Costello is now a millionaire, Abbott runs the elevator in his building, and Costello's assistant/partner is a gorilla. (2005)

After Dark, My Sweet 1990 James Foley 2.0 Jason Patric overemphasizing brain-damaged alienation as ex-prize fighter wandering around aimlessly in the environs of Palm Springs (actually Indio); Rachel Ward sexy, angry alcoholic that takes up with Jason; Bruce Dern shaggy and indecipherable as (apparently) Rachel's uncle who has dreamed up a hare-brained kidnapping scheme; George Dickerson effete, perhaps gay, and also indecipherable as local doctor that seems to want to help Jason. Irritating and usually dull attempt to make a kind of film noir on the basis of one of Jim Thompson's lesser pulp novels. The most interesting aspect of the film is the location – a burned-out, semi-deserted California desert city, a run-down 50s modern house set in an abandoned date palm orchard. After moving into Ward's house, Patric is revealed as a brain-damaged ex-boxer, who killed an opponent in the ring (bloody flashbacks) and who ended up in a mental hospital; he stumbles around with wide-open eyes and his arms hanging stiffly by his side. After participating in the incompetent kidnapping scheme (filmed quite well), the eight-year old victim lies around Ward's house like an inert doll and provides fodder for much shouting and loss of temper between Patric and Ward. When they aren't angry, they make torrid love in her bedroom – a misplaced three-minute sex scene breaks whatever narrative thread there is. The ending is interesting, although confusing: when clueless Dern emerges from the Palm Springs Airport victim with a satchel full of money, he is shot in the back by a companion whose role has not been clarified. After driving into the desert with Ward and the boy, Patric decides to kill the boy (no witnesses) and then himself, so that Ward can be saved (he has decided that he loves her dearly after all); before he can do it, however, Ward shoots him in the back to protect the boy and Patric falls on the dusty ground – we look at his face as his eyes go glassy. Despite the attractive noir trappings (voiceover by Patric, plenty of fear and loathing, generalized destruction in the end), the film does not work because of murky script and direction. The arguments between Ward and Patric drag on interminably. Since he is killed at the end of the film, Patric's voiceover has to be beyond the grave. Pitiful comparison to 'The Grifters' made by a good director in the same year. (2015)

After the Thin Man 1936 W.S. Van Dyke (MGM) 3.0 William Powell rich, debonair, impeccably dressed, wise-cracking ex-detective that is always being dragged back into cases, this time in San Francisco; Myrna Loy in pyramid hats and sumptuous gowns and fur-collared coats as his somewhat more restrained high-society and still humorous wife; James Stewart as sweet-seeming guy who appears to be in hopelessly in love with a prime suspect, but who turns out to be the guilty of the murders – he overacts entertainingly in the last scene when he admits his guilt; Joseph Calleia as a criminal-type nightclub manager; Sam Levene as the tough talking police detective with a New York accent. Second installment in the six-part 'Thin Man' series. Fairly entertaining show. The detective aspect of it is strictly so-so – a string of murders, the viewers completely in the dark about who is the guilty one, a lot of misdirection and false leads, the detective on the case not so bright and almost always deferring to Powell, lining up all the suspects in a room for ten minutes at the end and bullying and manipulating them until someone makes a mistake, cracks (Stewart), pulls a gun, and is then overpowered and carried off to the police station – case solved! The entertainment is in the star power of Loy, Powell, and Asta the dog: they are debonair ex-playpeople who are very much in love and have decided to marry; they drink way too much, although they never make fools of themselves and they never have hangovers or problems with alcoholism, and they are great at making quips and witticisms about alcohol, sex, marriage, etc., especially Powell, who seems to have a bottomless well of them. Little terrier Asta is much adored and their constant companion; very cute that he has a consort with puppies named Mrs. Asta, whom he protects jealously from invading dogs. Nick and Nora Charles are quite wealthy, especially Nora, since Powell makes several jokes about marrying her for her money and retiring to oversee her investments.

Amusing interchanges among the different social strata: Nora's rich (and very old) relatives are played for laughs (Jessie Ralph is entertaining as the family battleaxe swatting nosy photographers with her cane); Nick has a lot of underworld friends, who are rough-edged but good-natured and probably wouldn't hurt a flea – they often say the wrong things, e.g., commenting on how Nora is a looker; the script treats the less fortunate rather condescendingly. Film has absolutely none of the Angst and dark shadows of its successor film noir. Despite the dead bodies, played for laughs and light entertainment.

After the Wedding 2006 Susanne Bier (Denmark) 3.0 Mads Mikkelsen as Jacob, an intense, abrupt, scruffy, uncompromising idealist working in an orphanage in India called back to meet a potential donor in Denmark; Rolf Lassgard as the wealthy, somewhat satisfied, but sensitive and ultimately kind industrialist who offers Jacob the money; Stine Fischer Christensen as the pretty, freckled daughter (it turns out) of Jacob; Sidse Babbett Knudsen as Jorgen's wife, and (it turns out) Jacob's ex-lover. Highly emotional domestic drama about family ties and painful choices. Set mostly in a magnificent, tastefully decorated manor in the Danish countryside, which contrasts with the semi-tropical simplicity and dirtiness of the Indian orphanage where Jacob works. Script presents interesting conundrums, e.g., why did Jorgen insist that Jacob come to Denmark to discuss the donation? Then we learn that Jacob had had an affair with the wife before Jorgen married her and raised her daughter as his own. But was the invitation just a coincidence? Then we learn that Jorgen has terminal cancer, and that he invited Jacob intentionally so that he would stay in Denmark and take care of his wife and children (he also has twins) after he dies. Jacob has a painful choice between his loyalty to his orphanage and adopted son Pramod, but in the end he chooses loyalty to Denmark; the difficulty of the choice is brought out in the last scene in India with Pramod. Great semi-Soap, melodramatic plot that keeps viewer engaged. Acting is of the heavy variety with much intense, tearful emoting, particularly in a scene toward the end where Jorgen breaks down protesting that he does not want to die; it seems that the director allows the actors to improvise Method-style in front of the camera. The characters seem to take everything a little too seriously, e.g., Jacob's reaction to finding out that he has a daughter is violent; and why can't he just be thankful that a good man has raised her as his own? Filming is jittery (TV like), circling around the characters, cutting to eyes – very often a single eye of one character or of one of the game trophies on the wall of Jorgen's home office (signifying death or his inner demons?); a bit mannered for my taste. Also a lot of long shots of characters saying nothing, but just looking at one another (too much of a good thing?). Yet somehow the film overcomes these stylistic peculiarities and hits the viewer in the heart – you like Jorgen, and you care what Jacob decides. (2007)

The Age of Innocence 1993 Martin Scorsese 3.0 Daniel Day-Lewis, Michelle Pfeiffer, Winona Ryder. Very slow-paced film about social repression of true love, based on Wharton novel. Anti-Hollywood in sense that Archer (Lewis) never fulfills his love, spends the rest of his life pining for Pfeiffer, and when he has a chance to see her 25 years later, he thinks about it on an outdoor Parisian bench on a beautiful spring day, and then decides not to enter her apartment. Testimonial to the power of 19th century New York aristocratic society: in beginning he is attracted to the unconventional Countess, but all conspires against him: his own social inhibitions; the machinations of his aristocratic friends, who rally behind his wife Mae; and Mae herself, who although she appears to be naïve, she proves more than a match for her rival – she keeps her counsel to herself, and by exploiting her own pregnancy she maneuvers the Countess out of town. Performances are good, although Pfeiffer doesn't seem as fetching as she used to be, Day-Lewis has little opportunity to burst out of his repressed and oppressed character, and Ryder, in her carefully paced and measured speech, seems very low-key. High point of film is the photography and editing. Very sumptuous portrayal of all aspects of the luxurious existence of the New York upper crust: place-settings, gourmet food, stunning period costumes (usually made up in artificial-looking perfection), brilliant colors of gold, red, green, yellow (roses), etc., photographed with moving camera and imaginative, expressive editing; and on the other hand static shots of long gazes, bringing the action once more to a halt. One point seems to be that they care more about these manifestations of their rank than about real human feeling. Seems very faithful to setting, characters, and theme of Wharton novel. It is just hard to watch a longish movie where not much happens, conversations are drawn out and repetitive, and you spend a lot of time looking at tableware.

Aimée and Jaguar 1999 Max Färberböck (Germany) 3.0 Maria Schrader as striking Jewish girl Felice (Jaguar) who is smitten with freedom – an anti-Nazi operative, an aggressive lesbian seducer, and a great romantic who writes eloquent love letters – she says that all she is looking for is one intense moment that is enough to last a lifetime; Juliane Kohler as flighty, romance-crazy, often hysterical, jealous and angry Aryan Lilly (Aimée), who hustles her three children out of her apartment so she can meet her lover, keeps her husband at arm’s length, and has a shrieking fit when she thinks Felice is keeping secrets from her; Johanna Wokalek as the memorable, sensible Ilse, also lesbian, rival of Lilly for the affection of the charismatic Felice and trying to protect her against herself. The film is narrated by Ilse much later in her 80s as she reflects nostalgically on her wartime romance with the Jewish Felice. Film deals with a group of lesbian in the last years of the war in Germany. It focuses on characters on the margin of Nazi society – they try to lead their normal lives despite the war, they hope that the war will soon end, and they fear pursuit and persecution by the brutal Nazi regime. Film peaks about halfway through when Felice and Lilly finally make love, which is depicted as an electric, trembling encounter. The second half of the film is devoted to the women’s love affair with little or no attention remaining for their resistance activities. A slowing down of the pace announces the end, when Felice is arrested by the usual brutal Nazi thugs, dragged down the stairs and shipped off to Theresienstadt. The film ends with the reunion of a reconciled Ilse and Lilly in 1998, and a final tribute to the magnetic Felice in her prime. Conditions depicted in the film are fascinating despite the bad special effects displayed during the air raids. Berlin is progressively deserted. Single Jewish women are vulnerable, they are pursued by the Gestapo and don’t seem to have identification papers, they might have to start sexual relationships with men in order to survive. The strains and sorrows of war uproot everyone from their settled environment and open the door for partying and sexual encounters. Overall a tremendous amount of anguished emoting, passionate, halted breathing, and desperate kissing usually punctuated by music – all of which often gets on the nerves of the viewer. The film is memorable mainly for the three actresses.

Alfie 1966 Lewis Gilbert (Britain) 3.0 Michael Caine as Alfie, Shelley Winters as one of his later “birds” that betrays him with a “younger” man, Vivien Merchant as another who has an abortion that shakes Alfie up, Julia Foster as naïve Sheffield rubette who slaves for Alfie and then leaves him in a huff when he abuses her verbally, Denholm Elliott in small role as an abortionist. Classic 1966 film about good-natured cockney philanderer in London, who finally gets come-uppance at end when 1) Lily has to get an abortion, 2) Ruby throws him over for a younger stud, and 3) he sees his ex-girlfriend with her husband acting as father to Alfie’s son. In the end, a morality play in which Alfie realizes that he is lonely and has been a cad (although we cannot be sure he is going to change!). For most of the movie, however, we enjoy his seduction of one woman after another. He doesn’t have to try very hard – he makes sure they know he is available and they more or less go after him. Alfie is selfish, unfeeling and heedless of the suffering he inflicts on others (he makes no bones about telling his girlfriends that he owes nothing to them and that he is not coming home when they want him to, etc.), and yet he is rather good-humored, innocent (he never thinks about how he hurts people), charming, and likable; he is not affluent. Michael Caine is brilliant as Alfie: he addresses the camera (us) in an off-the-cuff, confiding, friendly way, rolling his sententious little cockney observations off the tongue (the women he is with never notice that he is talking to someone else). Movie begins and ends with amusing sequences about dogs pursuing one another for sex; Alfie befriends one of them at the end. Film is put-down of swinging London – there are no sex romps without consequences. His comeuppance – his tears -- at the end is perhaps a little saccharine and too pat, especially when he is uncharacteristically reduced to tears by sight of a three-month aborted fetus.

Algiers 1938 John Cromwell 2.5 A young and suave Charles Boyer as Pepe le Moko (he speaks in his lightly accented, low French voice), who falls in love with the impossibly glamorous and sultry Hedy Lamarr, the Parisienne fiancé of the stodgy and drastically overweight Robert Greig, Gene Lockhart as the traitorous Regis, who is murdered by Pepe’s gang when he betrays one of Pepe’s favorites to the police. Famous remake of the 30s French movie, set mostly in the Casbah, the labyrinthine quarter of Algiers where the police cannot penetrate; the Parisian police arrive and motivate a campaign to

capture Pepe (master criminal) by luring him into the modern quarter of the city. No one ever says “Take me to the Casbah” (uttered by Pepe le Piou in the late 40s). Pepe is secure until he falls in love with beautiful bejeweled Lamarr, who doesn’t have much to do in the movie and becomes a kind of lure to get him into town. He is finally captured and then shot by the police on the dock of Algiers when his omnipresent jealous girlfriend (Sigrid Lurie) betrays him. Most of the film takes place in the Casbah, where extras teem on the streets (seem like the same small number of sets shot from different angles), Pepe’s hangers-on lounge around, and admiring women call out to him when he wakes up in the morning. The photography by James Wong Howe seems loose and fluid (but this may be due primarily to the poor condition of the print). Cromwell’s direction has expressive flourishes, such as when he follows Pepe’s stylish polished shoes as he finally leaves the Casbah in search of Hedy Lemarr. Moderately enjoyable movie; somewhat of a disappointment after high expectations raised by its reputation – suspense is only moderate and the romance is often hard to believe.

Ali: Angst Essen die Seele Auf 1973 Rainer Werner Fassbinder (Germany) 3.0 Brigitte Mira as Emmi, a German cleaning lady in her 60s who lives alone; El Hedi ben Salem (one of Fassbinder’s lovers) as younger garage mechanic Ali from Morocco who has a good body. Highly regarded melodrama (*vide* Ebert’s review) based on Sirk’s soap opera ‘All that Heaven Allows’, but with all the glitz and glamour (and much of the drama) excised. Essentially Emmi and Ali meet up in a dingy bar, and despite the contempt of all the racist Germans around them, they start to live together and then get married; as the film progresses, the neighbors begin to get more sympathetic – usually because it is in their interest (e.g., the local shopkeeper needs her business) – , Emmi joins her fellow-workers in their discrimination against a new colleague from Bosnia, and Ali is unfaithful to his wife with the blond bar maid; the film ends melodramatically with Ali having an attack of stomach ulcers and Emmi is comforting him in the hospital. The focus is on the rampant racist attitudes of Germans, who make life difficult and sad for immigrants, on the loneliness of marginal Germans living in cities, to the extent that a young stud-like immigrant and a slack-looking older woman would actually fall in love (I think) and marry. The film is shot on a tiny budget in dingy apartments and bars and in streets where you see barely anyone except for the principals (Fassbinder himself plays Emmi’s surly, miserable, unattractive son-in-law). The quality of the acting is marginal: Mira expresses her loneliness and grief in a rather clumsy fashion. El Hedi does not seem to know anything about acting: he is supposed to talk in ungrammatical, approximate German (see the title), but he always comes across as wooden and mechanical even when he is expressing deep emotion or when he falls to the floor because of a pain in his stomach. Are Moroccan Bedouins so restrained? The filming and editing is idiosyncratic: a lot of shots of people walking across the floor, opening and shutting doors, and then turning around and walking back in opening and shutting the same doors; also the director often freezes the images of characters especially when they are feeling or expressing strong racist emotions rejecting the couple – e.g., the group of people in the bar are huddled in an immobile, distant-looking group watching Emmi and Ali dance, the couple is photographed frozen and alone in a fancy restaurant right after their wedding, Fassbinder’s camera pans slowly over the flattened images of Emmi’s shocked children when she tells them that she has married an Arab. An interesting film about loneliness and distance, but the primitive acting and non-standard filming techniques seem to undermine the potential drama and emotion of the story rather than promote them. (2011)

Alice Adams 1935 George Stevens (RKO) 3.5 Soapy but compelling drama about social class in a small Midwestern town; the realistic ending of the Booth Tarkington 1922 novel is replaced with a happily-ever-after romantic kiss between Hepburn and MacMurray. Katherine Hepburn in excellent performance as nervous, insecure, perpetuum mobile in her social climbing; Fred MacMurray as well-dressed, handsome, good-humored upper class guy genuinely interested in her; Fred Stone as Alice’s kind, but emotional father; Evelyn Venable as beautiful socialite with artificial voice; Hedda Hopper as snobby mother of Venable; Hattie McDaniels quite funny as disabused African-American maid; Ann Shoemaker as humble, sometimes shrewish mother that speaks Midatlantic English and campaigns to have daughter marry well; Frank Albertson as brash brother speaking working class English. The narrative portrays Hepburn trying to improve her social position with her mother’s strong encouragement. She pursues a relationship with easy-going MacMurray; it seems to falter toward the end of the film, but

the intervention of a kindly employer saves the family from perdition and gives MacMurray the chance to win the self-doubting Hepburn in the final Hollywood kiss. The initial picture of Hepburn is memorable – always wears her mask of social charm, a toothy smile plastered on her face designed to win the approval of the town’s beautiful people and the heart of a guy who will save her from the modest circumstances of her family (the family house is dreary with too much wallpaper and worn-out furniture); she projects well Alice’s underlying insecurity. The ending of the film is artificial and awkward. Alice rejects MacMurray in an unexpected outburst of honesty and sincerity, and just when the viewer expects a pessimistic ending (as in the novel), the employer’s intervention saves the day (deus ex machina). Extensive symbolism of flowers, a bouquet picked in the public park because Alice is too poor to buy a corsage for the all-important dance, or wilted roses to show the vanishing of her hope for the good life. Memorable dance scene in which the anxious Alice is photographed usually alone preening anxiously in her desperate attempts to find partners. Even better dinner scene when Alice and her mother are trying to impress MacMurray – extreme comic awkwardness with halting conversation, extensive silences (recalling Claud Chabrol); comedy eating caviar crackers; everybody sweating; Hattie is very comic, clumsy, chewing gum with a non-plussed, disabused attitude toward the family’s tensions; Dad’s bulging tux shirt gets in way of eating the soup. They serve sweetbreads and Brussel sprouts, which no one eats; Alice of course is motor mouth. Until the mushy ending, the film is analytical about social class in America; as Mother says, “Money and family are the only things that matter; and now money is family.” But the social divide is bridged by the Hollywood ending, in which a big wet kiss solves everybody’s problems. (2017)

Alice in Wonderland 2010 Tim Burton 3.0 The charming Mia Wasikowska as Alice, mistaken by everyone as a liberator although she is convinced that her visit to the Underland (not Wonderland) is a dream; Johnny Depp literary, moody, unpredictable as the Mad Hatter speaking with a Scottish accent; Stephen Fry as the voice of the Cheshire Cat, humorously expressive floating ghostlike apparition with his wide mouth and plentiful teeth; Crispin Glover as the pompous knight and lover of the Red Queen; Helena Bonham Carter as the bloodthirsty (“Off with their heads!” “It is far better to be feared than loved.”) Red Queen with the bulbous head; Anne Hathaway fey, dreamy and kind as the white-dressed White Queen with the blue-black lipstick; Timothy Spall endearing, loyal and loving as the hound dog Bayard; Doormouse very cute; Tweedledum and Tweedeldee roly-poly and constantly bickering with one another; and of course the White Rabbit; Bandersnatch as the ugly shark-toothed monster with a heart of gold who goes over to Alice’s side; Christopher Lee pronounces a few words for the raging, fearsome Jabberwocky. Studio-influenced adaptation of Lewis Carroll’s “Alice in Wonderland” that benefits from Burton’s fantastic imagination but suffers from a Hollywood-style bad guys-good guys plot and from excessive reliance on cgi graphics at the end. Story is told with a real frame in aristocratic Victorian England, where Alice is presented as a kind of rebel, who refuses to marry the twit that is destined for her by her family, and in the end decides to go into business with a friend of her father and plans to expand the company’s trading activities to China (how prophetic!); and to please the pre-adolescent girls even more, Alice is portrayed sometimes as a kind of Nancy Drew stalking the halls of castles looking for clues and solutions and sometimes as Joan of Arc dressed in 15th-century plate armor and capable of cutting off the head of a dread monster with a single swipe of her sword. Danny Elfman’s music is disappointingly atmospheric and utterly unsuited to being played outside the film as an independent musical piece. Best parts of the film are the satiric performances of the Wonderland characters – the blustering of Bonham Carter’s Red Queen (“Off with their heads!), the fey dreaminess of Ann Hathaway, the amusing whimsicalness of the Cheshire Cat’s wisdom, the unpretentious determination and aggressiveness of Alice; and the imagination of Burton translated into the landscape and characters of Wonderland – glowering skies, thick underbrush and tropical-like trees, picturesque vistas, almost headless playing card soldiers of the Red Queen, the bounding enthusiasm of Bayard, the quaint disarray of the Mad Hatter’s tea table, etc. Despite the often literary loquaciousness, the melodramatic focus of the plot disappoints with its lack of themes or philosophic interest.

All About Eve 1950 Joseph L. Mankiewicz 4.0 Bette Davis as Margo, aging, insecure, ill-tempered Broadway actress lionized by the public; Anne Baxter as Margo’s apparently meek acolyte

that is really scheming to replace her; Gary Merrill as Bill, theater director and Margo's long-suffering husband; Celeste Holm as Karen, the sensible girl in the film, although not above gullibility; Hugh Marlowe as the playwright, Karen's husband and easily taken in by Eve's "performance"; George Sanders deliciously conceited, cynical, and sharp-tongued as feared theater critic; Marilyn Monroe looking great in small role as bimbo would-be actress appearing at Margo's party; Thelma Ritter as Margo's retainer, Birdie, caustic, suspicious, and jealous of Eve. Astoundingly good film about cutthroat rivalry in the theater; perhaps Hollywood's attack on the snotty NY theater – we have something as good as anything you have ever done! The crispest of black and white photography; beautifully lit. The film is told essentially as a flashback from the initial award scene with multiple narrators recounting the marvelous events to us, a delighted audience. A wonderful script, with enough great lines to fill several good movies – “Fasten your seatbelts. It's going to be a bumpy night!”, says Margo as she prepares to display her bitchiness at the beginning of the famous party scene. The cast is memorable – the best Hollywood had to offer in 1950; each actor matches the part perfectly; lines are delivered in a literate and sophisticated way, sophisticated actors delivering sophisticated lines in a sophisticated script. Bette Davis carries the day with her anxious, bitchy aggressiveness; Anne Baxter (Eve) leads us down the garden path with her mellow throated protestations of unworthiness only partially hiding her consuming ambition – Margo catches her in the empty theater play-bowing to imagined applause in an early scene. The stepwise revelation that Eve is an ambitious, conniving, lying witch determined to displace Margo and take the husband she pleases is one of the great surprises of Hollywood movies. George Sanders, who often narrates, is deliciously cynical and conniving with numerous *bons mots*; he turns on Eve at the end, going one up on her making her become his mistress – which gives the audience a thrill of satisfaction, however improbable. Marilyn Monroe has a small part, but is beautiful and svelte in her two scenes, and she delivers her 'dumb blond' lines well. Hollywood's bitchy depiction of the self-satisfied New York theater scene, where people get ahead by conniving just as on the West Coast. Superior ending: Eve, who has just got her comeuppance from Addison (Sanders) returns to her room to find another 'Eve' (supposed hero-worshipper, but really another “calculating barracuda”, Phoebe) sitting in her chair; last shot is of new girl holding Eve's formal cloak and her acting award in front of her body as she gazes rapturously at multiple reflections in the mirror, admiring and dreaming as the music rises.... It won't be long before Eve herself gets her comeuppance. This has to be one of the best, most complete films ever made! (2006)

All About My Mother 1999 Pedro Almodovar (Spain) 3.0 Cecilia Roth, a charming and powerful Argentine actress playing Manuela, a Spanish woman who has lost her son, Marisa Paredes as lesbian actress Huma drawn into this offbeat company of women, Penelope Cruz as Barcelona nun Rosa who becomes pregnant when she has sex with a cross dresser (the extremely annoying weeping Lola has big breasts but he/she fathers babies and then leaves them to the care of others, but is free to weep in anguish afterwards), but who won't tell her mother and then dies in giving birth, Antonia San Juan as the flamboyant and baroque Agrado, a charming and lively cross dresser who is a good friend to our real women. Three outstanding actresses are largely the focus of the film and the factor that keeps the interest of the viewer through improbable and often manipulated plot turns; Almodovar focuses on the psychology of women without interference from male characters (except for the two cross dressers?), especially on the realities of motherhood. Roth is powerful central character, who eschews her possible career as an actress (many references to playing 'A Streetcar Named Desire' when she was younger; she is also fascinated by a contemporary performance in which Huma stars); she focuses on motherhood – she loses her beautiful (mildly incestuous mutual adoration and touching?) son who is planning to be a writer, she nurses Rosa in her pregnancy only to lose her when she gives birth, and then she takes over the care of Rosa's little boy after the mother's death. Almodovar focuses on the importance of caring for others and motherhood for women. Visual style is as usual arresting – bright colors arranged in interesting flamboyant Barcelona patterns that match the colorful characters and sudden plot turns. One wonders about the relevance of Mankiewicz's 'All About Eve' evoked throughout the movie – Manuela is a much more maternal, affectionate and caring character than Bette Davis! Viewer is sometimes drawn into the drama, but often remains on the outside, perhaps because of the author's flashy off-beat non-conformity. (2006)

All Quiet on the Western Front 1930 Lewis Milestone 4.0 Lew Ayers as Paul, Lou Wolheim as the grizzled benevolent leader Corporal Kat, John Wray as the comic hated sergeant Himmelstoss. Beautiful and eloquent anti-war film (Milestone, Universal?!) follows the fate of six classmates in a German gymnasium; they volunteer for the army in 1914, and then they all are killed one by one. Starkly realistic (with the possible exception of a few short anti-war statements) – no music, terrific special effects of war (explosions [with no balls of fire] that give a real sense of danger), following the experience and fate of common soldiers with barely any reference to officers, strategy – i.e., the experience of the grunts in the trenches. Depicts well the nature of World War I – immobility, artillery explosions, infrequent contact with the enemy, grubbing around in trenches and dugouts next to rats, waiting for the attack under the artillery barrage, mowing down the enemy attack with machine guns, counterattacks always organized to repulse the initial attack. Explicitly anti-war (Ayers took it so seriously he refused to serve when drafted in World War II): the marvelous initial scene, in which to the accompaniment of a lot of rapid expressive editing the professor rants about patriotism to his students and gets them to join the army; the famous scene in which Paul finds himself isolated in a pothole with a French soldier whom he has knifed and who dies slowly (brotherhood across nationalities; he even looks at a picture of the soldier's wife and little girl); good scene in hospital where the soldiers struggle against the terror of dying or being an amputee; Paul returns home for a leave and finds himself a stranger to civilian society – the war has ruined his life and he cannot speak honestly with his mother, his jingoistic father or the pompous super-patriot professor; since he loses all hope when Corporal Kat is killed by an air attack, at the end he reaches for a butterfly on the front lines (right before the Armistice) and is killed by a French sharpshooter. Once they have learned what the war is like, the soldiers say pretty subversive things – the next war we should let the kings and emperors fight it out in their underwear, there is no heroism in war (says Paul to the new students), it's just trying to stay alive, etc. Final montage of the six guys (all of whom are dead) marching over an immense graveyard of crosses into the distance. Not a smidgen of sound track music.

All that Heaven Allows 1955 Douglas Sirk 4.0 Jane Wyman moving, genuine, and expressive as upper crust widow living in suburbs of New York; Rock Hudson a bit wooden but believable as Waldenesque gardener who falls in love with Wyman; Agnes Moorehead as friend of Wyman -- she acts as interpreter of Wyman's place in the snobby community; Conrad Nagel as the passionless but reliable candidate for marriage; Gloria Talbott and William Reynolds as Wyman's bossy and selfish children who gladly tell their widowed mother what to do. Excellent, simple, straightforward, genuine soap opera set in upper middle class suburban area of New York (suburban trains regularly appear at the train station in the powder snow) about true love and the importance of challenging social convention to follow your drummer. Famous opening has camera panning around idyllic and colorful small town in the fall. Wyman falls in love with Hudson, who owns a small gardening business inherited from his father and who is a devotee of Thoreau (he reads 'Walden' which he describes as his Bible) living the simple (although well appointed) life in the idyllic countryside outside of town. Sirk is quite critical of social conventions: constant rounds of cocktail parties where people talk and gossip, the women have tea in their back yards; when Wyman lets it be known that she will marry Hudson, the rumor mills run wild stating that they were having an affair even before the death of Wyman's husband; the children pressure their mother not to marry for fear they will lose their family house -- the son is particularly obnoxious. Hudson is completely determined to follow through, but Wyman hesitates, and when she finally decides to declare herself to him at the end, he falls off a cliff, and the ending has him waking from his coma, the two smile at one another, and the camera cuts (for the umpteenth time) to Hudson's big picture window, although this time not crusted with ice. Controlled and precise direction with bright 50s color. 50s costumes are exact and glamorous without quite the over-the-top quality of 'Imitation of Life'. Wyman, playing a character 15 years older than her boyfriend, is a revelation -- genuine, convincing, moving as the woman in love trying to navigate the shoals of social opposition. Interesting that the film has clear message of independence -- follow your own star, make your own decisions, don't get caught up in the materialistic rat race, find your place in nature, and don't be afraid to "drop out" and retire to a

simple and fulfilling life if that is your destiny. One of the best of all Hollywood soap operas, the film convinces by its sincerity and genuineness. (2007)

All the King's Men 1949 Robert Rossen 3.0 Broderick Crawford as the charismatic, rascally, violent and ruthless Willie Stark (Huey Long) in the role of his life as the Governor of Louisiana; John Ireland wooden, slumped, indecisive, sometimes drunk as the reporter who goes to work for him but then has constant second thoughts without doing something about it; Mercedes McCambridge off center (laughing in unusual places) also working for Stark; Joanne Dru vapid as good girl from rich background who at first loves Ireland but then takes up with the middle aged, paunchy Willie (!); Anne Seymour in dull, holier than thou role as Willie's wife. A social consciousness film from the late 1940s. Studio version of Huey Long's career: his humble, sincere beginnings as populist politician appealing to the Louisiana "hicks", rise to fame almost by accident, his corrupt practices in power, romance triangle with his assistant Ireland, the negative results of his ruthlessness, and his final assassination by a man whose father Stark had destroyed. Movie dawdles a bit, but gets tight and exciting toward the end – the movement to impeach Stark, his scurrilous tactics in trying to stave it off, the pouring in of the "hicks" (Stark's political support – rural whites) into town to intimidate the legislature, his acquittal, and then – surprise – assassination; the scenes of cars speeding down the highway and of crowds gathering in the capital. Most of the characters seem rounded around the edges and censored; even Crawford, while powerful and intense, does not seem ruthless and folksy enough (tame in comparison to videos of the real Long). We miss the bad language and nakedness of emotion. The movie seems suspicious of the dictatorial (fascist?) extremes which great political popularity can lead to: Stark seemed sincerely a man of the people in the beginning – building roads, hospitals, telling the press that people had a "right" to health care, but he was corrupted by power, even having an opponent murdered; in the end the press was even talking about a possible coup d'état if impeachment succeeded. The film is somewhat placeless: the state of Louisiana is never mentioned, no black faces, no Southern accents, etc. A bit disappointing considering its reputation. (2007)

All the President's Men 1976 Alan J. Pakula 3.5 Robert Redford, Dustin Hoffman, Jason Robards, Martin Balsam, Jack Warden. Riveting detective-style film about the search of Woodward and Bernstein to discover the truth about the Watergate break-in. Completely linear plot from the break-in to tying the incident to the White House; very few plot complications, but just ferreting out clues that advance the story a little further, and keep the *Post* ahead of the *New York Times*. Both men are junior, relatively inexperienced reporters on the Metro Desk (the crime was originally a simple burglary), but they have persistence and attention to detail, under the usually avuncular guidance of Robards (Bradlee), who keeps telling them to get more facts. Film pays no attention to their private lives (outside their messy bachelor pads), but focuses on the newsroom (that is richly and realistically portrayed) and their peregrinations around Washington in dark scenes (e.g., with 'Deep Throat' (Hal Holbrook) in the dark garage, apartments and homes of staff members, and in front of huge, imposing public buildings, suggesting the intimidating power of the federal government). Woodward and Bernstein are differentiated with the former more insistent about getting it right; Robards is excellent as skeptical editor, but he has faith in his reporters, and is delighted when he gives the green light to publish. Film is about the grunt work the reporters must do to trace the lead from the Cubans, etc. to Mitchell and the White House; we are presented with the hard work, hints and bits that they pick up in "cold" phone conversations, the building of a story from unattributed sources where almost no one will go on the record; good lesson for us in journalistic ethics. Differs from Hollywood in that film puts little emphasis on the private lives of participants, excepting a few brief vignettes about Hugh Sloan and his pregnant wife, the nervous and diffident bookkeeper played by Jane Alexander, the "dirty tricks" (rat-fucking) expert Donald Segretti, played by Robert Walden, etc. Deep Throat (deep background) is annoying in his detached vagueness, and we are pleased when Woodward finally loses patience with him toward the end and demands specifics. Three men playing the *Post* editors are first rate; they make us admire the newspaper profession, the free press as the pillar of our democracy (although there is absolutely no preaching): "a victory lap for American journalism". Movie is usually suspenseful and exciting, although everyone knows how it will turn out. The good guys win in the end – which makes the film

atypical of the New Hollywood film. It is pretty long, and it might depend on viewer's stake in the Watergate story to hold his attention. (2006)

All or Nothing 2002 Mike Leigh (Britain) 4.0 Timothy Spall, Lesley Manville. Very moving film about "loser" working class people living in South London, who at the end find that their lives are worth living if they just appreciate what they already have. Very depressing environment – functional housing complex, cramped quarters (although decent enough), unattractive people speaking (apparently) rudimentary English, aimless sex of teenagers – they are too poor to enjoy their lives, and don't have the skills and education anyhow. Family of four – Phil, Penny, Rory, Rachel -- surrounded by friends and neighbors (such as Maureen and her daughter, who gets pregnant from jerk boyfriend); all of family except for mother are overweight and unattractive: Rachel is very quiet and works housecleaning in a nursing home; Rory the son is full of confusion and hostility. Spall and Melville have lost track of one another, and barely notice the other is around; Spall is something of a cynic philosopher, who is surprised at nothing and expects the worse to happen. But events conspire to give us an epiphany: after a revealing visit from an art-oriented Frenchwoman (an angel?), Spall goes to seashore to realize that his life is empty and aimless without the affection of his wife (and children), and Manville is shaken up by the near-death of her son. The two have a heart-wrenching long talk full of emotion and anguish, in which both – even Penny – recognize that they have let their affection slip away, and it ends with a kiss and a handhold and a promise of renewed love. Author is affectionate toward his characters, and always respects them despite their low status. We despair for them and get impatient, e.g., when Penny is whining, but as soon as the door of hope is cracked, we root for them, and cry with happiness when they again touch one another. Leigh's genius finds intense low-key poetry in the most unlikely of environments. (2005)

All That Jazz 1979 Bob Fosse 3.5 Roy Scheider, Anne Reinking, Leland Palmer, Jessica Lange, John Lithgow. Semi-auto-bio account of Fosse character's last days: his attitude toward death before physical crisis, and then the process of dying presented through musical/dance numbers. Joe Gideon as driven, only alive when he is working, womanizer who cannot be faithful to his wife or girlfriend, a very fond parent of adorable daughter and yet does not devote himself to her, charismatic and creative, and has fervent admiration of many, including the long-suffering women in his life. Several dance musical numbers, although no apparent original songs. Most significant is the extensive "Airtotica" that is very inventive erotic ensemble piece, and the ending death numbers – about five of them – that accompany his operation in the hospital and his more or less acceptance of his death, all performed in glossy, high-intensity way with lots of gloves, top hats and black and white costumes. All punctuated with fantasy, Fellini-like sequences in which Scheider confronts death in the person of a smiling, white-clad Jessica Lange. Appearing at times through film is sequence of Scheider waking up in the morning; he takes speed in order to get him ready for his always demanding day. Also interwoven throughout film is a documentary film that Gideon was working on at same time as his show, in which comedian comments in comic way on death. Death presented as something funny or perhaps friendly and beautiful. Gideon has angina attack, undergoes operation, and then dies post-op. Seems that he came to terms with it a little. Attitude toward showbiz is jaundiced: producers are presented as money-hungry rapacious types, who start negotiation with alternative director (John Lithgow) as soon as Gideon enters his crisis; then ironic ending when Ethel Merman belts out "There's No Business like Show Business" as hospital staff zip up his body bag. (2005)

Allied 2016 Robert Zemeckis 2.5 Zemeckis gives his patented treatment to a World War II spy thriller. Brad Pitt looking preternaturally young and fit as a Canadian (British) special ops officer who assassinates the German ambassador in Morocco and then meets and marries...; Marion Cotillard sports a would-be distinguished British accent as an assassination operative, who falls in love with Pitt, marries him and settles down in the London suburbs; Jared Harris ('The Crown') as Pitt's sympathetic superior officer; Matthew Goode in cameo role as bitter ex-combatant with a mangled face. The first third of the film includes the assassination (pretty exciting) and the coupling of Pitt and Cotillard. The bulk of the film is devoted to finding out whether Cotillard is actually a German agent passing classified information to Berlin; it turns out that she is, but only because the Germans have contacted her and

threatened her and Pitt's baby. Most of the drama is devoted to Pitt's marital dilemma, since the counter-espionage authorities enlist him in the campaign to ferret her out and they even tell him that if she is guilty, he would have to execute her with a shot to the head (an honestly absurd detail). Pitt expends great energy to determine whether she is the real anti-Nazi activist he worked with or a Nazi agent who was substituted for her; in the final pay-off scene, she is forced to play the Marseillaise on the piano to verify a skill that Pitt had learned about the Nazi substitute when interrogating a prisoner. Pitt's dramatic tension is undermined by the lack of romantic chemistry between husband and wife. The final scene takes place on a British airfield, where Pitt fails to get his plane started, and in order to get her husband off the hook, Cotillard shoots herself in the head on the tarmac. Noble sacrifice so that Pitt could live happily ever after with his daughter in his Edenic property in Medicine Hat somewhere in the prairie states – photographed with extreme sentimentality in the final scene. The film excels with pictorial scenes recalling the time of the Blitz: British Lancaster bombers parked in the airfields or lumbering toward the runway, guided by a Resistance fighter with a lantern Pitt landing in a small monoplane in a French field, skies lit up with searchlights and anti-aircraft bursts during a German bombing raid, Pitt through a window watching a crippled, burning German bomber plunge toward his home (and baby) and then narrowly missing. The narrative is essentially interesting, and Hitchcock would have livened it up considerably with focused editing, surprise reversals, and piquant characterizations through star performances. Zemeckis treatment relies excessively on star power to involve the audience. (2017)

Almost Famous 2000 Cameron Crowe 3.5 Billy Crudup as essentially good-hearted, good-looking lead guitarist for a successful rock group, Stillwater; Patrick Fugit with broad face and eternal beatific, curious smile on his lips as 15-year-old San Diegan who loves rock music and gets the chance of a lifetime to write an article for 'Rolling Stone' on his tour with Stillwater; Frances McDormand convincing and moving as Fugit's mother, who worries (rightfully so) about her son and his experience with the band; Kate Hudson as rather sad groupie and girlfriend of Crudup – she develops teenage love connection with Fugit; Philip Seymour Hoffman very amusing and sharp as rock critic that encourages Fugit to write and who gives him advice of questionable usefulness; Zooey Deschanel as Fugit's rebellious sister. Very endearing semi-autobiographical film about the most important event in Crowe's teenage years – the opportunity in the 1970s to write about a well-known rock group for the leading rock music periodical; it is not really a coming-of-age film, since at the end he has not much changed since the beginning, aside from losing his virginity. The film paints a very vivid, somewhat bowdlerized picture of the culture of rock music – sex, drugs, adoration by screaming fans, hanging out in cheesy motels, riding on a crumby bus (exchanged for a small airplane toward the end of the tour). Fugit – smiling in wonder the whole time – is incorporated by Stillwater into their group, despite the extreme suspicions of some that he, a journalist, will betray them when he writes his article. Despite its subject matter, the film has a feel-good emphasis: even if nasty things are going on, the viewer's attention is directed to the positive aspects – Crudup's smile, Fugit's good nature (e.g., saving Hudson's life when she overdoses on Quaaludes), the endearing relationship between those two who are constantly smiling at one another, the cute and playful nature of the 'deflowering' of Fugit by the three nymphs; and the ending is positive and forward-looking – Crudup gets his article published after all, Crudup and Fugit are reconciled after their mutual 'betrayal', Zooey comes home and is reconciled with her mother, Hudson fulfills her life's dream by buying a ticket to fly to Morocco, which she had previously dreamed of doing together with Fugit. Crowe is an optimistic soul who believes there is altruism and self-fulfillment in every character – symbolized throughout the film by Fugit's persistent smile. It is apparent that the director has a great love of rock music, celebrated in a soundtrack that includes a couple of dozen pieces; on several occasions characters mention that the glory days of rock and roll are over (this is 1973) and that we have to perpetuate the memory before it all dies. A charming film that leaves the viewer with a warm feeling. (2010)

Altman 2013 Ron Man 3.5 Entertaining, moving, and sometimes insightful and revelatory documentary about the life and work of Robert Altman. The film progresses through Altman's difficult beginnings in TV, his halting start in film (first accomplished film was 'MASH' 1970 when he was 45) and then the ups and downs of his career – success in the 70s, irrelevance beginning with the crash of

'Popeye' 1980 and his self-imposed exile to Paris in the 80s, and then his career Renaissance beginning with 'The Player' 1992, lengthened by a heart transplant in the mid-1990s, followed by Gosford Park; and 'Prairie Home Companion' 2006. The director relies on home movies, clips of Altman speaking and working, short spoken definitions of "Altmanesque" from many of the actors that collaborated with him, short clips from some of his films, all guided by remarks from his intelligent, loyal wife, Kathryn, whom he married in the 1950s. Analysis of his films is a bit sparse, although reference is made to his affection for ensemble casts, his willingness to make movies in virtually any genre, his frustration and even hostility toward Hollywood's movie-making approach (greed and arrogance in 'The Player'!), overlapping dialogue, loosely constructed plots, criticism and satire of American culture, and of course his inconsistency; amazingly the quality of his films was more reliable in his old age. The film focuses a lot on his personality and personal life: good-humored and always ironic; although devoted to his wife and children (five of them?), he was clearly a workaholic that did not make his affection known until late in life. The film is touching in its treatment of his awareness of and preparation for death: "Prairie Home Companion" is clearly about his reluctant readiness for death (the appearance of the beautiful, white-clad angel of death in the last scene of the film is unforgettable). Robert Altman died with his boots on. (2015)

Amazing Grace 2006 Michael Apted (Britain) 3.5 Ioan Gruffudd handsome and moving as the dedicated William Wilberforce; Romola Garai as his gadfly wife; Benedict Cumberbatch outstanding as a thoughtful and intense close and loyal friend of Wilberforce; Albert Finney shockingly degenerated as Wilberforce's teacher and composer of the title hymn; Michael Gambon avuncular as Pitt's nemesis Charles Fox; Rufus Sewell intense as the radical Thomas Clarkson, one of Wilberforce's key allies; Toby Jones as the gnomish son of King George, the Duke of Clarence, who ends up admiring Wilberforce for his dedication. Intense, credible, compelling, Hollywood-style treatment of the story of the abolition of the slave trade in Britain (finally achieved in 1807) and Wilberforce's long and dedicated campaign in spite of many a parliamentary failure. Wilberforce's force and persistence clearly come from his evangelical religious faith, which gives him an unwavering determination to do right according to God's commandments. It is very touching when Pitt on his deathbed (1806) admits that he is afraid and that he wishes he had Wilberforce's faith, but he then urges him to push through the reform as a tribute to his friend. The credibility of the film is enhanced enormously by the outstanding cast of prime British male actors (particularly striking is Cumberbatch as Pitt and Gambon as Lord Charles Fox), the sensitive cinematography, and Apted's steady and brisk direction. The narrative is a bit complicated – starting with Wilberforce's meeting his future wife (about 1800), proceeding to various layers of flashback and then finally moving forward from their marriage to the day of abolition, when Fox gives a moving tribute to the tearful Wilberforce after the vote. The narrative is handled 'Rocky'-like: Wilberforce is a saintly figure, whose only flaw is to sacrifice much of his health to the relentless pursuit of his cause; the narrative moves through numerous political obstacles toward its inevitable triumphant conclusion; when close to exhaustion and discouragement, Wilberforce meets a woman who bucks him up; even the Duke of Clarence reluctantly pays tribute to Wilberforce in the last scene. Outstanding historical drama that showcases the idealistic and activist side of strong religious faith. (2007)

The American 2010 Anton Corbijan 3.0 George Clooney as professional hit man sent to hide out in a town in central Italy after he almost gets killed in the snows of Sweden; Johan Leysen as Clooney's poker-faced boss, Pavel; Paolo Bonacelli as avuncular older parish priest that preaches repentance to the impassive Clooney; Thekla Reuten as attractive but ruthless partner hit lady that turns against Clooney when he gets close to "escape"; Violante Placido as beautiful and sensitive prostitute with whom Clooney falls in love (and vice versa) after he visits her for a few professional tumbles. A kind of existential treatment of a disillusioned hit man's exit from his métier and possible, if improbable, journey to redemption. Film begins with slam-bang surprise when, after Clooney is attacked by two enemies in the snow, he also shoots his lover in the back of the head so there will be no witnesses. After that the film settles down into a repetitive routine with Clooney – the ultimate outsider – walking and driving through the picturesque town and into the spectacular country around it, eating and sipping coffee, visiting Placido at the local whorehouse, working on the assembly of a high-tech assassination weapon

that Mathilde is buying from him, speaking with the priest, who gives him hints of repentance, forgives, and salvation (Clooney seems hardly to give them a thought). The change comes when he begins to fall in love with Placido, who conveys well that she shares his affection. Serious dilemma, since Clooney's boss doesn't seem the type to let him go, and anyhow his past is so violent and sinful that it would seem difficult to escape it. Film has high-paced, exciting, and appropriately tragic ending. When Clooney makes the decision to leave the profession, Mathilde is commissioned by the boss to kill him, but when she pulls the trigger as Clooney and Placido are declaring their eternal love (suspenseful close-up on Mathilde's finger slowly depressing the trigger), the gun backfires killing the would-be killer – Clooney has rigged the gun to misfire. Shot in a subsequent shootout with Pavel, Clooney drives to the beautiful sylvan river where Placido is waiting for him; his car then crashes quietly against a tree and Clooney dies. He was in too deep, his sin was too great, to escape his past. Film sometimes seems to be going nowhere, but it becomes an affecting existential drama about how one's past limits one's choices and makes change impossible. (2014)

American Gangster 2007 Ridley Scott 3.5 Denzel Washington as Frank Lucas, Harlem businessman and big time drug dealer; Russell Crowe as the (Jewish) man who seems to be the only honest cop in the New York metropolitan area; Cuba Gooding in rather small role as one of Washington's rivals; Josh Brolin as quintessential thuggish, crooked New York cop who argues with Crowe to "keep the cash cow [Washington] alive"; Lymari Nadal as purely decorative Puerto Rican wife of Washington; Armand Assante as mafia chief that Washington has to deal with. Very good crime/cop thriller about respectable-looking Harlem drug dealer and the New Jersey cop who tracks him down and eventually induces him to cooperate in his crusade to get the crooked cops. Denzel Washington smooth in his two-faced role as ruthless gangland boss (implicitly ruining thousands of lives among his own people) and respectable businessman, who dresses in expensive suits, appears to be faithful to his pretty wife, loves his family (but characteristically sucks his brothers and cousins from North Carolina into his organization, presumably because he can't trust anyone else), and buys a huge ante-bellum looking mansion for his mother (Ruby Dee) to live in. Because Washington is so charming and charismatic, the viewer can't help but momentarily forget the damage he is doing and like him. Russell Crowe is perhaps better as scruffy, rather overweight, bull-in-a-china-shop, anti-drug detective who is also studying to be a lawyer; surprisingly (his family life is a mess), he is completely straight arrow, turns unmarked gangster money into the police organization rather than keep it, and has no other ambition but to corral Washington and the crooked cops that he despises. Film sometimes has vague narrative direction, but it soon develops a compelling twin narrative – Washington building up his business like a classic American entrepreneur (he goes directly to Southeast Asia to buy a purer product and is then proud to sell a better product on the street at a lower price!); and Crowe suffering from his broken marriage and closing in doggedly and inevitably on Washington. Action climaxes in expertly choreographed, cliff-hanging, on-the-edge-of-your-seat 20-minute raid of the police on Washington's drug manufacturing operation, first at the Newark Airport and then in a public housing project somewhere in the area. Film ends somewhat surprisingly when Washington agrees to cooperate with now prosecuting attorney Crowe to track and arrest the crooked narcotics cops; Washington gets reduced sentence and then emerges from prison a free – and poor – man at the end of the film. The viewer is constantly reminded how able a director is Ridley Scott. Film works best as an action gangster cop melodrama, but it does recall the gangster film tradition of, for example, 'The Godfather', which begins with the statement "I believe in America" and the parallel is drawn between American business and organized crime. A good Hollywood-style film. (2007)

American Honey Andrea Arnold (Britain) 2.5 Very long (2:43), formless kind-of road movie about young woman traveling with a bunch of young misfits to sell magazines in the American Midwest. Sasha Lane as poor, tight-lipped teenager discovering life through her travels (she was spotted by the director on a beach); Shia LaBeouf as con-man type that helps manage the salespeople and becomes Sasha's lover; Riley Keough usually in a bikini as hard-bitten chief of the salesforce. The queen of British miserabilism comes to America. Sasha is first seen rummaging through a garbage bin for a chicken carcass, and soon she meets Shia and is off on the road with a bunch of uprooted, aimless kids to sell magazines under the direction of the steely-eyed Riley. The long, under-edited film consists largely

of shots of the kids traveling in a crowded van across the Midwest – from near Kansas City to Rapid City, South Dakota. Popular rock tunes (with which this writer has no relationship) play on the soundtrack with the kids singing along, horsing around aimlessly, smoking dope, drinking whiskey and wine out of bottles, shooting off Roman candles in public parks, staying two or three to a room in cheap motels, and fanning out over mostly well-to-do neighborhoods to sell magazine subscriptions. The narrative focuses partly on the daring Sasha's coming-of-age experiences – learning to be a salesperson, hitching rides with dangerous-looking men (who do not mistreat her), falling in love with Shia and having sex with him at least twice, locked in romantic competition with Riley, who threatens on several occasions to abandon her on the side of the road. Toward the end Sasha even sells sexual services to an oilfield worker, who for \$1000 receives a hilariously awkward hand job in his truck; afterwards he returns her tamely to her group. The film ends with nothing apparently resolved: after Sasha uses her hustler's money to buy food for a family of abandoned kids, she just climbs back into the van, and they drive on. For undisclosed reasons, the director includes several scenes of insects, butterflies, bees, etc. crawling on screens, sometimes being rescued by Sasha. The film has several amusing sequences, and the patient viewer will find himself becoming attached to the silent but resourceful Sasha. The film would have benefited greatly from severe editing. (2017)

American Hustle 2013 David O. Russell 4.0 Christian Bale, 45 pounds above his usual weight, sporting an abysmal hairpiece and a huge gut (!), as ballsy conman Irv working expertly with...; Amy Adams completely off her usual persona, plays Sydney, a con woman with distractingly plunging necklines oscillating between her Albuquerque self and her affected British personality; Bradley Cooper as Richie, a manic FBI agent trying to bag mafia bosses and US congressmen for corruption; Jeremy Renner excellent as sensitive and conscientious mob-connected New Jersey mayor, Carmine, sporting an extreme pompadour hairdo and working loyally for the well-being of his constituents; Jennifer Lawrence brassy and hilarious as Jersey housewife to Irv – heedless (she starts fires in the kitchen), afraid of change says she, but pushing toward getting what she wants (Irv calls her “the Picasso of passive-aggressive karate”); Louis C.K. as Cooper's antagonistic, bureaucratically passive boss – the two of them get into some hilarious conflicts. Insanely entertaining, beautifully written and constructed conman film that manages also to satirize New York and Jersey culture, to pursue a touching romantic comedy plot line, and to stage hilarious comic episodes (e.g., in the scene when Richie is trying to court Sydney, but receives a loud phone call from his fiancée and mother, who complains that he is not taking care of her aquarium); not a single dull moment. Irv and Sydney are the original con guys, but soon most of the cast is involved: FBI agent Cooper gets the two to participate in an elaborate con involving illegal money from an Arab Sheik to New Jersey politicians with participation from mafia kingpin Robert De Niro (unbilled; he almost upsets the whole scheme when he starts speaking Arabic); when confronted with destruction, Irv and Sydney hatch their own con within a con that turns the tide on the FBI and gets the two legal immunity; Irv's newfound friend Carmine gets a reduced sentence, Lawrence begins a tolerated affair with her mafia boyfriend (Jack Huston), Cooper gets no credit for his pains, and our romantic pair lives happily ever after. The script is ingenious and exciting: it begins in media res with Bale fixing his hairpiece in front of a mirror in the Plaza Hotel, and after the con trio tries to get Carmine to take bribery money, it moves into flashback to tell the back story of Irv and Sydney using two narrators (brings Ray Liotta's narration in 'Goodfellas' to mind). Extremely snappy dialogue, rapid-fire editing that leaves the viewer barely time to think, characters vividly portrayed by all the actors. Although there is no real moral, the film presents a culture where everything is grey – even the good guys are corrupt (Carmine), and even the bad guys are the focus of the romantic comedy (Irv and Sydney); everybody is a con man -- “We're all conning ourselves one way or another,” Irving says, “just to get through life”; even the FBI man is a con man. Rivetingly entertaining from the first to the last breath. (2014)

American Psycho 2000 Mary Harron 3.5 Christian Bale in break-out role as Patrick Bateman, New York yuppie financial operator – hyper-fit, impeccably dressed, status-obsessed; Reese Witherspoon as his air-head fiancée, also imbedded in the values of the Reagan era; Willem Dafoe rather off-putting as deferential, ineffective private investigator looking into the death of one of Bateman's victims; Chloë Sevigny cute and wholesome as Bateman's loyal secretary, secretly in love with him and

the only sane and attractive character in the film; Samantha Mathis, Cara Seymour (prostitute), and Guinevere Turner (co-writer and the most amusing of Bateman's sex partners/victims) as his female victims. Impressive, memorable, periodically funny, satirical, sometimes horrifying, and rather puzzling film about a soul-less yuppie Wall Street type with a compulsion to commit murder, especially on women he has sex with. The cultural satire is pungent and often funny: the guys try to impress one another with their greeting cards (distinctive typefaces, bone or off-white coloring, special textures, etc.) and their haircuts (Who did yours?); they laugh cynically about women; they are obsessed with dining at cool restaurants – even more about getting reservations at the right place. The look of the film is impeccably bright, shiny, high-tone lighting: cool, Zen-like modernist interiors, close-up shots of beautifully arranged gourmet dishes, bunches of Manhattan skyscrapers (including the World Trade Towers), lighting to show off the slim but impeccably defined muscles of Patrick's body, gleaming knife blades. The violent horror scenes are filmed with reserve (departing from the Ellis book, which describes all in disgusting detail); the sex is fairly explicit, but murder is indicated by bloodstains on the sheets, Patrick doesn't actually pull the trigger when he points a staple gun at the head of one of his victims, shots of dead bodies stored in a closet and a head in the refrigerator are very short; the most ecstatically violent scene has Patrick running naked through the corridor of his condo building wielding a chainsaw in pursuit of Turner. Patrick inexplicably manages to escape detection from both the police (despite his killing of at least one police officer) and the indolent private detective played by Dafoe. The problem is finding the relationship between Patrick's disgust with his social scene and his compulsion to commit horrific acts; the violence certainly dramatizes his loathing of his colleagues; but it is a bit off-putting that he chooses mostly innocent victims to get back at Wall Street. The ending of the film is ambiguous: on the one hand, several scenes indicate that everything will continue as before (when he returns to his apartment prepared to find grisly remains, he finds it instead freshly cleaned and painted by a real estate agent, who tells him not to ask any questions and to leave); on the other hand, Patrick has an impressively acted emotional melt-down, but then returns to lunch with his buddies, where they continue where they had left off. No closure; little explanation. Memorable satirical film with a great performance and a distinctive style. (2014)

American Splendor 2003 Shari Berman, Robert Pulcini 4.0 Paul Giamatti, Hope Davis. Ingenious, moving, interesting, inventive movie about famous underground comic book artist. Pekar is the ultimate nerd with other nerdy (one idiot savant who calls himself "world class nerd") friends working at the VA hospital. His life is disaster with two divorces, no girl friend, and hardly any friends. But he does meet Hope Davis (Joyce) and they form quirky, rather combative relationship. Harvey develops cancer and the two of them fight through it. All this he records in his comic books – he writes the stories, and he gets friends like Robert Crumb to illustrate them. Movie is inventive, with comic book touches, and interviews with the real Harvey and Joyce during the making of the movie. Overall, touching as we make contact with the real comic, forgotten people, not exactly heroes but a man who overcomes his insignificance to find fulfillment and expression in a creative endeavor. The revenge of the nerds! (2004)

American Ultra 2015 Max Landis (writer Nima Nourizadeh) 2.0 Bizarre body-count spy thriller unsuccessfully mixing comedy and violence. Jesse Eisenberg alternately reserved, intense and hyper active as stoner in Wet Virginia living with...; Kristen Stewart, charming and pretty – reminiscent of Ally Sheedy – as girlfriend utterly devoted to Eisenberg. The movie's premise is intriguing: Eisenberg, who smokes pot and manages a depressing Appalachian-style convenience store, is a CIA operative now put to "sleep" for future use. A midlevel CIA guy (Toper Grace trying to be hilarious) decides to eliminate him, but Eisenberg's handler (Victoria Lasseter) decides to defend him at all costs – thus an internal war breaks out in the CIA; perhaps the funniest scene in the movie is when she approaches the uncomprehending Eisenberg in his store and activates him with some mumbo-jumbo phrases. The big twist is that Stewart turns out to be Jesse's immediate handler; she has lived with him for five years, and has fallen in love with him; she will stand by his side until the end. The psychological emphasis and the twists and turns are soon over, and the second half of the film is devoted almost exclusively to extremely gory encounters between the (now) butt-kicking Eisenberg (soon covered with blood) and the super-human robotic goons that Grace sends to eliminate him. An awful lot of fast-firing,

high-caliber automatic weapons tearing up rooms and houses; the comedy however eludes the viewer. e.g., at one point Eisenberg crouching behind an overturned refrigerator throws a cast-iron frying pan into the air and when it turns to the right angle ricochets a bullet off it that passes bloodily through one of the bad guys. In the beginning the screenplay generates credit with the sweet couple (Broderick and Sheedy) threatened in a situation they scarcely understand, but it is all dissipated by the plunge into non-stop butt-kicking. For some reason, most of the film is told in flashback, beginning with the bruised face of Eisenberg in an interrogation room after his arrest and then spooling back to the beginning. The short postscript adds nothing to the narrative. Perhaps the lesson is that only Quentin Tarantino should try to make dismembering violence funny. (2016)

An American Werewolf in London 1981 John Landis 3.5 David Naughton as dark-haired, sweet-tempered, somewhat effeminate American college hiker who doesn't follow instructions when hiking on the moors of northern England; Griffin Dunne as his wise-cracking companion who does most of his acting as a ghoul under heavy make-up; Brian Glover as glowering chess player in the Slaughtered Lamb pub; Jenny Agutter very cute and sincere as Naughton's nurse and lover; John Woodvine as the hospital doctor that believes David's story and sets out to investigate what happened and to save David from his fate. AA for best makeup – Rick Baker. Very entertaining, often shocking, and often witty cult werewolf story involving the fate of two college kids that are attacked on the moors (Yorkshire?). The script picks up from the Universal classics – once bitten by a werewolf you become one yourself when the full moon is out and the curse will continue from generation to generation until the last bitee is dead. David develops into a werewolf slowly leaving plenty of time for suspense. He has vivid dreams of running naked through a forest hunting and feeding on small animals. The script takes us to a quintessential middle-class American family home where Nazi ghouls et al. break in and murder everyone with endless volleys of Uzis; when the film cuts back to David's room and we see him presumably wake up, the pretty nurse walks across the room to fetch him something, she opens the curtains, and ... she is attacked and hacked to bloody pieces by Nazi ghouls – all part of David's dream of course. David's transformation into an ugly feral monster is famously arresting – plenty of painful growth and elongation of limbs accompanied by the cracking and groaning of bones (and of David's voice expressing horror), the growth of hair over his previously pretty, smooth white skin, the transformation of his handsome face into a hideous snout- and carnivorous teeth-dominated mouth. On several occasion in the film Griffin appears in steadily advancing disgusting stages of decomposition – David says in the last one, "You look really bad." Plenty of tension is created by our pity for him, our fears for Agutter, and the attempts of the doctor to intervene. A memorable set piece is the pursuit and eventual murder and mutilation of a nice British middle-class guy in the London Tube, who later reproaches David for his viciousness when they meet in a porno theater in Piccadilly Circus. A memorable conclusion the begins with David's confrontation with Griffin in the porno theater (made for the film and containing some classic bad lines), the destruction of dozens of cars in the street recalling the heroic wrecks in 'The Blues Brothers', and then the finale: the beast is trapped by police riflemen, Agutter tries to save David by approaching him and saying that she loves him (the ugly monster!); hesitation; David lunges at her; the rifles crack and he falls dead; Agutter sobs. Sorry, folks, love does not save him, only the bullets from high-powered rifles. Despite its absurdity, the ending is still moving in its honesty. Movie is recommended for its wit, shocks, humor, and even – on occasion – its thoughtfulness.

L'Ami de mon Amie 1987 Eric Rohmer (France) 4.0 Emmanuelle Chaulet, Sophie Renoir, François-Eric Gendron. Overwhelmingly charming romantic comedy about bright and beautiful young people living in modern suburb of Paris falling in love with (more or less) one another's partners, and managing somehow to do it without ruining friendships. Setting is satellite city of Cergy-Pontoise (designed by Brazilian architect) that is self-contained and beautiful ("like a village," says Blanche) with clean lines, pretty condos and small homes set in charming gardens, even monumental plazas and small lakes where some of the characters go wind surfing. As often in Rohmer, film focuses on the female characters. Blanche (Chaulet) is shy and lonely young woman who works in the cultural office; she is looking for the ideal man and hasn't dated in two years; she is indecisive, passive, really doesn't understand herself (she calls herself "moche"), but like almost all Rohmer characters, she is a good talker.

Lea (Renoir) is statuesque, but delicate brunette, who is more talkative and confident of herself. Gendron is sort of ladies' man (the women come to him), charismatic, humorous and handsome. Chaulet is interested in him; Renoir is dating Fabien; the latter two tire of one another and drift apart; Gendron is not interested in Chaulet; and in the end the two women exchange boyfriends without ruining the friendship they had started up at the very beginning of the film. Dialogue as usual tends toward abstract as the characters good-naturedly analyze their relationships: stylized (little pregnant pauses) but simple, classical French, down-to-earth. Characters always running into one another by accident as they walk around the village, and then they continue the conversations they had to break off in previous scene. Wonderful ending as two women speak at cross purposes (Blanche thinks Lea has taken up again with Fabien!), only later realizing that things are right; the two men come in pretty clueless, a few embarrassed comments, and they go off on their respective vacations (Sardinia and Brittany!). All are happy at the end.

Amistad 1997 Steven Spielberg 3.0 Steven Spielberg's anti-slavery courtroom thriller. Morgan Freeman his usual dull and noble self as freedman abolitionist leading the fight for the black men from the 'Amistad'; Stellan Skarsgard as evangelical abolitionist Tappan, who is given a bad rap; Anthony Hopkins as crusty John Quincy Adams, who has to be persuaded to join the abolitionist cause; Djimon Hounsou as noble Mende man, often shouting and ranting, who agrees to testify to the court as to how the black men were treated on the Portuguese ship; Chiwetel Ejiofor as Mende freedman (he was rescued by the British), who translates for the court; Peter Firth as sensitive, slavery-hating British sea captain that testifies in support of the black men; Mathew McConaughey as the lively Baldwin, who is dedicated to the defense of the black men; Jeremy Northam his usual suave, handsome self as the president's chosen judge, who surprises the socks off us by finding that the men were born in Africa and thus should be freed and returned to their homes in Africa; Arliss Howard as John C. Calhoun, the courtly Southern defender of slavery, who threatens the nation with war if the black men are set free; Nigel Hawthorne as Martin Van Buren, whose only political principles seem to be to get reelected (1840). The film begins with the ship's mutiny, and then focuses on courtroom pyrotechnics, the first in the U.S. District court in Connecticut and the second with John Quincy Adams arguing before the US Supreme Court a short time later. The film has a couple of gritty, horrifying sequences – when the would-be slaves revolt against the ship's crew in the first sequences killing the ship's captain, and when in the first trial Mende describes the horrors of the crossing – the taking of the slaves by black slavers in Sierra Leone, their beating and mistreatment on the slave ship, lightening the ship's load by dragging black slaves over the side attached to chains. Most of the film however is a courtroom drama that will decide whether the black men are legally slaves, or whether not, given that they were kidnapped and transported illegally from Africa in violation of treaties forbidding the slave trade. In the process, the viewer is entertained by picturesque portrayals of historical personalities such as John Quincy Adams, Martin Van Buren, John Calhoun, etc. The suspense is drawn out in both trials, the last resulting in the Supreme Court (surprisingly) upholding the lower court's ruling that the men are African and must be returned to their homelands. The Spielberg style pumps up the sympathy factor – showing babies on the slave ship, seemingly ubiquitous soft emotional music, much of it Spirituals and African music, Cinque shouting repeatedly in the first trial, "Give us us free!" to the accompaniment of the humming chorus, etc. No doubt as to who the heroes are and the optimistic importance – albeit symbolic – of the proceedings. Christianity is pictured in a positive light – the abolitionist leaders taking the initiative, the abolitionist ladies praying fervently for the success of the cause, and even the admiration of Cinque for the story of Jesus and the conversion of several of the Africans. Pace is slow, film is manipulative and sentimental, but there is plenty to sink your teeth into.

Amores Perros 2000 Alejandro Iñárritu (Mexico) 3.5 Gael Garcia Bernal as Octavio, intense youth living with his family in the Mexico City slums; Vanessa Bauche as his pretty sister-in-law, Susanna, with whom he is in love and plans to run away; Alvaro Guerrero as well-off middle class guy, Daniel, who leaves his wife to go to live with a neurotic and insecure super-model; Goya Toledo as that woman, Valeria; Emilio Echevarría as El Chivo, a mysterious street person that lives in filth with his dogs and performs contract killings for a living. Intense, hard-hitting triptic first film by Iñárritu that paints a

lurid picture of life in Mexico City at the end of the 1990s. The film has three distinct stories linked only by a horrific auto accident when Bernal and his friend are running from some underworld characters. The first story deals with working class Bernal's romantic attachment to his sister-in-law; he plans to run away with her with her child with the money he earns from the extremely bloody and disturbing fights he enters his dog in; all goes wrong when Susanna leaves the family home with her husband and Bernal knifes a tough guy in a fight in the dog pen. The second story deals with the disastrous love affair that middle-class Daniel has with the temperamental and depressive model Valeria; he finds himself in a desperate quandary, when Valeria's lap dog gets stuck under the floorboards of her apartment and Valeria has to have a leg amputated after the fateful car accident; their relationship is hopelessly jinxed. The final story depicts the filthy, disheveled street person El Chivo, who enters redemption territory when he decides not to kill the dog that killed his own tribe of dogs and not to murder the man he was paid to; he finishes the film leaving a tearful and heartfelt message for the daughter he hasn't seen since she was two years old, and then walks away over the urban wasteland with his dog at his side. The film has an ingenious semi-fragmented structure: beginning with the madly violent chase (and later crash) that is the structural lynchpin of the film (Octavio is seriously injured, Valeria eventually loses her leg, and El Chivo rescues Octavio's dog, who kills his own dogs); it then transitions to the other stories, occasionally cutting back to a previous one to fill in some details, among them the relation of the main characters to the central accident. The filmmaker's style is consistently violent and intense – hyper-close-ups of the main characters, rapid cross-cutting, verbal and physical violence, a lot of intensely red bloody injuries, especially in the horrifying dog-fighting scenes and the auto accident. The pessimistic sequences in the first two-thirds of the film find some softening in the last: an obvious affection for animals, especially dogs, some glimmer of hope for humanity – Octavio's devotion to Susanna, Daniel's support of Valeria, and the sensitive sadness of El Chivo as he recalls and established a contact with his daughter. The film is dramatic, sometimes excessive and lurid, often riveting. (2015)

Anastasia 1956 Anatole Litvak 3.0 Ingrid Bergman in emotional Academy Award winning role as the amnesiac woman who comes to think she is the one remaining daughter of the tsar of Russia; Yul Brynner fiery, energetic, lithe and youthful as the Russian émigré who wants to pass the girl off as Anastasia, even though he doesn't think she is really her; Helen Hayes in rivetingly dramatic and convincing role as the tsarina's mother (grandmother of Anastasia), who transitions from a skeptical and world-weary old woman to a conviction that Bergman is her granddaughter; Martita Hunt amusing as Hayes' fussy and gossipy woman in waiting; Akim Tamiroff (old and plump!) and Sacha Pitoeff as Brynner's fellow conmen conspirators; Ivan Desny as the colorless Prince Paul, whom everyone expects to marry Anastasia in the end. Uneven character-strong film set in 1928 Paris about one of the women who claimed to be the tsar's surviving daughter; wheller-dealer Brynner and company plot to have her accepted as such so they can participate in the glory and the British bank account awaiting a genuine child of the late imperial family. Most of the drama focuses on the strong performance of Bergman – her first after her return from her extended fling with Roberto Rossellini. At first she is a simple, anguished girl who just wants to find out who she is, but then – possibly through awakened memories – she becomes convinced that she is the real thing, and in a dynamite scene with the skeptical Hayes, she convinces the Dowager Empress that she is really her granddaughter: the point at which Hayes breaks down and embraces Bergman with joy in her eyes is very effective – the high point of the film. The ending of the film is weak: Bergman renounces her proper royal marriage to Prince Paul, and runs off with Brynner; the scene rings false since Brynner and Bergman have developed hardly any romantic chemistry before the end of the film, and in any case, there is no need in the narrative for either one of them to run off -- they could just get married and collect the trust fund. The pleasure of the film lies in the sharp dialogue, in the exotic appearance (bald head, piercing eyes, lithe body) of Brynner, and in the strong performances of Bergman and Hayes. The film has a strong score by Alfred Newman, and it is beautifully restored in sharp Technicolor. A better-than-average 50s 'A' project. (2010)

Anatomy of a Murder 1959 Otto Preminger 4.0 James Stewart in one of his best roles (looking exactly the same as in 'Vertigo') as quirky small town lawyer who loves fishing and jazz and who takes the defense of an unattractive client, Ben Gazzara as the accused who murdered his wife's

lover/rapist, Lee Remick excellent as flirtatious, sluttish wife who may or may not have been raped, Arthur O'Connell as Stewart's alcoholic sidekick, who does some important research and gets off the booze in the process, Eve Arden as usual matter-of-fact self in role as Stewart's long-suffering secretary ("Did you get any money?"), George C Scott intense and aggressive in one of his early roles as hard-hitting prosecutor sent in from Lansing to counter Stewart's wily ways, Joseph Welch (of McCarthy hearings) as avuncular, witty, no-nonsense back country judge who runs an efficient and fair trial. Truly first-rate courtroom drama that never bores despite its length (2:40) and the long verbal duels between Stewart and Scott. Filmed on location in Upper Michigan, the film perfectly reproduces small town, back country atmosphere. Location is in counterpoint with jazzy, big band score by Duke Ellington, who appears in a couple of scenes, once sitting at the piano with Stewart – the jazz identifies the film as unmistakably 50s and sets up a strong counterpoint between the old-fashioned culture of Upper Michigan and the modern. Preminger, as usual, focuses on controversial subject for the late 50s, with references to sluttish behavior, women's underwear, torn pink panties, absence of sperm in a rape victim, one mention of contraception, bar owner dating a married woman, etc. (note the obvious decline of the effectiveness of the Breen Office). From the beginning there is no doubt that Gazzara committed the murder, but Stewart decides to defend him with the "irresistible impulse"/temporary insanity line – it works since the jury returns a verdict of 'not guilty' at the end of the film. The murder plot is ambiguous: Gazzara is a violent, unattractive character jealous of his wife, who flaunts her body when she goes to bars by herself; Remick obviously has affairs with other men, and yet the two seem attached to one another (must be sexually exciting); it is not clear whether she actually was raped (no sperm was found in her) or whether she was "stepping out" with her boyfriend and the bruises on her face were given to her by Gazzara when he found out. It doesn't matter much, since the focus of the film is the pyrotechnics between Stewart, who aggressively plays his back country, aw shucks, home town lawyer persona with great effect on the jury, and Scott, who takes him up point by point, flashes his eyes and juts his chin into the faces of defense witnesses. Whatever happened, it feeds into and supports Stewart's defense of irresistible impulse (his research reveals that a 1886 Michigan Supreme Court case had upheld the line of defense). Very hard to start this movie and not watch it all the way through.(2006)

Anchorman: The Legend of Ron Burgundy 2004 Adam McKay (co-wrote with Ferrell) 2.0 Will Ferrell as dim-witted, childish, clueless, egomaniacal TV news anchor in 1970s San Diego; Christina Applegate, very blond and svelte, perhaps less sexy than she was in 'Married with Children', as aspiring female reporter who is also the sometime romantic squeeze of Burgundy; Fred Willard mostly straight as the station boss; Paul Rudd as a station reporter convinced that he will get the girls with his stinking Panther cologne; Steve Carell as clueless, low-IQ weatherman, who when attempting to show he knows what love is, says "I love you" to a desk, since it is the only thing he can see; David Koechner as clueless, ranting, macho sports announcer; Chris Parnell (SNL) in small role as assistant to the station manager. Although the film barely makes it to the level of a movie, the first half of this SNL spin-off is intermittently amusing. Obsessed with his hair and mustache, willing to read anything that appears on his teleprompter (he once reads "Go fuck yourself, San Diego" without realizing that he may have done something objectionable), obliged to say anything out loud that passes through his consciousness (when he meets Applegate, he tells her that he would like "to be on top of her"; again to impress her he tells her that the name of San Diego derives from a lost Roman saying), Will Ferrell is the heart and soul of the film. He and the three other members of his news team are exceedingly immature and sexist, engaging in the most ridiculous and inexplicable escapades -- making hopeless and repetitive come-ons to Applegate, having face-offs and then duels with competing news teams in parking lots (even the Spanish team participates), attempting to make distracting faces while Applegate is reading her first broadcast, etc. The romantic narrative between Ferrell and Applegate does not convince, even when after an adventure in the Kodiak bear pin in the San Diego Zoo they engage in a final passionate kiss. What in the world could she see in him? The film contains some light satire about the inanity of TV news (the film follows the progress of the local panda's pregnancy throughout the film) and male chauvinist resistance to the arrival of women in the TV news room. But the focus is on rank foolishness rather than telling satire. Too bad the script did not take better advantage of the very funny Ferrell. (2014)

And Then There Were None 1945 René Clair (20c Fox) 3.0 Light-hearted version of Agatha's Christie suspenseful puzzler about 10 (actually 12) people trapped in a deserted island manor house – they die one-by-one wondering which of the guests is responsible. Barry Fitzgerald as retired judge (one of last survivors); Walter Huston as prosperous doctor from Indiana (survivor); Richard Haydn as pinched, alcoholic butler paid by the murderer to host the evening; Roland Young as police inspector (survivor); Louis Hayward, who was responsible for the death of over 20 African natives (survivor); Judith Anderson; Mischa Auer as one of first to be murdered; C. Aubrey Smith as another of the early deceased; June Duprez as young, pretty Vera (survivor). The guests arrive on the island without knowing one another (what would be their motive in coming?) The narrative is cast as delivery of justice for wrongdoing committed in the past, usually murder. The guests are then murdered themselves in various Hays Code permitted ways – poison, mysterious heart attacks, off-screen bludgeonings, a clean bullet hole through the forehead (turns out to be fake); and afterwards all the bodies are neatly stored in the large house's numerous bedrooms. The atmosphere is usually curious – which one of us is responsible for this? – and insouciant – the constant repetition of the catchy little tune about the step-wise disappearance of the ten Indians, the gradual toppling of the individual statues in the Ten Indian sculpture on the dining room table, the ball of yarn that unravels down the stairwell when Anderson dies; each death give rise to extensive conversation among the survivors about the guilty party, etc., whether they should go to bed (but be sure to lock your door), etc. The film is not scary (the deaths seem like a game) and it generates little suspense, since dying at the hands of the plotter doesn't seem to matter much. Plot takes different paths toward the end: the young Hayward and Duprez resist killing one another because they have fallen in love (a possibility the killer has overlooked); when the camera reveals Fitzgerald by the pool table as the executioner, he fails – Duprez refuses to hang herself (she's in love!) and Fitzgerald dies from his own poison, although he is disappointed that two of his victims have survived him. The film ends with a joke when a boatman comes to pick up the survivors. Entertaining for a good cast, good dialogue, light-hearted suspense, although no real drama or comedy. (2016)

And God Created Woman 1956 Roger Vadim (France) 3.0 Brigitte Bardot, Kurt Jurgens, Jean-Louis Trintignant. Film that established Bardot as premier sex kitten in the West. Opens with nude shot of her whole back and backside; not repeated in the film. BB extremely sexy when dressed in loose fitting dresses – very curvy with swelling hips, moderate sized breasts, cute, young roundish face with very pouty lips, long blond hair usually piled up on top of her head. She plays orphan, who is already (apparently) sexually promiscuous at beginning of film; then she spends the rest of the time tempting three men (Antoine Tardieu, Jurgens, and Michel, whom she marries) and generally driving them crazy with her erotic manifestations. She loves Antoine, but marries Michel, more or less out of spite (and presumably for security), but continues to flirt and have a sexual liaison with Antoine. Second high point of film is extremely sexy five-minute solo dance accompanied by orchestra of black musicians (where did they come from?). Photography is picturesque St. Tropez in good color; music is jazzy and cool. Some satirical scenes, but mostly focuses on the sexy persona of BB, although not much nudity (you never even see her bare breasts). (2005)

Angel 2007 Francois Ozon 2.5 Romola Garai as Angel, a bodacious writer of steamy romance fiction that lives in a romantic dream world; Michale Fassbender as n'er-do-well painter of ugly monochrome pictures that falls in love with Angel; Sam Neill in very unchallenging role as Angel's publisher; Charlotte Rampling in cameo role doing very little as Neill's wife; Lucy Russell as Fassbender's sister that also falls in love with Angel and serves as her sensible loyal secretary. Supposedly satirical romance bodice-ripper about a stubborn young woman who becomes a best-selling writer of romance fiction, beds and weds the man she adores, and dies a good Edwardian death after her husband commits suicide (a leg has been amputated from a wound in World War I); the final scene has Angel (with a pallid face and dark rings around her eyes) telling Lucy that she is the only one who ever loved her, and then falling back to expire on her pillow; cut to her friends visiting her grave piously. The film is mildly enjoyable from the spectacular decors (the multi-colored neo-Gothic mansion 'Paradise' that Angel lives in), the authentic Edwardian period costumes, the performance, voluptuous appearance and pre-Raphaelite costumes of Garai, the flourishes of the 50s Sirkian Hollywood soap operas such as the

pumped-up romantic music score (often sounds like 'The Warsaw Concerto') and the hyper-bright Technicolor colors. The character of Angel pops off the page: Completely obsessive-compulsive, she dashes off steamy romance novels without any experience in the matters of love she describes and without revising her manuscript; like one of her heroines, she dreams of living in neo-gothic mansion near her town named 'Paradise'; her books must be selling well, because she buys it, refurbishes it in the gaudiest Edwardian style imaginable, and moves in with Fassbender, whom she has practically forced to marry her. The latter turns out to be a nightmare husband, drinking, gambling, and wenching before he makes the first "adult" decision of his life (his sister's words) to enlist in the army to go to fight the Hun. Although both spouses die, their eternal love is validated by the lovely tombstone in the mansion grounds reverently visited by their survivors. The film doubly errs: first by being a pulpy romance, something Ozon doesn't seem to be made for; second by mocking the characteristics of the genre through hyperbole - the bright costumes, the outrageous characters, the predictable turn of events, the swelling music recalling Sirkian melodrama. Most of the potentially moving and tragic events turn out somewhat ridiculous and irritating.

An Angel at My Table 1990 Jane Campion 3.0 Kerry Fox as the adult version of Janet Frame, the extremely shy New Zealand working class girl who rose painfully to fame in the 1940s and 1950s; Alexia Keough and Karen Ferguson as younger versions of her, uncanny in their resemblance to the adult Janet; Iris Churn and Kevin Wilson affecting as her parents. A TV adaptation of Janet Frame's three-part autobiography. The first part, which is perhaps the most colorful and interesting, chronicles her life as an inhibited and timid child, her affectionate relationships with her siblings (two of whom are killed by drowning), and her experiences as a student until her arrival at college in the big city (Christchurch?); the second focuses on her panic attacks and her rather inexplicable commitment to a mental hospital, where she is subjected, she says, to 200 electroshock treatments and comes within a hair's breadth of having a lobotomy, but is released when a collection of her short stories is published; the third – the most inconclusive – recounts her personal expansion on a scholarship in Europe, her eventual loss of her virginity at the hands of an American would-be poet in Ibiza, and her final return to New Zealand (in her 30s), where she settles down happy to make her living as a prolific writer. The movie maintains the viewer's interest by its persistent focus on Frame's career, giving us often brief glimpses at different experiences in her life. Perhaps the most emotional is the very beginning when the little toddler is coaxed by her affectionate mother to walk through tall grass; in retrospect the scene evokes the sad contrast between the love and innocence of childhood and the struggle and tragedy of adulthood. The central section is very vivid because of the focus on the mental hospital, but is also quite frustrating because of the arbitrary diagnosis of schizophrenia – Janet obviously is very shy to the point of suffering a panic attack when she has to perform as a teacher in front of a classroom inspector, but the film gives no reason to consider her a schizophrenic. The narrative is event focused and often leaves incidents unexplained, e.g., when she has sex with the American and even seems to be having a miscarriage, subsequent scenes do not recount what happened to her – obviously no baby, but did she have a miscarriage, an abortion, etc.? Even with her tangle of red hair and very bad teeth (repaired in the second part of the film), Fox is wanly pretty and outstanding in her portrayal of Frame's hesitant, retiring manner. However there is no psychological breakthrough that would help the viewer understand why she returns to New Zealand and is able to take her place as one of her country's preeminent writers. Her passiveness at times becomes tiresome. The film provides virtually no insight into the qualities of her writing. Perhaps the most moving aspect of the film is simply the survival of a sympathetic, though troubled young woman. (2012)

Angel Face 1952 Otto Preminger 3.0 Robert Mitchum only a little above his minimal energy self as the bamboozled boyfriend; Jean Simmons with chiseled features, bouncy black hair, and pointy breasts looking mostly beautiful and innocent as the undercover femme fatale who hates her stepmother and adores her father; Herbert Marshall looking alcoholic and demoralized as the father of Simmons with writer's block; Barbara O'Neil as wealthy stepmother obsessed with bridge; Leon Ames as lawyer who gets Simmons off the hook; Ken Tobey in small part. Good (sort of) film noir set up in the barren hills of ritzy LA; Mitchum falls under Simmons' spell, and becomes a kind of passive accessory to her murder of

her stepmother and, by accident, of her father. Film takes us through the trial (precursor of 'Anatomy of a Murder') where Ames gets the pair off the murder rap by having them go through a jailhouse marriage; after the trial, Mitchum – with good sense and a basic sense of morality – prepares to leave Simmons, who desperate at being alone (father dead and her boyfriend about to take off for Mexico), shocks the viewer by driving the car off the hill with Mitchum in it, killing him and herself. Film has good twisty plot, and we are left in suspense wondering what Simmons is up to (she does look beautifully innocent), whether Mitchum has played a role in Simmons' first murders, and what is going to happen to the two after the trial. With the femme fatale bamboozling the victim guy, and the destructive ending, film probably qualifies as film noir, but film and editing style is strictly cool, elegant, rather distant Preminger, high-key lighting, and little sense of fate driving the lovers' destiny; sort of mix of film noir and tragic romance. Film suffers a bit from the Preminger cool: Simmons is clearly intended to be evil and conniving, and yet she never shows it to us on camera until she takes Mitchum off the cliff at the end; something very similar for Mitchum, who always seems phlegmatic and shrugging his shoulders. Wouldn't it have been a good idea for Simmons to show her fangs, and Mitchum a little anger, violence, or despair? Still moderately engrossing film that keeps our attention until the violent ending. Simmons is particularly memorable. (2007)

Angels in America 2002 Mike Nichols 2.5 Jeffrey Wright (only one from Kushner play), Streep, Pacino, Thompson, Mary Louise Parker. Visually impressive mini series made from Kushner play (1980s) for HBO. Directed by Mike Nichols. Focuses on AIDS and the homosexual community. Echos of Jean Cocteau's 'Beauty and the Beast' in one of the fantasy sequences, and of Edward Hopper in Parker's frontal nudity in front of her closet gay husband. Six hours long, and runs interminably for viewer looking for a movie experience; enormous quantities of dialogue, and they are very repetitious; when Parker has her last one on the plane flying to West Coast, our hearts sink that we have to go through it again, and we go to empty the trash. The three famous actors, each of whom plays at least two roles, tend to overact, including Pacino, who is however good as an enraged dying man, and Thompson, who spouts Shakespearean/biblical epithets in her two scenes as a hyper dramatic angel appearing to the "prophet" Prior. Pacino plays the infamous Roy Cohn, and does a good, although overheated, job of presenting the monster. Streep is wonderful as Ethel Rosenburg, and in Pacino's death scene she shines with her bit of pity (pretending to be his mother and singing a lullaby in yiddish) and then after he "tricks" her, she pumps her fist in triumph when he finally dies; she is however much less impressive as Joe's (Parker's husband) Mormon mother, who has to come to terms with the real world. Ideas of movie are rather hard to follow for the uninitiated: something to do with denouncing Reagan-era hardheartedness and pitilessness, God being dead or absent, and the angels trying to save mankind from the AIDS plague and designating Prior as prophet, but of what...? The epic part of play seems bungled; heaven has no God and is populated by angels presented as soulless bureaucrats, the most important of which are dressed in street clothes. There is little eroticism, except perhaps between earthlings and Thompson's angel (she shoots from both sides). (2005)

Angels With Dirty Faces 1938 Michael Curtiz (Warners) 2.5 James Cagney in another gangster role as Rocky Sullivan, thin and wiry and always defiant of authority, Pat O'Brien as childhood friend who has become a priest and who obviously represents the forces of good, Ann Sheridan as impossibly clean-cut young woman who is taken with Rocky, Humphrey Bogart in a first major role as a cowardly, wheedling crooked lawyer whose word means nothing – he is the worst of the bad, George Bancroft as another bad gangster who along with Bogart is shot down by Cagney toward the end, the Dead-End Kids, tough-talking although basically good-hearted street kids who follow Rocky. Pretty melodramatic gangster picture cleaned up for the late 1930s. A highly moralistic struggle between the forces of good and evil: the mob is evil (especially Bogart) and the priest and Ann Sheridan are good (Hollywood loves priests in this period); Rocky is doomed to perdition, but his soul might yet be saved; also a struggle between O'Brien and Cagney for the souls of the street kids – will they spend their time smoking and gambling in the pool hall, or will they basketball in the parish gym? Impeccably filmed and well directed, but the Warners gangster picture has lost its realism and grittiness and ability to shock after 1934. Film has some good action sequences: the shooting of the gunman in the phone booth toward the

beginning; the long sequence at the end where Rocky is besieged by innumerable policemen with shots fired and tear gas lobbed into the building; but the violence is stylized, e.g., no blood on the bodies after they have been riddled with bullets; and the final scene where Rocky walks to the gallows has its drama. Confrontations between O'Brien and Cagney sometimes hard to take: O'Brien announces to Rocky that he is going to wage a crusade against him and his gangster friends, and Rocky tells him it is ok, shakes his hand and wishes him luck; at the end O'Brien urges Rocky to die 'yellow' and scream for mercy so that the kids won't worship him; Rocky at first refuses but then shrieks like a stuck pig at the end, while the priest raises his head from his breviary toward heaven in thanksgiving. Last scene has the kids shocked when they read in the papers that 'Rocky died yellow'. The priest confirms it, and all troop off (to the church?) to say a prayer for Rocky to the accompaniment of heavenly music. All the evil have been punished; the cities of America have been cleaned up (all three gangsters are dead); the kids seem to be saved from an outlaw life; and morality has been saved. (2009)

Animal Crackers 1930 Victor Heerman (Paramount) 3.0 Early, perhaps less amusing, Marx Brothers movie based literally on their New York stage hit and actually shot on the East Coast. Groucho is the infamous African explorer Captain Spaulding arriving with his brothers at the upper-class home of Marguerite Dumont. The plotline, which is almost completely irrelevant, involves the theft of a work of art that Dumont is proudly displaying to her guests. The Marxes are up to their usual tricks. Groucho is full of his usual wisecracks: nonsense talk, bad puns ("crook of the month club"), high velocity stringing of bad jokes; his lengthy routine dictating a letter to Chico makes fun of business letter language. Chico is his usual dim-witted self speaking in a patently fake Italian accent: he specializes in bad puns ("cole slaw" becomes "cold sore" [actually displayed rather than spoken], and his long-winded nonsense routine with Groucho about who stole the painting somehow ends up with the conclusion the the guilty party were "left-handed moths"). Harpo with his mute routines is perhaps the funniest of the three: his first arrival which includes his shooting gags (two statues of wrestlers then fire back) and ends with him chasing a pretty girl who happens by; later gags have him pulling the fake copies of the paintings out of his voluminous pants and spraying himself with insecticide so he can lie down next to a pretty girl who has previously fainted. We do however have to put up with a lengthy harp solo. The film has only two musical numbers worth recalling: a love duet by the pretty and peppy Lillian Roth, "Tell Me Dear Why I am So Romantic"; and Groucho's famous entry number, "Hooray for Captain Spaulding" with zany lyrics and an imitative chorus reminiscent of Gilbert and Sullivan that repeats "The captain is a very moral man", his famous nonsense line "Hello, I must be going", his comically awkward dancing that includes a Cleopatra routine, and his bring interrupted by the chorus every time he tries to end the song (the third time he interrupts himself out of frustration). As one would expect, the filming is rather stilted and stagey. Nevertheless, generous amounts of the Marx Brothers' inspired lunacy. (2012)

The Animal Kingdom 1932 Edward Griffith 2.5 Leslie Howard as Tom, a rather indecipherable non-conformist writer who is a disappointment to his straight-laced father; Ann Harding as his long-term live-in girlfriend (!) who wants to be a painter; Myrna Loy as respectable, though sexy, rather manipulative woman whom Howard decides to marry; William Gargan as Tom's alcoholic, loud-mouth butler that Tom refuses to get rid of. Set in upper-middle-class milieu where the people have an interest in the arts. A stagebound comedy of manners with a charming cast but rather hum-drum plot and issues. Howard inexplicably decides to marry Loy when he obviously is in love with aspiring artist Harding; the rest of the film has him oscillating between the respectable life that he has momentarily chosen around Loy and his father, both of them trying to manipulate him into conforming; he tries his best to stay away from Harding and he even begins to write best-selling penny dreadfuls so he can afford to support his demanding wife; in the end, though, he recognizes that he must go back to his true beloved (he calls her "my wife") despite having the sultry Loy waiting for him undressed in the bedroom. Plot conveniently has his choice of true love corresponding exactly with his duty toward his art, which Harding pointed out to him he had abandoned in choosing the straight-and-narrow lifestyle. Rather typical Barry script focusing on the conflict between a conformist suburban, work-in-the-bank lifestyle and follow-your-dream, march-to-your-own-drummer, be-an-artist command from the bottom of your consciousness. Stagebound adaptation with a lot of stagey talk in a limited number of interior sets with

no background music and the continual hiss of the soundtrack. Full of precious dialogue wherein everyone speaks with a modified English accent (especially Myrna Loy and Ann Harding) trying to be witty and sophisticated: e.g., a Harding phrase – “a trifle quixotic of me”; much emphasis on Broadway pseudo-witty repartee. Fairly typical pre- Production Code Administration: two living together in sin; Loy coming across as sexy and waiting for him (in vain) at the end in the bedroom; Howard leaving his wife at the end to go back to his true love, etc. Interesting for film history, but the film lacks cinematic panache. (2009)

Anna Karenina 1936 Clarence Brown 4.0 Greta Garbo, Fredric March, Basil Rathbone, Freddie Bartholomew (annoying!). Wonderful classic Hollywood film from studio era produced by David O. Selznick Script pared down to focus entirely on Anna’s tragic story; Levin almost completely eliminated (briefly referred to as the happy marriage, in contrast to Anna’s sorry fate); about 100 minutes. Usual wonderful decors and costumes; tasteful moody, arty photography with lost of shadows, flickering candles in front of icons, etc. Garbo draws in viewer with her absolute engagement in the role: vulner-able, tired, lonely, often filled with sadness, tears. Rathbone in fine form as clipped, unforgiving, maddeningly decent upper class bureaucrat determined to punish Anna for her immorality (the sanctity of marriage must be protected!). March ok as Vronsky, although characterization seems a little standard/superficial. Film follows imagery of train from very beginning. Theme is rather critical of society. The rules of decency and decorum destroy the woman, who is a slave to her emotions, who gives up all she has, including her son, to be with the man she loves; Vronsky, however, continues – he reenters the army and goes off to war with the prospect of marriage to a rich young beauty. Hays Code played out with destruction of Anna through suicide; impact softened rather by Vronsky’s confession at end that he should have been more sensitive to her! (2006)

Anomalisa 2015 Duke Johnson, Charlie Kaufman 3.0 Curious stop-motion romantic drama using felt-looking dolls; Anomalisa is the Japanese-inspired name that Michael gives his lover. David Thewlis as the British accented voice of depressed salesman Michael Stone, arriving on an airplane in Cincinnati to give a sales speech; Tom Noonan as the voice of most of the film’s characters, including the females; Jennifer Jason Leigh as Lisa, the only character in the film voiced by a female. A fundamentally depressing drama about Michael’s inability to relate to others until he meets Lisa in his hotel; although the narrative is ordinary and predictable, the film gains an existential piquancy and interest from its stop-motion work. The film is drab and slow-moving. Stone arrives in Cincinnati, has a conversation with the taxi driver, walking stooped and expressionless, he checks into the hotel, goes to his room in real time, turns on the television, looks out the window, orders from room service, etc. – all of our actions are repetitive and essentially empty, there is no way to escape existential depression. The movement of the dolls is slow and deliberate; the faces are segmented and artificial looking, giving the characters a robotic and surreal appearance (at one point Michael actually removes his facial mechanism and then replaces it). Michael’s inability to relate to other individuals is expressed by having other characters voiced by one male actor; everyone outside of himself is featureless and the same; again a bizarre, surreal effect from having children and female characters speak in a male voice. Michael has particular issues with relating to women – his relationship with his wife is tense, and an attempt to reconnect with a former girlfriend in the hotel bar leads to anger and recriminations (conversations between lovers in this film are replete “fuck yous”). The dramatic moment occurs when Michael unexpectedly meets Lisa, who surprises the viewer by chatting with Michael in a female voice. They get to know one another, she goes to his room, and they have hesitant, affectionate sex depicted in slow-moving detail (including oral sex and Lisa’s and Michael’s orgasms). Sexual intimacy however does not seem to change anything. While sleeping with Lisa, Michael has a surreal dream in which the hotel manager (and a host of typist assistants) attempt to intimidate Michael into abandoning Lisa, assuring him that it is everyone else that really loves him. Afterwards Lisa returns to her home in Akron, and Michael returns home, where a surprise party organized by his ambiguous wife fails to please him. There is no salvation for Michael. A ray of light appears with Lisa, to whom the focus of the film switches after the encounter: she seems to gain self-esteem and appears to appreciate the memory of their experience even if it does not lead to a permanent connection. Looks as if a temporary link is all we can hope for. (2016)

Another Year 2010 Mike Leigh (Great Britain) 3.5 Jim Broadbent as avuncular, laid back, prosperous and happy middle class engineer living just north of London; Ruth Sheen ditto with disappearing chin and prominent teeth and devoted to her garden (“the allotment”) along with her adoring husband; Leslie Manville as whiney, needy, alcoholic 50-something work friend of Sheen; Peter Wight as another needy, overweight, old buddy of Broadbent bent on smoking or drinking himself to death (maybe both) in the same night; David Bradley as angry, bitter, non-verbal brother of Broadbent whose wife dies in the Winter segment of the film; Imelda Staunton (Vera Drake) as very unhappy insomniac who rejects counselor Sheen’s ministrations at the beginning of the film, never to return. Mike Leigh dealing this time with the middle class meritocracy, some of whom have made it (Broadbent and Sheen) and some not (Manville and Wight); nary a reference to the sherry-sipping upper classes or the working class blokes in this analysis of the impact of social democracy since the Second World War; some of these university graduates have made good and seem to be happy; others are unsuccessful, no mate, dead-end jobs, dependence on intoxicants, and particularly unhappy since the system expected them to make something of themselves. Film is divided into four segments corresponding to the seasons: Spring where we meet Sheen in the hospital and spend our first evening with Manville; Summer where Wight comes by, drinks and smokes all evening, makes passes at Manville who assures him that she does not have those kinds of feelings for him, and where Manville makes it clear that she (foolishly!) thinks Broadbent’s son (Martin Savage) is a possible mate; Fall when son Joe brings by his new girlfriend, who hits it off with Sheen, but comes across as silly and brainless; Winter when the whole family goes to Hull to be with Bradley in his stunned non-verbal mourning. The film ends with Manville again in the house to disturb the family fun (Sheen is quite put out with her) and as the others talk of the fun to come, Manville stares emptily and disconsolately at the camera. Film moves quite slowly with a lot of shots where nothing happens except pregnant silence, although it never seems boring; it also has little narrative curve, since nothing dramatic happens and there is never any real suspense (it is absurd to think that Manville might hook up with the inchoate Bradley): you just get to know the characters and work out in your mind the differences between the happy ones and miserable ones. The film lacks the tight drama – intense (‘Secrets and Lies’) or more relaxed (‘Life is Sweet’). All the characters are fully drawn, and the unblessed ones are vivid and memorable; Broadbent and Sheen, and to a lesser extent their son, are just too well adjusted to be interesting, but the three ‘nether’ characters hold one’s attention. The film excels in social and personal observation; but it’s hard to get personally involved when the two main characters are so perfect and easy-going and perhaps just a wee bit smug and self-satisfied. (2011)

Anthony Zimmer 2005 Jérôme Salle (France) 3.0 Yvan Attal as low-key guy on a train who is picked up by Marceau because of his resemblance to her former lover and master criminal, Anthony Zimmer; Sophie Marceau interesting, pretty and unfathomable as a police agent (I think) helping Akerman to catch Zimmer; Sami Frey as charismatic police inspector devoted to catching Zimmer. Twisty and perhaps unfathomable French police thriller that follows the pursuit of master criminal Anthony Zimmer (who however has had his appearance changed by plastic surgery), while taking us through some memorable scenery on the French Côte d’Azur. For most of the film, the viewer does not know that Marceau is a policewoman, and we follow her and Attal in and out of glamorous hotels on the Riviera while pursued by ruthless Russian gangsters, who are also after Zimmer. Marceau and Attal appear to fall in love with one another, although we cannot help but wonder what a slick chick like Marceau sees in the droopy Attal. Two major surprises catch the audience’s attention: it is revealed that Marceau is a policewoman (in the French Douanes) and that she is working with the implacable Akerman (with his abundant hair and prominent nose a commanding presence in the film). The police set an ambush for Zimmer in a striking modernist house set in a scrub forest on the Mediterranean coast; the confusing action ends with the well-armed police killing all the Russian henchmen who turn up there also to get (kill) Zimmer. Then the second twist: when alone with Marceau, Attal reveals to her that he is Zimmer and that the reason she didn’t recognize him is because he had so expertly changed his appearance (and the reason she fell in love with him is that she somehow sense that he is the man she has loved). The issue is whether she will reveal his identity to her police colleagues; but she gives the police his cover name, they step into a car, and from magnificent helicopter shots we see them drive down the

winding road through the forest to live happily ever after. The film is beautifully shot: the close-ups of the principals, the integration of the human actors in the lovely southern environment, interesting and effective mise-en-scene and editing. The film falls short of masterpiece status partly because of incredible psychology – Attal never convinces us that he could be a criminal mastermind! – and partly because of overtrickiness and ambiguities in the script – e.g., just what was going on in the train scene where Marceau strikes up the relationship with Attal? Was she sent there by Akerman and she just happened to pick the man (the only one in the TGV car) who was really Zimmer (her old lover)? Nevertheless, enjoyable and shows promise. (2008)

Antonia's Line Holland 1995 Marleen Gorris 3.0 Bucolic feminist movie. Women don't need men except for sperm, and in fact do better without them. Many of the men are violent and rapists; the others rarely do anything. Antonia returns to her Dutch farm after World War II, settles down on a farm, gathers a large extended family around her, and manages willy nilly to perpetuate her genetic line. Some magic realism reminiscent of Tavianis – statue that cries, corpse rises from coffin and sings, teacher envisaged as Botticelli's Venus. All rather pagan – we are settled in the midst of nature, and are part of its cycle; death is just a transition to another stage. Consistently hostile attitude toward the Catholic Church, which is patriarchal and oppressive; worthy of mocking. Like 'Babette's Feast,' we are enjoined to enjoy life – eating, sex, love, child-rearing and companionship. Church=men=society=repression. Rather hippie – salvation lies in simplicity, in the country. The film is entertaining; at least the viewer is not bored. (2006)

Anywhere but Here 1999 Wayne Wang 2.5 Susan Sarandon as impulsive, non-conformist middle-aged woman, who decides to leave her husband in boring Wisconsin to seek fortune and excitement in Beverly Hills; Natalie Portman as earnest, straight-laced, although cute and petulant, 14-year-old, who resents Sarandon for making her leave her friends and grandmother for the unknown. Moderately entertaining, but essentially vacant women's pic about the travails of a fractious mother-daughter relationship. The two go through many ups and downs – Portman always appears the more mature, the electricity in their apartment gets cut off when mom doesn't pay the bill, mother has a romance with a womanizer that immediately abandons her, Mom embarrasses Portman when she has friends over, etc. Their mutual love triumphs however in the LA Airport when Portman finally gets her way and heads off to Providence to go to Brown University instead of UCLA, which is her mother's choice; heart-warming ending. Both actresses do excellent jobs portraying their characters, as does Michael Milhoan, a cop who gives Sarandon and Portman a couple of valuable life lessons when he stops Sarandon for traffic violations. The tension between Sarandon's ambitions and her financial means is nicely symbolized by her older-model gold Mercedes, which she finally sells to help finance Portman's college ambitions. The movie's interest lies in the complexities of Sarandon's and Portman's characters and in the success of the two stars in bringing their characters to life. The plot, situations, and outcome are pretty routine. It appears that the movie considerably sanitizes the Mona Simpson book it is based on. Since this film comes on the heels of 'Joy Luck Club', Wayne Wang seems to be making a specialty of women's movies. (2014)

The Apartment 1960 Billy Wilder 4.0 Jack Lemmon wonderfully comic and dramatic as young lonely schlemiel working in the accounting department of a New York insurance company; Shirley McLain glowing and adorable as Fran Kubelik, the elevator operator in the insurance company; Fred MacMurray wonderfully understated and matter-of-fact as insensitive heel of a boss and lover; Ray Walston very amusing as one of the jerk bosses that forces Lemmon to let them use his apartment for trysts with mindless secretaries; Jack *** as Lemmon's neighbor, a Mensch who berates Lemmon for his presumptive womanizing, saves McLain's life, and serves as a moral model for the film. Fantastically good romantic comedy with genuine dramatic feeling and hilarious satire about corporate America. Film is essentially a romantic comedy; boy meets girl on the elevator; girl treats the boy as a friend since she is hopelessly in love with another guy; she finally realizes what a jerk he is, breaks with him, and throws in her lot with Lemmon: last scene is heart-warming as McLain tells Lemmon to deal the cards for their second game of gin rummy and the film ends with gentle grins on their faces. Film works in part because

of superior script: even though some of the exchanges are rather long, the dialogue is always credible and it draws the viewer in. Just as important are the principals. Lemmon expertly weaves comedy with romantic feeling; he is the shy, fidgety, lonely “man in the crowd”, a milksop who can never say no to his bosses and who is reluctant to declare his feeling for McLain since he does not want to interfere in her relationship with MacMurray; on the other hand, he makes it clear that he is in love with her. McLain’s character is simpler: she is also lonely and a bit sad since she has always been unlucky in love; her persistent affection for MacMurray strains credibility; but her adorable face with the cute short hair, her sadness, innocence and genuineness that stream forth in her close-ups, manifested signs of her internal struggle all force the viewer to take a stake in her fate. The film score, which is based primarily on various versions of the famous theme [sometimes full orchestra (grand), sometimes Rachmaninoffian piano (powerfully emotional), sometimes a flute (quiet, contemplative interlude), sometimes solo violin (sentimentally romantic)], effectively reinforces the drama. The film is full of Wilder’s wit and sometimes caustic satire about American corporate institutions. The first part of the film has several scenes reminiscent of King Vidor’s “The Crowd” in the corporate office – Lemmon’s head nods to follow the movements of his calculating machines – he does exactly the same thing day after day; he stays after closing time and we see him at his desk alone lined up with hundreds of others in the same big room. It is apparent that the executives in the business have warped values; they promote people who abet their sexual flings with their secretaries and telephone operators; the way to move up in the business is to do favors (lending your apartment for trysts) for your boss; it has little to do with dedication to the company or hard work. The actors who play the exploitative bosses are very effective. Not often to find a film that scores so high as a romantic comedy, a personal drama, and a social satire. (2009)

Apocalypto 2006 Mel Gibson 3.0 Rudy Youngblood as protagonist Jaguar Paw; Dalia Hernandez as his pregnant wife. Extraordinarily interesting but repulsively violent film set in Central America (vaguely Mayan) sometime before the arrival of the Spaniards. The over-the-top brutal Mayans attack a small Edenic village in the jungle, murder many, carry the rest off for sacrifice to the blood thirsty Mayan gods; only Rudy escapes, and he returns to rescue his pregnant wife and baby from the well/cave where he put them to hide them from the attackers, and then he returns to wreak revenge on his persecutors. The film has a traditional Hollywood plot and look (the Indian leads are much prettier than the bulk of the population) with the viewer rooting for Jaguar paw’s escape and then tensely awaiting his revenge on the evil Mayans. The film is a triumph of convincing visual detail – the rotten teeth of the warriors, their tattooed buttocks, the huge, real-looking set representing the Mayan city that is obviously in social and economic crisis, the vast crowds of Mayans present at the sacrifice ceremony all dressed in colorful detailed costumes (the historical accuracy of the events and the appearance however is under question). Shocking is the director’s sadistic lengthy lingering on the most brutal acts of violence – the evisceration of the slaughtered tapir in the first scene and one of the warriors eating its testicles (!), the sadistic cruelty of the Mayan captors, insisting that the viewer watch three bloody sacrifice on the top of the temple (cut the palpitating heart out, decapitate the body and throw the head bounding down perhaps 100 steps, and then throw the body tumbling down), the contest to spear the running captives when they are allowed to run and try to escape, walking through a Jewish holocaust-like graveyard strewn with grey headless bodies, watching a panther rip the face off one of the Mayan warriors, etc., etc. Such a focus indicates a seriously disordered soul (Gibson). Gibson’s intentions are obviously allegorical. The Mayan state seems parallel to the later centuries of the Roman Empire with its economic crisis, mistreatment of slaves, etc., and before the coming of the softening, civilizing influence of Christianity. Also he seems to be warning us that unless we reform ourselves (abolish abortion?), we will soon go the way of the decadent Mayans. But (pace Kenneth Tynan) Gibson seems part of the problem rather than the solution! Entertaining film, but shocking and scandalous! (2010)

Apollo 13 1995 Ron Howard 3.0 Tom Hanks imperturbable, quietly noble everyman rising to the occasion; Kevin Bacon as the only bachelor on the shuttle; Bill Paxton as the third crew member who has a 104 degree temperature; Gary Sinise as the crew member left behind because of his exposure to measles; Ed Harris as the imperturbably determined and optimistic flight chief in Houston; Kathleen Quinlan as the stoic, very 60s housewife. Emotionally engaging semi-documentary about the near

disastrous moon flight in 1970. Special effects are very effective: the impression of flying through the emptiness of space; the sights of the moon and the earth out of the portholes; the simulation of the effects of the explosion; the fiery reentry; the amazingly detailed and seemingly accurate depiction of the interior of the spacecraft. Howard maintains the suspense throughout: will the crew survive in space after the explosion; will they survive the CO2 crisis (they solve it with a bit of Yankee ingenuity); can they pull off the burns with the damaged motors and no computer guidance; will they enter the atmosphere of earth at the right angle (to keep from skipping off into space); the whole time the large ground crew in Houston under Harris labors indefatigably to improvise this completely unplanned and unrehearsed situation; joy is in every heart when the chutes are spotted after a four-minute communications blackout and the men are retrieved by the helicopters from the command module. Film cuts back regularly to wife and children on earth to pump up the emotional stake, including even the return to family values of the rebellious teenage daughter – this aspect becomes a bit repetitive. Hanks is an effective anchor – quietly, efficiently, and engagingly doing his job to get his crew back safely. Film comes across as a quietly patriotic ‘Rocky’ movie – great danger and obstacles, which are overcome in triumph at the end. The Hollywood formula irritates at times, but overall an engaging, exciting, and satisfying Hollywood-style film. (2007)

The Apostle 1998 Robert Duvall 3.5 Robert Duvall, Farah Fawcett, Billy Bob Thornton, Miranda Richardson, John Beasley. Convincing, honest treatment about white preacher (specializes in Black audiences), who commits murder, then sets out to redeem himself; and he does before he is finally arrested. Duvall is terrific as Sonny, or E.F.; he has the fire of Jesus in him; enthusiastic, energetic; generous with himself and his possessions (he gives all his gold to the church when he is arrested), and will do anything to spread the Word and make people happy; very intense personality that worries his fellow preacher and Farah Fawcett, whom he courts for a while; obviously a potential for violence that breaks out in his attack against wife’s boyfriend and leads him to challenge Billy Bob Thornton to a fistfight; inability to keep his mouth shut – he is even almost preaching to the deputies who haul him off to jail. His congregations are mix of Black and white, and he gets furious when somebody suggests that white and Black shouldn’t worship together. Realist texture: set in very ordinary small-town Louisiana surroundings (Bayou Boutté); dialogue completely colloquial; many of smaller parts played by amateur actors; long takes and long scenes that match the slow energy of the southern town (sometimes the scenes last a bit long, such as the final sermon before Sonny is taken off by the police). Depicts the wonderful energy of Southern religion: the emotionalism that gives meaning to lives of the faithful (conversion always accompanied by tears, even among men); the social gatherings and sense of belonging; the fun and even the internal back-biting; the sense of community of people who call one another “brother” and “sister.” Most affecting scene is conversion of Billy Bob Thornton, racist bulldozer operator, who is converted in emotional scene when he arrives at church picnic to tear down the church. A rare gem among American movies dealing honestly with religion. (2005)

Appaloosa 2008 Ed Harris 3.5 Ed Harris as lawman for hire – he is ready to settle down; Viggo Mortensen difficult to recognize behind facial hair as Harris' charismatic and honorable deputy; Jeremy Irons talking like John Huston as the bad guy (he murders the sheriff and his two deputies in the first scene of the film); Renée Zellweger as the decidedly unclassical lady who hooks up with Harris but doesn't stop prowling for men. Harris is back in his second directed film. A truly excellent classical western with interesting character study, although somewhat undermined by the presence of the botox-injected (?) Zellweger, who is hard to look at when she is on screen. Film is shot in the glorious desert and mountain country near Santa Fe, New Mexico – sweeping shots of the friendly, brightly lit landscape. Harris hires himself and Mortensen out to the town of Appaloosa to protect them against Bragg; he kills a few of Bragg's men (Mortensen is entertaining walking around with his ubiquitous 8-gauge shotgun), arrests him, has him condemned to be hanged in a questionable proceeding, has to chase him again when he escapes from the train that is taking him to his execution; Mortensen ends the film with an assertion of lawman's honor and protection of his friend when he shoots a pardoned and supposedly rehabilitated Bragg dead in the street. Film focuses on the friendship between Mortensen and Harris. They have been together for about 12 years (the West is close to being integrated into the USA), and they project loyalty and affection with gestures and facial expressions rather than a lot of words. Harris is a little off center

and depends a lot on the taciturn and always reliable Viggo: the latter is an educated man (he went to West Point) and helps Harris find Latinate words and finish his sentences; as Harris constantly makes a fool of himself by continuing his pursuit of the faithless Zellweger, Mortensen covers for him and helps give the couple another chance. Film also deals with the issue of keeping the law in the Old West: the two for-hire marshals conscientiously enforce the law asking the skittish townspeople to pass enough ordinances to give them authority, but they are prone to outbursts of violence, and they don't mind provoking privately motivated showdowns: the best being the finale when Mortensen challenges Irons and then kills him to "give Harris and Zellweger another chance" and to save Harris' job, since he is in danger of being fired by the Bragg-influenced townspeople. The finale invokes personal honor, support for one's friend, and a conscientious devotion to duty. Harris stays put with his wife of questionable virtue, and Mortensen rides off into the sunset (literally) commenting that he doesn't know where he is going (the two rode into town in the beginning of the film). Excellent update of the classical western, although slightly marred by the Zellweger presence. (2009)

L'appartement 1996 Gilles Mimouni (France) 3.0 Vincent Cassel young and lean as obsessive trying to recapture his lost love; Monica Bellucci as the lost love, cool, elusive, unfathomable; the classically beautiful Monica Bellucci as the object of Cassel's obsession; Romane Bohringer as her more-or-less look-alike sexy friend that is dating Ecoffey but who is obsessed with Cassel; Jean-Philippe Ecoffey Russian-seeming best friend of Cassel; Sandrine Kiberlain as Cassel's respectable girlfriend that he expects to marry. Impossible-to-categorize, brilliantly directed and edited French film that has elements of a thriller, of a romantic comedy, and of a homage to Alfred Hitchcock. Cassel, who is about to fly to Tokyo for an important business meeting, intends to marry Kiberlain, but when he catches a glimpse of his former girlfriend, Bellucci, he impulsively drops everything and launches a pursuit of her with the help of his friend Ecoffey; when with the help of a key that Bellucci left in a phone booth (McGuffin), he thinks he has found her in her apartment, it turns out that the woman is her look-alike friend Bohringer, who herself has been obsessed with Cassel for at least a couple of years; although he makes love with Bohringer, Cassel persists in his search for Bellucci; Bellucci is murdered by another boyfriend (in a melodramatic explosion and fire in the telltale apartment) and Bohringer has a nervous breakdown during a performance of "A Midsummer Night's Dream"; when Cassel reads Bohringer's diary detailing her love for him, he rushes to DeGaulle Airport to intercept her before she can leave for Italy; they embrace joyfully, but when Kiberlain arrives (by chance?) in front of the camera, Bohringer leaves momentarily, and when she returns, Cassel and Kiberlain are holding one another in a cool embrace; Bohringer seems happy enough, credits roll, end of film. Despite its narrative absurdities, the film is attention-riveting. The director shifts back and forth between the present (above narrative) and the past when Cassel and Bellucci were lovers; the switches are not particularly enlightening -- the viewer is reduced to looking for telltale haircut changes to determine which time frame we are in -- but they keep the viewer focused and provide opportunity for playful homages to Hitchcock: in flashback Cassel races up a staircase trying to get a glimpse of Bellucci thus recalling Stewart climbing painfully the stairs of the belltower in 'Vertigo'; Bohringer stares through a window spying on Bellucci, which of course recalls the voyeur activities of Stewart in 'Rear Window'; to the accompaniment of Bernard Herrmann-like music Cassel follows Bellucci through the streets of Paris, even going into a florist's to watch her buy a red rose (following Madeleine in 'Vertigo'); and Cassel even has to stretch his arm to retrieve the key to Bellucci's apartment that has fallen through a grate into a sewer drain ('Strangers on a Train'). The music and the plane-changing camera focus even recall Brian DePalma in 'Obsession' and in 'Dressed to Kill'. The psychology of the individual characters is rarely credible; either they are completely marginal (Kiberlain and the murderous lover) or crazily unpredictable (all the main characters). The subject of the film is ambiguous, to say the least: one can hardly believe it is a romantic comedy, when the real romantic object -- Bellucci -- is murdered and abandoned. Is the ending supposed to suggest that the film is really about Max overcoming his sexual immaturity and settling down with Kiberlain to live happily ever after? Is the film conceived as a satire of thrillers and the French obsession with 'amour fou'? A fun ride that deserves more clarity and focus. (2010)

Applause 1929 Rouben Mamoulian (Paramount) 3.0 Helen Morgan in performance as aging, probably alcoholic, but kind and loving burlesque performer, Kitty Darling; Joan Peers as her daughter April speaking in stilted, labored, pseudo-British accent (girl becomes “guhll”); Henry Wadsworth as Tony, a homespun sailor from Wisconsin that April meets; Fuller Mellish as pushy boyfriend Hitch talking gangster talk. Stilted, sentimental early sound studio film notable primarily for its imaginative, mobile camera and editing; although not a musical, Morgan sings some songs. A fairly realist take on the backstage culture of burlesque theater including natural dialogue, gritty sets, and some outdoors, location filming. The plot is a precursor of ‘Stella Dallas’ with Morgan sacrificing everything for her daughter, who however is an ingénue rather than a spoiled brat (Ann Sheridan). Morgan sends Peers off to a convent school (piously presented with lots of praying and statues of the Virgin) in the beginning so she will be a respectable woman, but when she returns to her mom’s milieu, she is lost; she finds possible salvation in her sudden love for a sailor she meets in the street, but a confusing ending jerks the viewer in several directions – Morgan commits suicide by taking poison, April takes leave of Tony in a moving scene filmed in the New York Subway, she does a sexy, imaginatively photographed burlesque performance herself (condemned to follow in her mom’s footsteps?), but then backstage she runs into Tony, who has decided to stay after all. Morgan is not capable of carrying the main role, but she does have a couple of good scenes, including one when she realizes that she has become old and useless and that the only way out is suicide – the camera underlines the point by tracking onto a glamor portrait of Morgan in her prime. Mamoulian gives us an amazingly mobile camera at a time when most of them seem screwed to the floor. The camera tracks backwards and forwards when appropriate, e.g., when Peers is leaving the convent for the real world, or pans quickly back and forth to show Morgan’s thought sequence. He also uses rapid-fire editing, e.g., during April’s burlesque performance, shadows on the wall or behind a frosted glass window, rack editing, e.g., showing mom’s performance while April is talking, a montage sequence to show April’s confused dreams. A particularly memorable cut fades from April taking a glass of water in a restaurant to her mother taking a drink from a glass filled with poison. The narrative is sentimental and hackneyed and the acting is gauche and stilted, but the film is saved by the camerawork and editing. (2010)

Après vous 2003 Pierre Salvadori 2.5 Daniel Auteuil charming as ever as extremely complaisant gérant of a fancy restaurant in Paris; Jose Garcia as blathering emotional basket case determined to end his life because he was dumped by his girlfriend; Sandrine Kiberlain tall, willowy, light-haired, rather hook-nosed, and loose-moraled as that former girlfriend working in a florist shop; Michelle Moretti as Auteuil’s long-suffering girlfriend reflecting whether she will marry him. An intermittently amusing bankable little farce about an overly kind man and the trouble one can get into through romantic entanglements. Auteuil stumbles upon Garcia ready to commit suicide in a park; he saves him - much against the latter’s will - and then goes way beyond the call of duty to help him straighten out his life: he squares things with his grandmother, finds him a job, and tries to help him get his girlfriend back; the switch is that Auteuil and Kiberlain fall in love themselves, and at the end begin their happily ever after as Garcia - now apparently restored to emotional equilibrium - takes his revenge by bashing in his former friend’s car. Some wonderful gags in the first 45 minutes get the film off to a strong start. The early sequence in which Auteuil tries to reassure the priceless, partially blind grandmother (Andrée Tainsy) about her grandson is side-splitting. Even better is the interview that Auteuil arranges for Garcia to get a job at the restaurant as sommelier in his restaurant: Garcia gets off to a rocky start by guzzling the wine that he is supposed to evaluate, and then fails to interpret Auteuil’s hilarious hand signals indicating that he should suggest lobster to be eaten with the wine. Another funny sequence has Moretti think that Auteuil is proposing marriage when she sees the enormous quantity of flowers and the statuette of a wedding couple that he had bought in order to get the attention of Kiberlain. The second half of the film is quite dull, partly because one tires of the silly, repetitious interactions of the two principals, and partly because the film remains a farce and does not venture into the territory of satire (comédie des mœurs) or psychological depth. Since the film is essentially aimless and we don’t really care about the principals, the ending is of little interest; almost any ending would do. (2010)

Arbitrage 2012 Nicholas Jarecki 3.0 Richard Gere fairly annoying as silver-haired, athletic, alpha male hedge fund manager who is in deep doo-doo; Susan Sarandon in rather minor role as apparently dutiful wife who pulls a surprise switch at the end; Tim Roth as a slouching, rude Columbo-style police detective obsessed with getting the goods on rich guys like Gere; Brit Marlin as Gere's daughter and business partner (?) who – incredibly – doesn't know anything about Gere's financial shenanigans (her acting abilities are unfortunately quite limited); Nate Parker as very decent Harlem-living black guy that bails out Gere when he is in a bind and gets in trouble as a result (it is hard to believe that he has a caring relationship with a bastard like Gere). Entertaining, tightly plotted, and well-directed thriller that is critical of high finance. Gere is Gordon-Gecko-style mover and shaker making multi-hundred-million dollar deals and living high off the hog as a result. He however has multiple problems: a big merger deal is about to go south because of his fraudulent actions, and he is under investigation by the police because of the death of his high-maintenance girlfriend (a fiery Latina Laetitia Casta) in an automobile accident. Gere is threatened from many sides: the possibility that the merger deal will fail, thus laying bare his cheating, the possibility that Parker will tell all to the police in order to avoid jail time, the possibility that his wife and daughter will find out what sort of person he is. All the narrative strands of the film are well manipulated to keep the viewer attentive and on the edge of his seat. The film ends with Gere having to tell his daughter everything about his financial problems, and then confronting his wife, who makes a deal with him: she won't reveal incriminating information to the police about the death of Casta, if he will sign all of his assets (still considerable, since the deal with the purchasing bank did go through) to a charitable foundation with his daughter in charge. He eventually agrees, and the film ends with him being lionized by New York society for his generosity; as he stands at the microphone, the viewer knows he will just start over again – you can't slow down a shark. Art decoration in the film is wonderful depicting sumptuous home decoration, priceless works of art, riding in chauffeured limousines, etc. The film is critical of high finance, but without the cutting edge of films like 'Margin Call'. Much of one's attitude will depend on your reaction to Gere: beautiful, brilliant, arrogant, obsessed with money, dressed in glamorous expensive clothing, leading a life of risk on the edge of annihilation, and yet showing underneath a certain loyalty to his family (do we really believe that?). Film has references to Gordon Gecko in 'Wall Street', Jon Hamm in 'Mad Men' (the automobile accident that kills a lover), 'Margin Call', and 'Crimes and Misdemeanors' (Martin Landau glorified at the end despite the murder of his mistress). Film might have been better if Douglas had played the lead. (2012)

Argent de poche 1976 François Truffaut 4.0 Charming movie about children. Episodic structure including: little girl left in her apartment by parents, and then fed by other inhabitants of the HLM; little tyke crawls out on the ledge of his apartment and falls four stories, and bounces when he hits bottom. Follows stories: the welfare kid who is abused by his mother and grandmother; the teacher so dedicated to his kids, married, and give birth toward the end; little Patrick with no mother, very shy with girls, crush on the glamorous mother of one of his camarades, but then finds *une petite amie* in the last scene. Light hearted song on the soundtrack – Bécud style with guitar accompaniment. Has trademark light-hearted Truffaut touch (he has small cameo in beginning). Obvious continuation of themes in *400 coups*, but more happy and optimistic, and not focused on one character. Ends with marvelous, almost thrilling pro-child speech by teacher – classic. Our well-being depends on how we treat our children! (2005)

Argo 2012 Ben Affleck 3.0 Ben Affleck as CIA operative specializing in extracting US diplomats from dangerous situations; Bryan Cranston as his boss usually looking mad and determined to bend the rules of the bureaucracy to get the job done; Alan Arkin as low-level Hollywood producer (foul-mouthed – he invents the mantra “Argo go fuck yourself”) recruited to give credibility to Affleck's scheme; John Goodman hilarious and very big as Hollywood producer (?) of cheapo science fiction movies; a host of unknown actors playing the mousey American diplomats holed up in the home of the Canadian ambassador. Entertaining, compulsively suspenseful film about the successful plot to get six American diplomats out of Iran following the hostage-taking in 1979 and 1980. The film first sets up the situation with newsreel footage and lots of pictures of angry, young, bearded Iranians raging against “The Great Satan”, etc.; Affleck then comes up with the gimmick to present the concealed Americans as a

Canadian film production crew and expends a lot of energy convincing them to take the risk (a little annoying since they didn't really have an alternative); and then the last 30-40 minutes in which the escape group overcomes multiple obstacles imagined by the scenarist to escape finally on their 747 with the Iranian Revolutionary Guards chasing them down the runway. The film is essentially a well-made Hollywood crowd-pleaser with good guys pitted against really bad guys, a lot of suspense relieved somewhat by our knowledge that the escape will succeed, good guys triumphing, and a long postscript celebrating the heroism of the Canadians and their exemplary cooperation with the US government. The film is very well constructed, moving efficiently among interesting situations, not the least of which is the development of the (absurd) film cover by the pungent Hollywood personalities. The crowd scenes are effective, evoking the danger threatening the escaped diplomats and sharpening the dislike of the Western viewer. The creation of danger and suspense in the last part of the film approaches ridiculous proportions: Will the housemaid at the Canadian residence squeal to the Iranian police about the unexplained houseguests (she unaccountably lies to protect them)? Will the piecing together of the shredded US documents by Iranian officials lead to a phone call to the airport to have our heroes arrested? Will Goodman return to his "office" to answer the verification phone call from the militant Revolutionary Guard? Will the 747 lift off the runway before the Guards arrive? Will the plane successfully clear Iranian airspace? Too much cross-cutting in a short period of time! Affleck is an effective Hollywood leading actor – handsome in his beard, serious, intelligent, conscientious, and humane. Entertaining film that hardly deserves the Academy Award for best film it received in 2013. (2013)

L'armée des ombres 1969 Jean-Pierre Melville 3.0 Lino Ventura as taciturn, rather blank leader of the French Resistance; Paul Meurisse ('Diaboliques') in rather small role as his boss, a famous mathematician and philosopher whom, Ventura worships; Jean-Pierre Cassel as a Resistance foot soldier; Simone Signoret stout and middle-aged as gifted organizer who finally gets into trouble because she refuses to remove the photo of her daughter from her wallet. Cool film about the French Resistance in the Marseilles region: Ventura is interned by the French authorities but then escapes and joins the Resistance; members of the cell execute a traitor – with difficulty since they have to strangle him; they report to their superiors in London (a quick glance at a good DeGaulle look-alike); several are captured and tortured and interrogated in a Gestapo dungeon; a daring and lucky escape for Ventura organized by Signoret; film ends when they discover that Signoret has betrayed names to the Germans, and they gun her down in the streets of Paris; epilogue titles show that all the remaining characters are captured and killed by the Germans within a year. Film is low key and often static (the camera follows a man walking down a whole street with no continuity cuts) with sudden bursts of energy (escapes in a cloud of smoke grenades, running through the streets); it focuses on the visual textures of the experience of the men in the movement; most of the time they are sitting around worrying or waiting in depressing abandoned farmhouses; they are not depicted doing anything positive to harm the German occupation or war effort, but mainly dealing with police pursuit, internal betrayal, escape when imprisoned, etc.; one supposes that their effort tied up German resources to pursue them. Film lacks a focus on plot and character; we have basically no idea what makes a Resistance fighter; they are just there doing their job. The film is more like a series of vignettes/tableaux vivants that push the history of the Resistance cell toward destruction. It must have been shot in winter, since the ground is usually covered with snow (Marseilles?) and the men huddled and shivering in their overcoats. The restoration of the color film is first rate with an emphasis on cool blues in dimly lit interiors. The film keeps one's attention despite lacking a typical ('Hollywood') plot structure; ones leaves the theater with a puzzled admiration for men fighting doggedly for a cause despite not being able to see the good they are doing. (2007)

L'armée du crime 2009 Robert Guédiguian (France) 3.0 Simon Abkarian as Missak Manouchian, a tall, charismatic Armenian Frenchman that leads a group of immigrant resisters against the German occupation in World War II; Virginie Ledoyen as Mélinée, his quietly beautiful wife, one of the few female members of the group; Robinson Stevenin as Marcel (he is a champion swimmer) and Grégoire Leprince-Rinquet as Thomas, two of the principal members of the group; Lola Naymark as the sexy redhead that cooperates with the Paris police (she has sex with Darroussin) in order to save Marcel; Jean-Pierre Darroussin as the rumpled police inspector that falls in lust with Naymark and is eventually

responsible for the capture and execution of all 22 members of the gang. Sometimes complicated but colorful and interesting account of the exploits of the “*armée du crime*”, an organization of Communist immigrants and Jews working against the Germans in Paris. Told as a long flashback, the film covers the formation of the group (Missak is sent to a prison camp but then released when he signs an affidavit that he is not a Communist), their campaign against the Germans (assassinating German soldiers in the streets, assassinating a top general outside of his house, etc.), and then the arrest, torture, and execution of all members of the group except for Mélinée, who, deprived of her beloved husband, survived until after the war. The film presents a bewildering variety of characters: a large number of the main conspirators, their girlfriends and wives, friends, and their parents (e.g., Thomas’s mother and father, who go into hiding to avoid deportation to a death camp); the large number of characters perhaps detracts from the intensity of the drama. Since most of the repression was conducted by the Pétainiste Paris police (many shots of Darroussin tracking the conspirators in the street and of grisly torture scenes in the basement of the local police station), there is not much contact with the Germans except for rather casual shots of soldiers strolling through the streets. A bit of romantic interest – between Marcel and his girlfriend, but particularly of the passionately loving relationship of Manouchian and Ledoyen. The film has a rather dispassionate affect – Pétainiste police officers usually appear as normal Frenchmen trying to get by; the film depicts both passionate resisters and a lot of people who choose to collaborate with the Germans; the streets of Paris seem normal and tranquil, with soldiers and young Frenchmen strolling by one another on a sunny day as if they were used to it. The film lacks perhaps dramatic punch and compelling, deeply written characters, but it is periodically moving and adds a fresh perspective on the nature of the French Resistance. (2011)

Arrival 2016 Denis Villeneuve 2.75 Often indecipherable science fiction film about the deciphering of the language of aliens that have landed in Montana. Amy Adams sincere, focused, emotional as East Coast linguist commissioned to discover why the aliens have come to earth; Jeremy Renner as physicist, who is along for variety and to provide a last-minute love interest; Forest Whitaker clipped, no-nonsense army officer in charge of the mission of discovery. Evoking comparison with ‘Close Encounters of the Third Kind’ and ‘The Day the Earth Stood Still’, this film posits a non-hostile alien landing. Like ‘Close Encounters’, Adams goes to the site of the landing to decipher the alien language, which turns out to be visual rather than spoken – scraggly circles blown onto a glass shield by the ugly octopus-like creatures with seven legs. *Mise-en-scène* is misty, cloudy, reduced light so that you feel you are under a permanent cloud cover. Adams’ efforts to use her linguistic expertise are interesting; she gradually solves the puzzle with the aid of computer technology and research undertaken at other landing sites around the world (the aliens have landed in 12 different places). The military men present are suspicious of the intentions of the visitors. The Chinese are the most defensive, and when they cut off communications with the other landing sites and mobilize their forces for an attack in concert with the Russians and the Sudanese, the world is suddenly in danger of a conflagration. The final message of the aliens to earth is vague and botched; they use the word “weapon” instead of “gift”. Adams nevertheless interprets that they are giving us a gift – time is really circular (!?) and they will return in 3000 years for human help in some crisis they will experience; they have come to ask for help. The new time insight enables Adams to telephone the Chinese military chief and inspire him to stand down his military; peace is thus reestablished. The viewer also becomes gradually aware of Adams’ personal narrative. The film’s introduction leads the viewer to believe that she is alienated from her husband and that she has lost her only beloved daughter to cancer. With her new understanding of time, she comes to realize that these visions are actually predictive and that the loss of her daughter is yet to come (?). She falls in love with Renner and at the end of the film Adams agrees to have a child with him, even though she now knows that the child will die prematurely; it’s apparently for that reason that Renner later leaves her. Adams’ performance is often moving, but the film is puzzling in its efforts perhaps to do too much. (2017)

Arsenic and Old Lace 1944 Frank Capra 2.0 Cary Grant mugging, eyes popping, mouth open, cowlick showing, and completely non-plussed playing the only sane person in the Brewster family; John Alexander in famous role as a cousin who thinks he is Teddy Roosevelt charging up the stairs blowing his bugle; Josephine Hull and Jean Adair as batty, harmless-looking elderly aunts who for no

apparent reason have been poisoning male pensioners to death and burying them in the cellar; Priscilla Lane (from Hitchcock's 'Saboteur') in decorative role as Grant's new bride; Raymond Massey made up to look like Frankenstein as Grant's murderous brother, who shows up half way through the film to keep the plot moving; Peter Lorre as his shy, simpering alcoholic assistant, who is also a surgeon that periodically give Massey's face a new look; Edward Everett Horton his usual annoying self as the head of a rest home for insane people; Jack Carson as an also mugging neighborhood police officer who is a playwright. Mostly annoying, macabre (sort of?), kind of screwball comedy done in characteristic upbeat way by Frank Capra (this film he said was without a message, unlike 'John Doe'). Everything is ridiculous with no concession to probability: asylums are meant to be filled with family members; at least three members of the Brewster family are committed more or less against their will at the end of the film; the 12 murders of the two batty old ladies go unpunished; cadavers don't smell bad when they are hidden in the window seat; Cary Grant, who is virtually the only sane person around, runs around in panicky circles when confronted with all the stressors – mad Teddy Roosevelt charging up the stairs and insisting he is president, the ladies burying their victims in the 'Panama Canal' dug by Teddy in the basement, the arrival of felonious brother Jonathan and his disquieting sidekick, the danger that the wrong persons will drink the elderberry wine, the identity of the body in the window seat, etc. The film is shot more or less on a single set inside the Brewster house; the film is well restored, and it is well directed and edited by Capra; the performances of Massey and the two old ladies is pleasing. Word is that Capra insisted on heavy mugging from Grant and Carson (compares unfavorably to his restraint in 'Blandings'). Film's reference to cadavers must have evoked some second thoughts amidst all the American casualties in the war. Film comes across as aimless and chaotic – so much more so than the average screwball comedy that it irritates. (2007)

Art School Confidential 2006 Terry Zwigoff 2.5 Max Minghella as innocent, feminine-looking, and ambitious art student Jerome; Sophia Myles as Audrey, a nude model and the object of his affections; John Malkovich as sarcastic Professor Sandiford whose art is sterile variations on a triangle; Jim Broadbent as angry drunkard cynic Jimmy; Ethan Suplee as loud-mouth, film major Vince who is Max's roommate –making a horror movie on the Swathmore strangler; Joel David Moore as cynical Bardo; Anjelica Huston in cameo as art appreciation instructor; Steve Buscemi as motor-mouth art-oriented restaurant owner. Aborted attempt to follow up on the success on 'Ghost World'. Minghella goes to Strathmore Art Institute idealistic about art and convinced that he can become the great artist of the 21st century; he also is in love with Myles, a nude model whose naked body he could hardly resist. He has difficulty fitting into the art school scene of phonies and poseurs set against the backdrop of a murderer that is on the loose in the vicinity of the school: students sharing about one another's work leads to major mutual insults and put-downs as each struggles to become that rich, successful artist; Minghella's courting of Myles goes awry when she falls for a preppy guy with a superficial pop-art style. After a lot of fairly good satirical put-downs, the last third of the film goes into aggressive plotting; because Minghella has adopted the ugly, pessimistic style of cynical Broadbent, he is arrested for the murders and (apparently) found guilty and imprisoned; ending has him famous now that he is in prison turning out art that expresses a tortured sociopath's soul; the clever ending has Myles visiting him, and over the lyrical, romantic strains of a Beethoven concerto, the two of them approach one another in slow motion and kiss – an ironic success that has won her heart! Film is entertaining in the first part as Zwickoff and his writer skewer the phoniness and pretentiousness of art school and the art world through some of his colorful student and faculty characters. Unfortunately, Minghella's acting range does not go beyond a bemused look on his face, and the sudden plot-driven wrap up seems phony. The message is unalloyed nihilism: there appears to be no such thing as true art, but just success for those who "suck the right dick" (Broadbent); everybody has on a phony mask; nothing else matters in life but landing that solo exhibition in the cool art gallery. The film is seriously inferior to 'Ghost World'. (2008)

El artista y la modelo 2013 Fernando Trueba (writer Jean-Claude Carrière) 3.0 Jean Rochefort with long, time-ravaged but handsome face sporting a cocky hat as French sculptor in the Pyrenees who has given up on his art during the Nazi occupation; Aida Folch as beautiful young refugee from Spain – she is an anti-Fascist political activist; 75-year-old Claudia Cardinale as wife of Rochefort –

she encourages his relationship with Aida in order to revive his flagging artistic inspiration. Slow-moving, subtle meditation on the nature of art, in particular the relation of the visual artist with nature and young women. Rochefort, who is an internationally renowned artist (he is even visited by a German officer who is an art professor at the University of Munich), finds his artistic juices gradually revived by employing Aida as his model – she is nude in perhaps 75% of the film. The film takes place in a landscape resembling the Provence of Marcel Pagnol – dusty, rocky, mountainous landscapes, spectacular views from the terrace of Rochefort’s studio perched on the mountainside above his comfortable home, bringing home birds that one has shot for dinner, drinking red wine on the terrace and pouring olive oil over crusty French bread, walking through the woods and listening to the leaves rustling above and the crickets chirping below; all photographed quietly in richly detailed, high contrast, wide-screen black and white. At first Rochefort has a strictly professional relationship with Aida, who wears only her bathrobe when clothed, as he begins his work on his final masterpiece, a seated nude with the girl’s head resting on her hand (the finished statue is an exact replica of a statue by Aristide Maillol); we see him working hard to replicate in plaster the soft contours and textures of Aida’s body. Gradually however Rochefort moves into a spiritual and artistic crisis; when he finds that he is sexually aroused by Aida, he breaks down and weeps, perhaps in joy that he has reached an aesthetic apotheosis, perhaps in grief that he will soon die and leave beauty and the female body behind forever. The film ends with the finished statue displayed in the brilliant light of the South, and Aida leaving on a bicycle to travel to Marseilles, where she hopes to model for Rochefort’s friend Matisse; a shot then rings out signifying that the sculptor has taken his own life. The film is primarily about attaining beauty through the contemplation and the working of physical contours and textures of the female body. Appealing mostly to aesthetically sensitive viewers, it moves very slowly and with a minimum of dialogue: several scenes have Rochefort and Aida exchanging quizzical glances for long periods while he works on depicting her nude body. The enduring quality of the film is the deeply affecting performance of Rochefort and the sensitive and beautiful cinematography. Challenging but worth the effort. (2014)

L’Artiste 2011 Michel Hazanavicius (France) 3.5 Jean Dujardin all toothy grins and enthusiasm as silent film idol, Valentin; Berenice Bejo perhaps even toothier grin, peppiness, positiveness, and sensitiveness as young silent actress, Peppy, who gets her chance from Dujardin and then makes the transition successfully to sound film; John Goodman relatively svelte and good-humored as Dujardin’s director; James Cromwell as Desjardin’s dignified and wise butler; Penelope Ann Miller as Desjardin’s wife, she also a silent film star. Charming, feel-good, beautifully acted and imagined film set at the cusp of the transition from silent to sound films in Hollywood. The entire film is photographed in crisp, elegant, beautifully toned black and white. It follows a double plot line – will Valentin and Peppy finally get together romantically; and will Valentin overcome his personal pique due to Peppy having become a sound film star while he did not make the transition and retreated into obscurity. No secret that after much silent suffering and even a half-hearted attempt at suicide, Valentin finally responds to Peppy’s devoted ministrations (including buying all his personal possessions at auction) and the two will live happily ever after. The film is a model of silent film techniques – reliance on mise-en-scene, particularly tell-tale close-ups held a long time, careful use of the frame to convey a visual telling of the story, minimal conversation and a sparing use of dialogue cards, expressive facial acting that goes a little over the top without being really “hammy” (at one point Peppy accuses Valentin of old-fashioned, “hammy” acting techniques). The use of sound is infrequent and introduced expressionistically: when unknown to Valentin sound movies have become popular, he drops something on his make-up table and it makes a little sound effect that he (the silent character) doesn’t know what to make of; when at the end Peppy convinces Valentin to make a come-back with sound, sound is suddenly introduced; the two dance a dynamite, exhausting production number (in Gene Kelly style) to full orchestra, and when Goodman says “Perfect! Let’s do it one more time!” Valentin replies with his only vocal line “Let’s do it!” the number starts and the credits roll. Most of the silent parts of the film are accompanied by a colorful, romantic symphonic score. Many homages to Hollywood movies, both sound and silent: Valentin as a silent star resembles Gene Kelly, and he dances like him; the comeback story is reminiscent of the plot of a “Star is Born”; Valentin’s character is a combination of Fairbanks, Valentino, and Gilbert, and his dog is a dead ringer for ‘The Thin Man’s’ Asta; Peppy’s career curve recalls that of Greta Garbo; a long

excerpt from Herrmann's score of 'Vertigo' is used toward the end; and of course the surprise ending is a tribute to the Busby-Berkeley-style production numbers of 1930s Hollywood. The film has scarcely a tragic bone in its body, but delightful, light-hearted entertainment expressing great affection for silent movies and the Hollywood tradition, all of which is even more impressive coming from the French. (2012)

An Autumn Afternoon 1962 Yasujiro Ozu (Japan) 3.0 Chishu Ryu as weary, soft-spoken widower living with his daughter and teenage son – he thinks it might be time for his daughter (24 years old) to marry before it is “too late”; Shima Iwashita as his porcelain-beautiful daughter Michiko; Keiji Sada, Teruo Yoshida, Shin'ichirō Mikami, etc. as various of his friends that he converses with during their daily drinking sessions. The last of Ozu's films about family dynamics in postwar Japan; filmed in color, the film does not perhaps move the viewer as deeply as some of his previous films. Most of the film is taken up with conversations between older middle-aged men about age, life, and family; the viewer follows the “Gourd”, an older man living with his middle-aged daughter and drowning his disappointment in alcohol; a natty guy who reminds Ryu that it is possible to rediscover youth by marrying a younger woman (he has to take “pills” to keep up with her); a confidant at work that advises Ryu to take the initiative about arranging a marriage for his daughter. There are several scenes portraying the often difficult relationship of Ryu's older son with his dominating wife. The actual arrangements for the wedding and the aftermath occupy only about the last quarter of the film; the wedding occurs off screen; Michiko appears only as taking care of her male relatives until she is presented poetically in a single moving scene wearing a beautiful, sumptuous traditional Japanese wedding dress. The film is focused primarily on the experience of growing old and preparing for death (Ozu's mother died in the year in which the film was released; he died of cancer the following year): one must pass the torch of life to the next generation, represented by “marrying off” one's children, something that the Gourd did not do (he shows his regret by getting drunk), but that Ryu reluctantly decides to achieve. The end of the film is melancholy and resigned: the father drinks again, and the last shot has him sitting by himself perhaps contemplating the sad poetry of life. The mise-en-scene and editing are traditional Ozu (see 'Tokyo Story'), the main difference being his use of carefully composed color shots and lighter, gaier music in his pillow shots. Ozu carefully portrays the contrasts between traditional and modern Japan coming from postwar Americanization: the men and the women are dressed usually in neat, modern clothes; the homes of the young contain American gadgets such as television and vacuum cleaners; the men are fond of baseball; and yet Ryu's house is traditional minimalist paper and wood, parents have a significant influence over the marital choices of their children; and the wedding costume of Michiko astounds the viewer in its traditional beauty. A kind of valedictory performance of the great filmmaker. (2014)

As Good As It Gets 1997 James L. Brooks 3.0 Jack Nicholson sporting his endearing, quirky personality as obsessive-compulsive (avoids cracks in the sidewalk, has to dine in the same restaurant served by the same waitress – Hunt), hostile (in the first scene he throws Verdell down the garbage chute), acerbic successful author who has a sarcastic way with words (he slings outrageous insults at gays and blacks) – somewhere underneath he may be a decent, thoughtful guy; Greg Kinnear as practically clueless sensitive, good guy, gay artist extremely (annoyingly) attached to his dog; Cuba Gooding, Jr. pretty dull as Kinnear's gay agent; Helen Hunt as nervous, caustic, obnoxious, generously breasted, square-jawed waitress with her own personal problems with her ill son and an adversarial relationship with Nicholson – what she really wants is a man in her life (and after all who else would grow fond of Melvin?); Jill the Dog as overly expressive dog Vernell. Romantic comedy carefully and entertainingly written by James Brooks. In keeping with the formula, both Nicholson and Hunt start off with annoying, antagonistic personalities, and essentially the viewer waits for things to click between them. Nicholson makes the first move by (inexplicably?) using his resources earned from writing romance novels to foot the medical bills of Hunt's son, thus greatly relieving her stress. The essential changes occur when Nicholson, Hunt, and Kinnear take a trip together and bed down in the same room. Nicholson is funny trying to court Hunt, often saying the wrong thing and hurting her tender feelings, and Hunt struggles to make her growing affection for Nicholson believable, and in the end the two walk off camera hand in hand in the streets of New York with apparently the intention of marriage. Kinnear is

good as the sensitive, feminine, gay artist, who is severely injured by a robbery attempt and has trouble getting his aesthetic mojo back until he sees Hunt nude (nice body) in the hotel room without a hint of lust, declares her beautiful, and starts sketching her furiously. Nicholson is the heart and soul of the film, especially in the first half when his hilarious compulsions and insults keeps the viewer entertained; his transition to true love is often funny too, but the second half of the film, where the director is focusing on feel-good items (the gay guy is artistically inspired by a woman's body!), is less comic and less interesting. The film at 2:20 is too long for its content; a 20-minute cut would have made it more pointed. Brooks' snappy one- and two-liners are amusing – e.g., his put down of HMOs evokes cheers from the audience. (2010)

L'ascenseur pour l'échafaud 1958 Louis Malle (France) 3.5 Jeanne Moreau in her debut film role, alabaster skin gleaming in the streets of Paris, wandering disconsolately looking for her Julien like Eurydice looking for Orpheus, Maurice Ronet as boyfriend who is trapped in the elevator right after the murder of Moreau's husband, Georges Poujouly (a French James Dean look-alike) and the 50s cute Yori Bertin as star-crossed teenage lovers whose flight in Ronet's car leads to plot complications, Lino Ventura and Charles Denner as policemen investigating the crime. Engrossing thriller by Louis Malle at the beginning of the New Wave. Obviously owes much to Film noir -- the femme fatale (although she is truly in love with her man), the series of "accidents" (so many of them that they amount to "fate") that lead the guilty to destruction, etc. Ronet gets caught in the elevator and there are several Hitchcock-like suspense sequences as he tries to escape; the teenagers commit two additional murders with Ronet's gun that puts the latter in a delicate situation when he is captured and questioned by the police -- if he insists that he was caught in the elevator all the night of the murders, then he will be suspected of the murder of the husband, etc. Film has dispassionate, clipped, matter-of-fact, yet arty quality of the best of pre-New Wave films, reminding one of Becker or Melville. The black and white cinematography is beautifully lit and textured -- the face of Moreau as she wanders through the streets calling for her lover, the close-ups of her face as she speaks her thoughts of undying love for Julien, the many shots of cars whipping by on the newly constructed freeways in the Paris region, the crisp, modern feel of the American-style motel where the teenage couple commits their crime. Ending of the film comes across as a bit elliptical: the detective (Ventura) figures out the case pretty much off-screen; Moreau, Venura and Poujouly all arrive at the end in a photography developing shop; Poujouly has come to retrieve the incriminating pictures that he and his girlfriend had taken of themselves with the German tourists, only to be shown by the police inspector that the earlier exposures on the roll of film (stolen from Ronet's car) were romantic pictures of Moreau and Ronet together. Motive supplied and case solved; three arrests for the three murders. Another delicious Hitchcockian moment -- Ronet on the lam in a cafe but doesn't yet know that he is hunted by the police; he is noticed by a little girl in big glasses who keeps tugging at the arm of her newspaper-reading father: "Isn't that the man?" Father leaves with the girl, Ronet picks up the newspaper and realizes that he is now wanted for the murder of the tourists. (2006)

Ask Father 1919 Harold Lloyd 3.0 Also has Bebe Daniels in this 13 minute short. Short slapstick comedy a la Lloyd. Lloyd is serious young middle-class guy on the make, who wants to marry the boss' daughter. The problem is getting into to see the boss so that he can ask for her hand in marriage; the office is guarded by a bunch of comic, clumsy flunkies who throw everyone out who tries to get in. When Lloyd gets into the boss' office, the latter uses trap doors and conveyor belts to expel him; Lloyd then goes to the costume company next door, tries to get in in drag (no success), and then in medieval armor – that works, since he bongs everyone over the head with his club, but then he finds out that the daughter has eloped with another suitor. Lloyd settles for the cute switchboard operator (Daniels) instead. Light-hearted, short, fast-paced. (2005)

L'Atalante 1934 Jean Vigo (Boris Kaufman) (France) 3.5 Dita Parlo as pretty, adorable, childlike young wife who marries Dasté because she wants to get out of her village and travel, Jules Simon as rather disquieting, sometimes disgusting (sloppy, spitting, raspy voice) character who has had many experiences in life and who seduces Dita without sex, Jean Dasté as rather hunky bridegroom who dearly loves his bride but who has a bad temper. Classic French romance of the 1930s about the crisis in

the early days of a young marriage relationship: Parlo becomes quickly discontent with riding in a barge, leaves the boat in Paris for a night wandering about town, and then is found by Père Jules and returned to the boat. The story is very slight; the proof is in the poetic atmosphere, the details of the cinematography, and the sprightly musical score by Maurice Jaubert. Film moves at a slow, poetic rhythm; there are many beautiful shots – low angle looking up at a character passing against the backdrop of the sky, shots of the main characters moving from the river across the industrial landscape, Pardo in her wedding dress walking along the spine of the barge against a dark background, poetic and appealing scenes of Paris along the quays, particularly in the Canal St. Martin and in the streets as Pardo wanders around the city, looking in chic Paris shop windows, and as Père Jules comes to get her, the three men of the barge taking the repaired phono player outside and trying it out in the open air, etc. Several long scenes focusing on the unattractive Simon as he plays with his cats (very many of them!), tries to repair a phonograph player, goes off on a bender and comes back drunk to the barge, etc.; and one wonders what the relevance is to the main story (were they originally cut from the film and then restored?). The clown-like salesman/prestidigitator pursues Pardo and actuates her fascination for the city and the pleasures of Paris; he might symbolize the immaturity of her fascination with city life. There is a lot of light-hearted humor and touches of fantasy, reminding one of ‘Zéro de conduite’. One of the best scenes is the first one, where the couple emerges rapidly from the country church and with the wedding party trailing behind make their way through the village to the barge; a few remarks from the villagers fill us in on the situation. The heart of the movie is the strong romantic, physical attraction between the two young lovers – they smile compulsively in one another’s presence, they fall on the floor and kiss and roll, Pardo, who spends much of the movie dressed in a pretty white nightgown, snuggles up to her husband in bed; and when anger and bad decisions separate them they toss and turn all night thinking about one another in the famous scene where Vigo cuts their restlessness together, until Père Jules – somehow – knows where Juliette is and he goes out to bring her back to her husband. They look at each other confused and shy, and then Juliette rushes into her husband’s arms. The film ends with an aerial shot of the Atalante moving through the river, like a penis plowing; they are off together to their destiny. (2006)

Atlantic City 1980 Louis Malle 4.0 Colorful, entertaining, moving treatment of the redemption of a has-been mobster in a crumbling Atlantic City. Burt Lancaster as subordinate mobster, whose apartment building is about to be torn down – he is proud of his gangster past and of his sexual prowess with Kate Reid; Kate Reid as former Atlantic City beauty queen, who pays Lancaster to tend to and service her; Michel Piccoli in bit role as loud instructor for young people learning to be blackjack dealers; Susan Sarandon as pretty, but feisty young Saskatchewan taking lessons from Piccoli in order to make it big in Monte Carlo (!); Hollis McLaren as pretty, clueless, pregnant hippie girl, who believes her boyfriend will soon return reincarnated after being murdered by thugs; Robert Joy as deceptive baby-faced kid from Saskatchewan that makes the mistake of stealing a cocaine stash from the mob. The film is set in an Atlantic City theoretically in transition, but actually it is crumbling – buildings being torn down, the Boardwalk lined with cheap storefronts, poorly dressed people milling about garish casinos (briefly featuring Robert Goulet spreading his smarmy charm). The film focuses on characters that are painted colorfully and in depth, all trying to reinvent themselves in the midst of catastrophic transition. The plot is impelled by Joy’s marketing the drug stash he stole from the local mob: he is murdered by thugs and Lancaster gets his chance at renewal by getting hold of the money after Joy’s death. Lancaster starts the film as a failure – low-ranking hood that never achieved anything (never even shot a gangster), having sex with an elderly shrewish woman, running numbers in a run-down neighborhood; on one occasion he is humiliated by his failure to protect Sarandon from the two thugs that are looking for the drug money. He yearns for something better, symbolized by his staring out of his apartment window at Sarandon rub lemon juice on her breasts to dispel the fish smell she picks up at work in a casino oyster bar. He begins his rousing redemption when he shoots dead the two thugs trying again to beat up Sarandon. In his inimitable fashion Lancaster depicts his pride and delight at finally “achieving” something worthwhile. He thinks at first that he might run off with Sarandon, but when she steals most of his money wad, Lancaster lets her go, even giving her keys of the getaway car and reminding her to stash the car asap. It seems that he loves her too much to tie her to himself; he knows it wouldn’t work. The final scene has Reid go alone to a hotel room to sell one last package of (adulterated) cocaine; she pockets

the money and then strides down the hall – with Lancaster happy and chatty at her side. He doesn't have the girl and he has lost most of his money, but for once in his life he has his pride and a job well done. (2016)

Atonement 2007 Joe Wright (UK) 2.5 Keira Knightley as Cecelia, romantically and hopelessly in love with Robbie but who doesn't want to admit it in the beginning; James McAvoy as Robbie, a household servant, who has been to Cambridge (!) and who has coitus interruptus with Knightley in the library; Saoirse Ronan as Briony, the 13-year-old sister of Celia, who wrecks the lives of her sister and Robbie through a bold-faced lie; Vanessa Redgrave as the elder Briony speaking directly to the camera at the end. Able adaptation of McEwen novel. Best part is the first half that takes place at the Tallis country estate in Sussex – fascinating, sprawling, somewhat dilapidated Tudor mansion: there Briony sends her sister's swain to prison out of a combination of jealousy (she has a crush on Robbie) and protectiveness (she sees her diving into a fountain and emerging with her pubic hair showing through her slip). Dialogue is sharp and cinematography is lush and evocative. The second part is much less satisfactory, giving us long epic demonstrations of the suffering of British soldiers during the Dunkerque evacuation and a broken Robbie's putative reunion with his beloved. There it becomes clear that the central character of the film is Briony (here played ably by Brenda Blethyn), who experiences terrible remorse for her ruining the life of Robbie and her sister. The emotional wallop comes at the end, when an elderly Briony – now played by Redgrave – confesses her sin to a national TV audience and tells us that in her 21st novel she atones for her misdeed by giving Cecelia and Robbie a happy life together after the war. We learn in a surprise twist that the scenes of Cecelia and Robbie together were figments of Briony's guilty imagination at a time (1940, etc.) when she could not admit even to herself the destruction she had wrought in the lives of these two loved ones. Much of the middle section is a false step, putting the emphasis on a showy epic quality rather than maintaining the more intimate and personal tone of the first part of the film. Direction is rather arty: each shot has to be perfect and exquisite (shades of Merchant/Ivory); and director plays with time with flashbacks (labeled) and dual versions of the same event – e.g., the key fountain scene toward the beginning. All acting is excellent, as one expects in a big budget British movie: Ronan particularly stands out as the obsessed, precocious, and somewhat malignant Briony; McAvoy is credible as the suffering lover and soldier; Knightley's performance suffers from being a second tier character and yet treated by the director's camera as the star of the film. The strong point of the narrative is dealing with deep guilt and how one atones for it; the film would have been stronger with a more consistent focus on it. (2008)

Attack 1956 Robert Aldrich 3.0 Eddie Albert in quintessential role as nervous, indecisive, cowardly, and ultimately contemptible company commander; Jack Palance as tough, angry platoon leader who believes he is betrayed by Albert; Lee Marvin as equally tough regiment commander who in following his self-interest ignores the leadership problem; Robert Strauss as gravel-voiced, colorful-talking private who provides comic relief; Buddy Ebsen as a calmer soldier; Peter van Eyck as blond, perfectly groomed German SS officer, who is pushed to his death by Palance. Somewhat overblown World War II film taking place sometime around the Battle of the Bulge in Germany. Its origin in a Broadway play is demonstrated by the stagey-sounding and often overdramatic dialogue. After a preliminary scene in which Palance loses a whole squad because of Albert's paralysis, he is ordered by Albert to take a German-held town with a promise of support if he should get into trouble; when resistance turns out to be fierce (the Germans have cheesy-looking tanks rumbling through the streets) and Palance loses several men, his calls for help go unheeded; he stumbles back to town, has his famous confrontation with a German (semi-) tank, and then stumbles into Albert's cellar headquarters with the intention of killing him; he dies first, but other members of the platoon do him the favor posthumously. The film is a hard-hitting critique, not so much of war in general, but of the officer corps, whose members are often more interested in their own glory, advancement, or, as in this case, their advantage back home, than in military efficiency and the welfare of their men; an obvious precursor of 'Paths of Glory'. Marvin knows perfectly well that Albert is an incompetent coward ("You want me to risk the whole country for the remnants of one lousy platoon"), but he covers for him because he is part of a good ol' boy network in Kentucky that Marvin will be able to profit from after the war. The end of the film is a kind of cop out:

when Marvin arrives on the final scene with the dead bodies, he is still thinking of himself: he tells the company executive officer that with his cooperation (he offers him a promotion to captain) he will award a Distinguished Service Cross to Albert, thereby ensuring his favor among the home town bigwigs. The end, however, has the exec deciding to do “the right thing” and marching off to the division commander to tell the truth! The film’s *pièce de résistance* is the crushing of Palance’s arm by a German (sort of) tank and the subsequent rictus on his face just before and after he dies, even after his body is placed on a stretcher; the latter leads to intimations of camp among contemporary audiences. Sometimes powerful film notable for its radical critique of the US military. (2011)

Au hasard Balthazar 1966 Robert Bresson (France) 4.0 Anne Wiazemsky as Marie, who adores her donkey and who suffers in her own life parallel to Balthazar’s, mostly at the hands of Lafarge; François Lafarge as Gérard, the head of the little local gang of delinquents, who sadistically mistreats both Marie and Balthazar throughout the film. Luminous Bresson film set in small French town in the early 1960s about the essentially unhappy lives of both Marie and the donkey: Marie disappears at the end of the film, and Balthazar dies in a pasture. Balthazar is sweet and accepting, and when mistreated never complains – he is so patiently long-suffering that he penetrates one’s heart; his feelings are basic – hunger, contentment, pain, etc.; constantly his face is displayed – adorable big face with the white markings, sweet, uncomplaining, impassive eyes; his donkey’s bray is heard regularly on the soundtrack, although more just to reveal again his presence rather than to express anything concrete. Marie is much sadder: she is passive and defines herself in relation to the dominating men in her life – first her father who attempts to control her, and then Gérard, who owns her, takes possession of her, and dominates her cruelly and even sadistically. Her passiveness and hopelessness sometimes try one’s patience; she cannot respond to the continued affection of her childhood sweetheart, Jacques, after her almost masochistic experiences with Gérard; at the end of the film she simply disappears with no explanation (as does Gérard, although we are glad to get rid of him). Christian references abound throughout the film: Balthazar is a Christ like figure who suffers humbly without protest (Jesus was there to do the will of the Father); he is baptized in the beginning by the children, his mother is ‘Mary’, he performs miracles in the circus, he suffers a stigmata, etc. But the film is no Catholic allegory. We leave with a deep sense of sadness at the evil and cruelty in the world (Balthazar has some kind owners, but poor Marie never gets a break), and, like in ‘Mouchette’, we wonder what will save us from our human condition. Style of the film is uniquely low-key and ‘realistic’. The camera records more or less impassively what is happening; there are a lot of shots of people walking, opening and shutting doors; often we see only legs, hooves, and hands on screen; the actors are reduced to inexpressive physical actions as dictated by the director (Wiazemsky’s performance is so modest and passive that we get annoyed with her). The transparent texture created by the director enables us not to be distracted by the interpretations of the actors or the creation of self-conscious visual poetry, but to penetrate through the visual and narrative material to the themes, poetry, humanity and spiritual feeling that lie behind it all. Balthazar’s death at the end is modest and beautiful: shot in the leg, he wanders into an alpine field, he is surrounded by a herd of sheep, the Schubert piano sonata begins on the soundtrack, and then Balthazar kneels, and in the next shot is lying on the ground dead. The world seems cruel and lost to evil and unhappiness, but Balthazar strangely gives us comfort: he suffers with such patience and dignity, and then he dies at one with life and compared to the humans in the movie, in a state of innocence and grace. (2007)

L’auberge espagnol 2003 Europe Cedric Klapisch 3.0 Romain Duris, Audrey Tautou, Cecile de France. French Guy goes to Spain to learn Spanish so he can be a bureaucrat, lives with six other Europeans in Erasmus program. Focuses on everyone’s romantic adventures; he has a lesbian friend (Cecile) who gives him lessons in how to seduce a woman, love affair with a disenchanting married woman, etc. Fairly interesting set of roommates, especially English girl who has a very obnoxious brother who turns all the other kids off and then redeems himself by taking the rap as a homosexual. Sometime screwball comedy especially in scene when all the kids are trying to save the English girl from discovery by her boyfriend – reminds one of Feydeau. Moral: at end Xavier, who despises his hippie

mother, can't handle the bureaucratic life and even without girlfriend, he decides to fill his child ambition and be a writer! (2004)

Audition 1999 Takashi Miike (Japan) 3.5 Ryo Ishibashi as Aoyama, 40s widower looking for a bride (prefers them pretty and young), Eihi Shiina as Asami, beautiful young woman who responds to his search but she has a shadowy and uncertain past. Very effective and compelling Japanese horror film with a subtext of sexual politics. Aoyama's wife has died and he is a single parent of male teenager (impossibly pretty actor). He decides to look for a new wife; he admits that he prefers his wife to be young and pretty with some accomplishments, and he goes along with a fellow TV producer to hold a fake audition for 30 aspirants, who think erroneously that they are trying out for an important part in a TV program. Audition filmed in very short, impersonal takes that emphasize the physical characteristics of the actresses. Aoyama courts Asami once he chooses her and pursues her with real passion and devotion, and she seems to respond. First two-thirds of movie are Ozu-like, recording Aoyama's everyday life and the slow progression of his courtship of Asami – several scenes in restaurants where she gives him increasing glimpses of her past. We do however learn more about her and have increasing uneasy feeling, e.g., when she suddenly disappears when they go to a mountain resort, or when Aoyama finds out that two of Asami's previous associates have mysteriously disappeared, or when Aoyama visits Asami's old ballet studio (very dusty and dilapidated) and encounters an old cripple who has most of his fingers and both his feet missing. First major jolt occurs when in a shot of Asami talking on the phone in her own apartment, an unidentified bag filled with something in the background suddenly jerks and rolls to the left! Matters build to a climax when Asami visits Aoyama's home, and after drugging him with a paralyzing drug that leaves him conscious, tortures him exquisitely with acupuncture needles (he somehow doesn't faint), and then severs his left foot with piano wire that she handles expertly. Son enters and he appears to kill Asami by throwing her down the stairs. Even then, as son calls ambulance (he hasn't done anything to stop the bleeding!), Aoyama gazes at Asami, who appears to talk repeating her lines of devotion that she had used in previous more romantic scene; to the end, he appears still to be in love with her. Film starts slowly, builds dread, and finishes with a horrifying flourish – very effective. Sexual politics key to film – Asami was abused by her stepfather, and she is taking revenge on the men in her life, who she says are all faithless; and Aoyama, even being the true lover he is, chooses her for mostly her physical attributes. Director plays a lot with subjective passages and multiples takes of a scene that increase our uncertainty about what is happening (Did Asami really leave Aoyama in the resort? Was the son overcome by Asami's attack at the end?). A missed opportunity is perhaps Aoyama's dog, which after being featured throughout the film, is simply found dead in the end, and not tortured to a grisly end like his human counterpart (fear of animal rights activists?). Very well-made and well-paced film. (2007)

August: Osage County 2013 John Wells 3.0 Meryl Streep as bitter, pill-addicted matron venting her spleen on the rest of her family; Julia Roberts as almost equally angry daughter, carrying a deep resentment of her mother; Chris Cooper endears himself by defending his son against his mother; Benedict Cumberbatch a bit much as the paralyzed, tongue-tied son of Cooper; Margo Martindale as Streep's calmer sister, who cannot abide the slovenly ways of her son; Ewan McGregor in thankless role as Roberts' estranged husband; Abigail Breslin as his 14-year-old teenage daughter; Sam Shepard as Streep's dignified and weary husband, who declares his suffering in the film's first scene before going off to commit suicide; Juliette Lewis as irresponsible, flighty-eyed sister; Dermot Mulroney as Lewis' "fiancé" – blunt and clueless, he has been married three times before; Julianne Nicholson as quieter sister, who has decided to stay in Oklahoma to tend to her mother and who is secretly in love with Cumberbatch; Misty Upham as dignified Native American housemaid. High impact dysfunctional family film filled with anger, biting humor, and melodramatic revelations Streep dominates the film with a highly stylized, high impact performance: suffering from mouth cancer (although the viewer wonders whether it is an excuse) and addicted to prescription pills, she attacks at the slightest provocation using an hysterical sarcastic humor that makes the film very entertaining. Most of the verbal fireworks occur between Streep and Roberts, who transforms her good girl, wan-smile personality into a shrewish shrieker almost on the level of her mother. The centerpiece of the film is the hilarious and disturbing dinner scene in the family

home after Shepard's funeral. High on pills, Streep puts on a hilarious show that ends in a wrestling match with her daughter. She tells the men at the table that they look like they are at a cock fight rather than a funeral dinner; Cooper's long-winded, halting, repetitive grace drives Streep to distraction as she gazes at him through parted fingers; Mulroney's cool phone ringtone interrupts the grace; Streep tells Mulroney that he must have the marriage business down pat after she finds out that he has been married three times; Lewis and Streep shout out "Where's the meat/beef?!" referring to the teenager's statement that she is vegetarian because when you eat meat, you eat the fear of the animal when it was slaughtered; Cooper feigns a heart attack, and when everyone is close to panic, he cracks that he has just ate a piece of fear. The last third of the film reveals shocking family secrets that eventually drive **all** the characters into isolation. McGregor and his daughter leave when Mulroney makes a play for the teenager; a difficult-to-interpret scene reveals that Streep had something to do with Shepard's disappearance; when it is discovered that Nicholson is not Cumberbatch's cousin but his half-sister, she drives off in a panic; Roberts drives off in a pickup truck, stops on the side of the road and looks poetically at the bleak view; Streep, alone in the house, crawls up the stairs to snuggle in the arms of Upham. The wasted playing field at the end reminds one 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolff?' One hopes that the author does not consider this the typical American family. (2014)

El Aura 2005 Fabian Bielinsky (Argentina) 2.5 Ricardo Darín as milquetoast, epileptic Buenos Aires taxidermist with a yen to pull off the perfect heist caper; Alejandro Awada as his buddy who takes him hunting; Dolores Fonzi as young abused wife whom Darin encounters on his adventure; Eva as the spooky, wolf-like dog. Highly thought of but very slow moving, arty film that seems too personal to interest and be understood by most viewers. Darin, who often dreams of the perfect heist and has recently been dumped by his wife, accompanies his friend on a hunting trip in a heavily wooded area around Bariloche; there he mistakenly kills a local man (the body is not discovered) and then discovers that the dead man had been planning the robbery of an armored car; when some thugs show up, Darin uses his photographic memory to take the leadership of the heist; it goes radically awry with virtually everyone except Darin being killed in a shootout; Darin returns to Buenos Aires where he is last seen working on his animals while listening to classical music. While the external plot is the story of a failed armored car heist, one supposes the real subject of the film is Darin's psychology-soul. The film focuses on his two epileptic seizures – one in the very beginning in front of an ATM machine and the other at the end just before the robbery attempt – that are depicted as more or less occasions of spiritual awareness (the aura is the period of calm insight that immediately precedes the seizure), although it is not apparent what the experience brings to him. There is an obvious connection with nature: the landscape around Bariloche is densely and picturesquely forested; the camera focuses extensively on animal eyes – the glass eyes of the stuffed animals and the penetrating eyes of the dog that follows Darin incessantly in Patagonia; and the gentle but persistent dog of the dead man (Dietrich) that tracks Darin; but it is not clear what it all means. Darin's character is extensively studied – his passiveness (he barely reacts when his wife walks out leaving a note), his physical cowardice (he allows himself to be pummeled by one of the thugs), his prodigious memory (with the help of flitting images of the pages he had read several days before, he is able to recall the details of the dead man's plan), and the yawning gap between his passive personality and the unconsciously felonious aggressiveness of his dreams. There is little variation or velocity in Darin's acting; no matter what the situation, the viewer is presented with the same blank face seemingly watching events from a distance and remaining outside of them. Since the narrative is so ambiguous and the movement so slow, the film can often be boring and irritating. It seems that Bielinsky used the fame obtained in his very entertaining con film 'Nueve Reinas' to make a personal film along the lines of Iñárritu; the leap to a personal film was premature, and it is a shame that the author died before he could give it another try. (2010)

Australia 2008 Baz Luhrmann 2.5 Nicole Kidman looking older and less delicate, alternating between a kind of burlesque comedy and weepy depression – she can't seem to get out of her riding clothes; Hugh Jackman extremely lean, handsome and charismatic playing the drover (cowboy) who has a hard time settling down; Brandon Walters as the adorable little "creamy" (half breed) that Jackman and Kidman are impossibly attached to – he narrates engagingly a good part of the story; David

Wenham as the evil and ultimately pitiful schemer; David Gulpihill playing his usual Aboriginal elder who wields powerful magic and a mean spear. Entertaining semi-epic set in the Australian Northern Territory at the beginning of World War II. It is filmed very dynamically in bright colors: detail-rich close-ups of the main characters (the beaming, happy face of the boy Nullah!), fabulous wide-angle shots of the Australian Outback with a lot of colored skies, many special effects shots of Darwin under attack, the city burning, the cattle stumbling on the edge of a heart-sinking precipice, etc. that take the breath away but subtract from the film's sense of realism. The 'magical realism' element is emphasized by the aboriginal story line – on several occasions Nullah and Gulpihill invoke supernatural forces to save the good guys from the depredations of the bad; particularly at the end when Wenham is speared through his chest by Gulpihill to keep him from killing Nullah. The aboriginals are handled in politically correct fashion – they are wise and profound, they understand nature and have a constructive relationship with it, and they have strong sense of morality, always being on the good side and defending good “white fellas” from the (white) forces of evil. Also very pc is the round condemnation of the Territory's policy of removing mixed parentage kids from their families to be taught to be servants in mission schools; much of the film's tension involves keeping the police from getting their hands on the kids. The romance between Kidman and Jackman is handled in high Hollywood style – the destined-to-be lovers don't like one another in the beginning, but they are drawn irresistibly toward one another until they have a night of love rolling together in the bed and then gamboling in a pool of water under a waterfall; the film ends happily with the couple united on their cattle station but dutifully accepting that Nullah must set off on his walkabout to become a man. Film is hard to adjust to – an epic with burlesque elements (Kidman's face and costumes!); an epic that can't make up its mind about Australia – does it defend itself gallantly against the Japanese or is it discredited by its mistreatment of the Aboriginals? Images of the land, the sky, the city, and the sea are memorable, not to mention the hunky Jackman. (2009)

Auto Focus 2002 Paul Schrader 3.0 Greg Kinnear always convincing as Bob Crane, star of 'Hogan's Heroes' and unregenerate sex addict in America of the 1950s and beyond; Willem Dafoe as his seedy-looking, degenerate friend, an audio-visual expert that offers recording equipment to Crane for his sexual escapades; Rita Wilson as Crane's first, straight-arrow wife, who divorces him; Maria Bello as his second, post-sexual-liberation, wife, who tolerates his shenanigans for a while and then also divorces him; Ron Leibman, avuncular and kind as his agent, who tries until the end to help Crane turn his life around. Entertaining, scandalous, and ultimately sad film about the decline and fall of Bob Crane: his choice as Colonel Hogan on the TV show was something of a fluke; afterwards, he played out the rest of his career mostly in dinner theater productions; he used his star status mainly to pick up young women with his buddy Dafoe and photograph and then videotape their debauchery. The first part of the film with its bright 50s color hues, its Las Vegas jazzy crooning, its International Style interior decors, and its look at the filming of the TV show is entertaining and dynamic; with the career frustrations, the descent into sexual obsession, and Crane's divorce from both wives the film gradually becomes darker and more thoughtful. Many scandalous scenes with oral sex, naked bodies, even Crane and Carpenter masturbating in their underwear in front of the TV set. In the final two scenes Crane – previously cheerful and buoyant – becomes cruel in his dismissal of Carpenter as no longer useful to his pleasure (he points out that the only way they were able to get women was through Crane's celebrity status); and in the final scene some angel of retribution sneaks into Crane's Scottsdale, Arizona apartment and bludgeons him to death with a camera tripod. The film makes it clear that the murderer was Carpenter, although it avows that he was never convicted of the crime. Most of the film is a breezy trip through 50s culture and sexual corruption, but the moralist Schrader ('American Gigolo') comes to the fore in the last part. Through his moral corruption Crane becomes bedraggled and neglectful of all his true relationships, including his agent and Carpenter; the decline is underlined by the use of more washed out color in the cinematography and by low-key music instead of the upbeat jazz of the first part; and with the use of the tripod as the murder weapon (not historical), his death is tied to the sex tapes he has made. The viewer however has enjoyed a lot of titillation on the way to retribution. (2012)

L'Avenir (Things to Come) 2016 Mia Hansen-Love (France) 3.5 Comedy drama about a lycée philosophy professor whose life is turned upside down by mid-life misfortunes. Isabelle Huppert

quietly sensitive as a middle-aged woman who won't let circumstances get her down; André Marcon as he under-stated, rather dull professor husband; Roman Kolinka as Huppert's favorite former student and friend, with whom she has a potential romantic connection; Edith Scob as her mother who has dementia and who dies shortly after being put in a nursing home. The film is set in a simpatico Parisian environment: professors who love books and discussing life issues (the film begins with a family trip to a cool, misty Breton island to visit the grave of Chateaubriand); attractive apartment whose every room is lined with bookshelves; classic maison de campagne with metal patio furniture and a ravishing ocean view; handsome children with a teasing sense of humor. The director puts Huppert in every frame: she is energetic, moving rapidly from home to work, speaking fast, encouraging her students to think about important issues (the French "philo" course), maintaining good relations with her husband, cooking dinner for the family, consulting with her publisher on updating her lycée textbook, etc. A satisfying life, seemingly headed toward a contented retirement. Then the unexpected happens: her husband tells her that he "a rencontré quelqu'un" and is going to move in with her; her mother, who is about to drive her crazy, falls and dies in the nursing home; her publisher cancels the reissue of her textbook; and not to mention her children move out and see her less often. Whereas an American screenplay would have her pursuing serial relationships with inappropriate men or shooting up a strip mall, Huppert is not fazed. She occasionally loses her temper with her husband; she remains silent when she gets the bad news from her publisher; she manifests a little loneliness by striking up an affectionate relationship with her mother's overweight cat, Pandora; she has little desire to pursue sexual relationships or to test the "freedom" she has discovered. She experiments with an alternative radical lifestyle by visiting Kolinka in the anarchist commune he shares with German friends in the foothills of the Alps, but after two visits she returns to Paris to enjoy her teaching, fuss at her ex-husband, and cuddle her new grandbaby. The plot and the resolution are modest and low-key, but the movie's affect is poetic and quietly amusing. Lovely sensitive music, including Fleetwood's version of "Melody of Love" and Schubert's beautiful art song, "Auf dem Wasser zu singen". Marvelous small French film packed with quiet wisdom. (November 2017)

The Aviator 2004 Martin Scorsese 3.5 Leonardo DiCaprio, Cate Blanchett, Kate Beckinsale, Alan Alda as corrupt senator, Alec Baldwin as Pan Am boss. Extremely colorful and evocative treatment of productive part of life of Howard Hughes. Begins with production of 'Hell's Angels' (showing perfectionism of Hughes), and continuing through his aviation and movie career, focusing on his groundbreaking aircraft pioneering, his relationships with various Hollywood starlets, and his disintegrating personality until he finally loses his sanity in last 30 minutes. DiCaprio is convincing as Hughes (aggressive, visionary, unbalanced), as is Kate Blanchett, who captures perfectly the mannerisms and the spirit of Kate Hepburn, and Beckinsale, who is sumptuously dressed incarnation of spitfire Ava Gardner. Everything is pumped up (soundtrack, color, close-up sequences) to make the most vivid possible impression. The most amazing special effects of aviation sequences, particularly the flying of the experimental spy plane, which flies like a race car, then cracks up, and then gives us a hyper-realistic crash sequence, perhaps the most vivid and overwhelming I have ever seen! Last part of movie seems to be in search of the subject of the narrative: as Hughes' mental health collapses (he walks around naked in his screening room peeing in milk bottles), he nevertheless rallies to make a Rocky-like blockbuster appearance in front of a Senate committee, in which he turns the tables and discredits his accusers (and then off to the Spruce Goose, where he loses his mind again). Was his mother responsible for his mental problems? Is mental instability the price you pay for creativity? A very entertaining ride! (2004)

Awakenings 1990 Penny Marshall 2.0 Robin Williams, benevolent, introverted, "kind" (Kavner), and under control as Dr. Sayer, unemployed physician, who gets a job in New York mental hospital that cares for post-encephalitic patients; Robert De Niro as Leonard, catatonic patient that responds to Sayer's drug, although he later partially relapses; Julie Kavner as supportive nurse that eventually becomes Sayer's break-out love interest; John Heard in thankless role as skeptical medical superior that does however come around some at the end; Penelope Ann Miller as pretty girl that (unaccountably) has brief romantic meetings with Leonard; Alice Drummond as another patient that responds well to the drug, but then reverts to catatonia. As one reviewer put it, "homage to catatonia". Mostly smarmy, manipulative, feel-good drama about what dedicated medical professionals can do for

their patients if they are just willing to buck the system. The obviously public hospital, within whose walls the drama occurs, is surprisingly pleasant, well-equipped, and even well-funded (the pharmacist doling out large amount of an expensive drug for over a dozen patients). Acting by the patients is convincing: almost immobile catatonia in the beginning, then fairly naturalistic shuffling, then back to catatonia and, in the case of De Niro, sometimes violent jerking and ticking. Obvious invocation of the recently produced 'Rain Man', except that this time De Niro did not get an Academy Award. Williams' character is coated with saccharin – he is a quiet, benevolent, smiling saint that will go to any length to help Leonard and the other patients; he gets surprisingly little opposition from his superiors. He goes through a little character development himself: not responding in the beginning to Nurse Kavner's hinted romantic interest, he suddenly changes his mind in the last scene, rushing out of the door to share a cup of coffee with her. Marshall misses nary a chance to pull out the emotional stops, even covering the action with a pretty but smarmy sound track by Randy Newman. The film is mostly honest, sticking close to the facts: e.g., after the initial successes with De Niro and the other patients, they all return to immobility or almost uncontrollable jerking and ticking. The film ends however on a false note in order to provide the requisite happy (?) ending: not only do Kavner and Williams find their romantic destiny, but Williams gives a speech invoking that old warhorse, the human spirit, and goes on to tell us that afterwards the patients experienced more infrequent, temporary awakenings. Slow, dull film that seems predictable, and even when it is not, you just don't care. (2015)

Der Baader Meinhof Komplex 2009 Uli Edel (Germany) 3.0 Martina Gedeck as Ulrike Meinhof, leftwing journalist who loves her children and then gives up everything in order to join the gang; Moritz Bleibtreu charismatic, cool (drives a BMW), anarchistic personality filled with aggression; Johanna Wokalek very pretty (straight teeth!) as his wife/girlfriend, but a violent, ruthless, totally indoctrinated and relentless terrorist leader who always pushes her group toward extreme responses. Accurate, and yet sometimes glamorized, fictional depiction of the Red Army Faction terrorist organization operation in Germany in the late 1960s and then through much of the 1970s. The group starts riding high on the wave of student protest about 1968, but when the protests die down when Willi Brandt comes to power (1970), they continue as desperate and totally ruthless terrorist organization determined to bring down the German state by violence. At first the violence is measured (set off a bomb in a department store when no one is present), but they become increasingly more brutal as things go wrong; when the main characters are put in prison, recruits outside murder judges and prosecutors involved in the case (most of them object in principle to indiscriminate murder of "the people"). The first part of the film is exciting and attractive (lots of explosions, suspense and action, naked bodies on nude beaches, etc., and sex between the attractive principals); but the second part is devoted mainly to the original members of the gang in prison, disrupting their trial proceedings (always so smug), and then turning on one another in mutual recriminations about who is responsible for their failure. The film ends in despair with the suicide of the three principals in prison, and then the kidnap and murder of main judge in their trial (the kidnapers insist that he ordered the murder of the three). Film is at first a fascinating look into minds of German middle-class terrorists: there is no speculation about the psychological origins of their psychosis; in the beginning they talk a lot about their conviction that Germany was a neo-Nazi state; they don't seem connected formally to any particular ideology or international organization (although there are amusing scenes of their visit to Palestinian resistance camps where they scandalize the prudish Arab fighters with their nude sunbathing, etc.), but they constantly spew ideological denunciations in an alienating mechanical way, often in the form of statements released to the press or in arguments made by Wokalek in debates with her fellows; everybody acts ruthless and efficient when they are murdering people, but there are different personalities – Wokalek's consistent ideological ruthlessness; Bleibtreu's off-the-wall emotions calling women "cunts" and Arabs "Ali Babas" and shooting at road signs in a joy ride; the essential puzzle of Gedeck as to why she left her children to become a fellow-traveling terrorist who doesn't get along well with the others. The first part of the film does somewhat glamorize the terrorists (so cute, so cool, nice bodies), but it slides into despair and demeaning backbiting toward the end. Film separates the real radicals among the viewers who can stomach these brats and liberal fellow-travelers who can't wait for them to get their comeuppance – arrest, imprisonment, death. The libertarian patience of the German state is striking.

The Babadook 2014 Jennifer Kent (Australia) 4.0 Essie Davis convincing and eloquent as Amelia, hyper-anxious, isolated mother in Adelaide; Noah Wiseman as Samuel, her alternately charming, irritating, scary child, who convinced that he is pursued by a bogeyman in their house, rattles his mother with his piercing screams. Minor masterpiece of a psychological horror film – both scary in the traditional sense (things going bump in the night, glimpses of the Babadook emerging from the shadows) and insightful about the emotional tribulations of an anxious young mother. Most of the film takes place in a delightful post-Victorian frame house with bare, sparsely furnished rooms and a ruined front yard. The troubled Samuel (a penchant for violence and bizarre weapons that get him kicked out of school) is greatly disturbed when a priceless children’s pull-out book appears in his room – titled ‘The Babadook’ (apparently bogeyman in Serbian), it predicts that Samuel will be haunted by the bogeyman, the ‘Babadook-dook-dook’ with piranha-like teeth, hands with pointy fingers, clad in a black smock and a top hat. In a calibrated slow crescendo the spook troubles both mother and son – strange noises in the house, crackling electricity, shadows emerging from the fireplace and the armoires, glimpses of the Babadook appearing in windows, even attacking them when driving during the day. Amelia’s decline to an hysterical woman increasingly isolated from her social and family environment is difficult to watch. When she tries to get rid of the book, the evil force retaliates by repairing it, adding pages predicting that Amelia will kill their dog, her son, and then commit suicide, and then delivering it to her doorstep. As the haunting progresses, one realizes that the spook is having a more destructive influence on the mother than the son, who increasingly emerges as the protector of his mother. The screenplay even suggests that the Babadook is an expression of Amelia’s anxiety resulting from not coming to terms with the death of her beloved husband seven years before (he was killed in an auto accident while driving Amelia to the hospital to give birth to her son). In the final scenes, the Babadook inhabits Amelia’s body, leading her to curse at Samuel and threaten him with bodily harm. When mother and son free her from the possession, the spook turns back into the husband, who implores Amelia to “join” him on the other side, i.e., kill Samuel and commit suicide so they can all be together again. Amelia refuses, and in the last scene while Amelia is (finally) celebrating Samuel’s birthday with him in the garden, the viewer knows that the father-Babadook is in the cellar, living in the shadows and eating the earthworms that his family brings him. It seems as if Amelia has learned to live with the memory of her husband; one hopes that mother and son have turned the corner. The film appeals for its lack of goriness, its harmonization of the horror style with psychological analysis, its excellent art direction, mise-en-scène, and editing. One notes the influence of Polanski’s ‘Repulsion’ (a woman going crazy before our eyes), ‘The Exorcist’ (a good person possessed by a devil), ‘Nosferatu’ (the disturbing appearance of the Babadook), and many haunted house films. The film is perhaps not as original as ‘It Follows’ (2014), but it uses the tropes of haunted house movies to optimal effect. (2015)

Babel 2006 Alejandro Iñárritu 3.0 Brad Pitt as American tourist on vacation in Morocco; Cate Blanchett as his alienated wife, who is shot in the shoulder; Adriana Barraza as the illegal Mexican babysitter taking care of Brad’s and Cate’s children in San Diego; Gael García Bernal as Barraza’s hot-headed nephew who gets her and Brad’s two children in trouble when they take them to Mexico for a wedding; Rinko Kikuchi as Tokyo teenager, who develops promiscuous sexual behavior as a result of her mother’s suicide; Koji Yakusho as her taciturn but sympathetic father. Another puzzle piece from Inarritu, but somewhat more cogent than ‘21 Grams’. Main incident is Blanchett’s shooting by Moroccan boys, who are testing out their hunting rifle by firing at a tourist bus inching up a country road; we spend the whole film waiting for the helicopter to arrive to take her to the hospital. The second scenario is San Diego – Mexico, Barraza’s and the kids’ fun at the Mexican wedding, and then their crisis in the desert after Bernal panics at the border and leaves the three in the desert (?). The third is practically unrelated: Kikuchi’s growing up problems, made more poignant because she is a deaf-mute hanging out with other deaf mute kids; she engages in dangerous sexual activity (somewhat absurd when she attempts to French kiss her dentist), but she is finally healed in the end by the caring paternal concern of both her father and of a police detective who refuses her aggressive offer to have sex with him. One wonders why it is necessary to tell three stories, when really there is no organic link between them – especially the Japanese story is on its own, except that the rifle used to wound Blanchett was one given to a Moroccan guide by

Kikuchi's father when he was hunting in Morocco. Acting is uniformly good, especially by the Japanese girl. That episode is the most touching, since all viewers can identify with the lost teenager; Pitt and Blanchett alienate a bit, especially with Pitt's biting anger and rudeness. The Mexico episode is a little puzzling, since the first 60% of the episode is happy and festive, and then the drama sets in in the desert. The overall theme appears to be a polyglot world that fails to communicate (Babel) – the father with the daughter, although speaking the same language; the Americans with the Moroccans (or the State Department!); and the Mexican lady with the American border agents. All three episodes end happily with the protagonists safe. Some annoying shaky, jittery camera work, but some excellent touches, especially how the noisy world of Tokyo goes suddenly quiet when the camera takes Yakusho's points of view.

Babes in Arms 1939 Busby Berkeley 3.0 Mickey Rooney, Judy Garland, Betty Jaynes. MGM pie-in-the-sky musical about theater kids, who decide to put on a show in small town to make money to benefit their parents; the latter are washed up vaudeville stars, who can no longer make a buck to support their kids. Louis Mayer must have been happy – everybody shows pluck and determination, as they overcome multiple obstacles to get the show moving and make their dreams of being Broadway performers come true; and when they are against the wall, Mother Luck intervenes to get them to Broadway. Judy Garland is simple and pure, although she doesn't have a lot of good music; Mickey Rooney is super-charged, hyperactive, very emotional crying in moments of crisis (three times!). Tone quite juvenile, e.g., the puppy love story line of Mickey and Judy; and also sentimental with all the crying, parents and children loving and supporting one another, and triumphing over adversity. Plot, which is very slow, driven by putting on show, Judy's pique and jealousy at her replacement, whether Margaret Hamilton will succeed in having the kids committed to a children's home. Musical numbers include excellent rendition of Judy and Mickey singing 'Good Mornin,' 'Babes in Arms' march through the neighborhood, long minstrel song production medley in the first neighborhood show, and the grand finale: hugely patriotic extravaganza – "We got no duce, We got no Führer." Just Garbo and Nelson Eddy. "Drop your sabers. We will all be good neighbors."

Baby Driver 2017 Edgar Wright 3.5 Hyper-kinetic, Tarantinesque bank heist film focusing on role of the baby-faced driver and his mind-boggling car chases. Ansel Elgort as Baby, sweet-dispositioned expert getaway driver addicted to speed and to hard rock music of the past three decades; bejeweled Kevin Spacey no-nonsense, fast-talking gang chief with an inconsistent soft heart for Baby; Jon Hamm as ex-stock broker who, as girlfriend Gonzalez says, will "make you see black when he sees red"; Elza Gonzalez as Hamm's sexy, edgy, devoted girlfriend; Jamie Foxx as disquieting, borderline psychotic whose persecution of Baby makes your hands sweat; CJ Jones (deaf actor) sweet and loyal as Baby's foster father; Lily James sweet, pretty, eye-catching as naïve waitress who falls in love with Baby and gets a lot more than she bargained on. The film stands out for its hyper-kinetic pace: quick cutting to promote a breakneck narrative pace; fast, unrealistically literate talking from most of the characters so that the viewer has to rewind to hear the basics; fast, reckless driving by Baby (and others) as cars speed down Atlanta's streets dodging incompetent police officers, skidding in and out of turns, toward the end of the film crashing into other cars always to the accompaniment of beating rock tunes that Baby has to play on his earphones when he is on a job. Spacey organizes several successive bank robberies (one of them a post office!) for which he takes on a variety of accomplices, but always Baby as his driver. Most of the film has a light-hearted, entertaining vibe that turns violent and destructive toward the end – bloody wounds, cars destroyed, principal actors killed, etc.; Baby is haunted by a relentless, unstoppable Hamm, who rises repeatedly from the dead to pursue the kid for being responsible for the death of his beloved wife. Wright mixes the Tarantino-like action and dialogue with inspiration from 'Gun Crazy' and Ray's 'They Live by Night', as waitress Lily bonds with Baby in a movingly innocent relationship that seems destined to end in tragedy: they plot in vain to "head west on Route 20 in a car and with money they don't have" to escape the violence and complications of Baby's real world. The ending, which can't seem to make up its mind between romantic fulfillment and Rayesque tragedy is perhaps the film's only weak point. Brilliant, entertaining film. (October 2017)

Baby Face 1933 Alfred Green (Warners) 3.5 Barbara Stanwyck pretty and slight, and quite an actress, an expert in manipulating men; Douglas Dumbrille as the boss who gets hooked after being seduced; John Wayne in tiny role as an assistant to a business boss and apparently also one of the victims; George Brent as elegant, handsome “playboy” brought in to run the bank after the boss’ death. The song ‘Baby Face’ recurs through the soundtrack; Una Merkel. Setting in a depressing factory town; Stanwyck’s father runs an illegal saloon. Stanwyck is cynical, disabused, and slovenly, since she is surrounded by working class drunks, whose advances she rejects with contempt. She is influenced by an older man, who preaches Nietzschean ideas about using her power to dominate men and get what she wants; and later – “Face life as you find it – defiantly and unafraid. Waste no energy yearning for the moon. Crush out all sentiment.” Stanwyck with her servant then hops a freight train for New York, but when a railroad guard catches them, Stanwyck suggests that they talk it over, the guy eyes her body, and the light goes off while the Black woman she is with sings a spiritual (this scene was apparently cut from the theatrical release). In all of her seductions, Stanwyck has a very sensual kiss, close-ups in soft focus as she waits with parted lips for the kiss; she has a thespian gift for bull-shitting her men; she knows her power over men and waits coolly for them to fall for the bait. Soon she starts to work on Dumbrille, whom she invites into the ladies rest room; he is fired when the boss catches him there; Dumbrille becomes a pitiful beggar for sex, knocking at Stanwyck’s door for affection; since she has already seduced the supposedly virtuous boss, Stevens, she turns Dumbrille down. When Stevens’ father-in-law tries to fire her, she plays the broken-hearted virgin and flashes him her leg; he then visits her in her apartment, the time lag being shown by variation in the light coming in through the window (shades of Lubitsch?); she refers to him as “Fuzzy-Wuzzy”. As she moves up, her clothes become more elegant and stylish (one striking dress with her back completely bare), and her apartments become sumptuous and luxurious; reaches acme in her Art Deco apartment where she is living in Paris. Stevens becomes completely irrational in his obsession, bursts into Stanwyck’s apartment, shoots her lover (his boss!), and then himself; Stanwyck of course remains cool as a cucumber. New chairman Brent (rich, handsome, and well connected) sends her to Paris. But since Brent is known as a playboy, it is more or less inevitable that he will fall for her when he visits Paris. In their meetings she plays for marriage by presenting herself as a woman looking for true love, although she implies that she is looking for money (“You could divorce me in two weeks.”). But he is truly hooked and ties the knot. Oops, tragedy strikes with the bankruptcy of the bank (shadow of the Depression, but shouldn’t there have been a little warning?). She then turns down Brent’s plea for financial help, saying she has to watch out for herself, but it is apparent she now has conscience qualms. About to sail for America, she dashes back to the fabulous apartment to give him the money, but she finds him shot unconscious in his office and mourns over him. There is a hint of salvation in final scene in ambulance – she says her wealth doesn’t matter now, and there is a chance of his living. Film well written and photographed especially in telling close-ups (e.g., all of her possessions at the end). Film drastically violates the Hays Code, even in the end where she has real hope that Brent will live and she will perhaps live happily ever after despite her transgressions.

The Bad and the Beautiful 1952 Vincente Minelli (MGM) 4.0 Outstanding traditional Hollywood movie, “pretty close to film heaven”, says Catherine Clarke of ‘Time Out’. Has an impressive array of Hollywood stars, all of whom are good actors and convincing in their roles, with possible exception of Lana Turner who seems a little soft. Kirk Douglas (Jonathan Shields) as conflicted but ruthless producer who sacrifices those around him for his own compulsion – perhaps ‘ambition’ would be too strong because he is driven inside by a desire to excel, to produce high quality movies (like David. O. Selznick?); a cutting example of the male egos that dominated Hollywood in the studio era. Dick Powell good in understated performance as cynical, passive, somewhat wise writer, whose wife is destroyed by Jonathan. Script and dialogue outstanding – interesting and real; the script with its flashbacks reminds one of ‘Citizen Kane.’ Begins with Barry Fitzgerald (a director, whose idea Jonathan stole), Turner, and Powell in an office being courted by Walter Pidgeon to make another film under Shields; they then launch into three successive flashbacks to recount what a (gifted) heel he is – Barry Fitzgerald in the early days (like Orson Welles and Joseph Cotton in ‘Citizen Kane’; Paul Stewart [butler in CK] is Douglas’ assistant) in dynamic relationship with Douglas until double-crossed by him; Lana Turner basically given her career by him until he tires of her and takes up with a cheap dame (Elaine Stewart); Dick Powell

married to overly cute Southern belle (Gloria Grahame) lured to Hollywood by Douglas, who is then largely responsible for her death; finally the narrative returns to the office where they refuse to work for him. Wonderful crisp expressive black and white photography that shows huge care in execution. Direction is Minellian perfection and good taste – elegant moving camera, expressive composition, appropriate shadowing in the lighting. Film extremely insightful in showing how studio (actually independent production company) works, especially the central role of the producer in the studio system – Douglas is always in charge, pursuing and courting a potential star, working the script directly with the writer, present on the set to make sure the fragile star is handled correctly, dealing directly with the banks, etc. Historical precedents are pretty obvious – Diana Barrymore, David O. Selznick, F. Scott Fitzgerald, etc. Story focuses on Jonathan, who, although having reasons and perhaps excuses for his foibles, is ruthless and often arrogant (Ivan Triesault asks, “Do you have humility, Mr. Shields?”), and willing to sacrifice most anything for success and ‘quality’; Douglas is very convincing. In the end, his old protégés reject icily his offer to collaborate one more time, but they are still fascinated and dominated by him (their listening in on the telephone). Hard to find as better, more deliciously scandalous film about Old Hollywood. Also features suave Gilbert Roland as Latin Lover star and Leo G. Carroll as sharp-tongued director. The film won five Academy Awards, but not including Douglas as best actor. (2007)

Bad Day at Black Rock 1954 John Sturges 3.0 Spencer Tracy as former World War II buddy of son of Japanese farmer – he comes to Black Rock at end of war to give his son's decoration to father Komoko, Robert Ryan as farmer who murdered Komoko – he leads the local gang to resist Tracy's investigation, Lee Marvin as vicious and stupid hit man, Ernest Borgnine as another violent hit man (he gets beaten up by Tracy in a nice fist fight), Anne Francis as decorative young woman who runs the garage, Walter Brennan as one of the decent townsmen intimidated by Ryan's reign of terror, Dean Jagger as another decent, tho alcoholic, townsman serving as sheriff. Solid 50s liberal Hollywood movie exposing, among other things, racism in American society – the Japanese farmer had been murdered by a small local mob in rage against the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor in the days following December 7. Best part of movie is first scene of a Southern Pacific passenger train pulled by two diesel locomotives rushing through sage and sand on a magnificent clear day with the Eastern Sierras in the background – the photography and editing are nervous and daring (once the camera hovers right in front of the onrushing train – helicopter shot?); the sound track is fully symphonic (composed by André Previn) and very portentous. Great all-star male cast, shot in Cinemascope and recorded in stereophonic sound – one of the first in 1954. All the acting is good; story is rather slight, but it uses suspension and slow progress to develop the plot to discover what happened to Komoko. Aside from the denunciation of American racism, the film develops the dynamics of 20th century society: most of the people in the town are decent enough, but they are weak and they cave in to the domination of tyrant Robert Ryan; and it takes the intervention of the outside force to bring them around; at the end they are liberated, and Tracy feels empowered to hand to Brennan Komoko's son's medal. On the one hand, the film reads as a denunciation of American conformity (like 'High Noon,' which the film in many ways resembles – e.g., it happens in a short time recorded on a clock); on the other, it seems more like a look at Nazi Germany – a nation of basically decent people dominated by a madman, but then set free by the intervention of a foreign power. It is also clear that the use of force is necessary – Tracy starts as a kind of Zen, pacifist character who does not respond to insults, but when he finally has had enough, he humiliates Borgnine with Asian-like karate chops; Hitler was disposed of by the American and Soviet armies, not by humanitarian sentiments. The film owes much to the classic western – outsider rides into town, adventures and fights in behalf of justice, magnificent scenery in the background giving it the epic feel, solving the problem of the community, the protagonist leaves on his 'horse.' The town is extremely artificial – a few wooden shacks looking just like a movie set in Lone Pine, California, and all men with only one unattached woman, no children, no families, no church, etc. Impression – a script resembling a play, lots of all-star actors, beautiful, epic scenery in the background, the whole thing lasting about 80 minutes making it seem rather slight. Interesting for the study of the evolution of the western in the 1950s.

The Bad Lieutenant: Port of Call – New Orleans 2009 Werner Herzog 3.0 Nicholas Cage in lead role as a drug addict policeman who astonishes us with weird and unpredictable behavior; Val

Kilmer somewhat more normal as his policeman sidekick; Eva Mendes sexy and vulnerable as prostitute friend of Cage – she has a heart of gold. Unpredictable, surreal, often outrageous film mixing a police thriller with the personal drama of a rogue policeman; it is set in a seriously dilapidated and semi-abandoned New Orleans after Katrina. Cage is the focus of the film in every scene. He begins by jumping into Katrina flood waters to save an inmate; he regrets it later since he ruined his underwear, but more serious is the profound drug habit he acquires because of the back injury he suffers. The film is superficially wound about the investigation into the murder of five Senegalese drug dealers (which is solved at the end of the film), but the real focus is the non-stop drama surrounding Cage's fate. Since he also has a serious gambling habit, he is soon in trouble with the sports betting people; he becomes the object of an Internal Affairs investigation because he threatened to kill the relative of a congressman; and when he slams around a mafia character who is abusing Mendes, Cage is soon being tracked by hitmen demanding \$50,000 in compensation and sex with Mendes (which Cage manages to postpone indefinitely). In an inexplicable plot veering at the end of the film, everything turns out well for this cop condemned to perdition: the gang responsible for the five killings kills all the mob hitmen come to collect their money (one of the dead guys does a spectacular breakdance before heading off to the afterworld), Cage then turns in his savior and is rewarded by promotion to captain (!), and he apparently marries Mendes, who – pregnant – beams with pleasure as her husband is honored at the police ceremony. Cage turns in a powerfully manic, unpredictable, over-the-top performance: limping and his shoulders leaning to one side from the back injury, he shakes down everyone for cocaine and Oxycontin, he snorts cocaine compulsively from his hand, he shakes down a partying college couple in the street, confiscates drugs from the guy and gleefully rapes his girlfriend while her partner looks on; at one point he snorts cocaine like a madman, eyes bulging, teeth bared in a compulsive rictus, and laughing and snorting uncontrollably. The proceedings are enlivened by periodic shots of alligators (one dead from being hit by a car and the other watching with some disgust from the side of the road and then sauntering off to greener pastures) and iguanas that witness the mad goings-on while walking across the frame; one even breaks into song singing soul. It becomes obvious that the animals are Cage's hallucinations. The film also touches on Cage's positive points – he rescues a man from drowning, he agrees to take care of his father's dog, and he cares for and takes care of his girlfriend. The film is unpredictable and entertaining – Werner Herzog's personal (off-the-wall?) take on film noir and the American cop movie. (2013)

Bad Santa 2003 Terry Zwigoff 2.0 Billy Bob Thornton as rude, physically disgusting, potty-mouthed, lecherous, drunk who plays Santa Claus at Christmas for a living; Tony Cox as the extremely foul-mouthed, murderous dwarf that Thornton works for; Brett Kidd as the over-weight, completely cutesy, clueless kid that Thornton goes soft for in the end; Bernie Mac moderately amusing as security man at the shopping center trying to get the goods on Cox and Thornton; Lauren Graham as Thornton's pretty sex buddy (how she got hooked up with him is inexplicable). Occasionally amusing, over-the-top, screwballish comedy that requires very young and immature viewers to crack a smile. Thornton is constantly skating on the fine edge dividing outrageous comedy and just plain revolting behavior, and most of the time it falls on the side of the latter. While working as Santa in a department store, he shows up drunk with his costume unbuttoned, insults the children on his lap, uses bad language, and then dismisses them with the back of his hand, while the parents look cluelessly on; Cox and his "mail-order girlfriend" intentionally smash Bernie Mac's ribs with their car, laughing and joking the whole time; Cox and Thornton approach the kid's mentally incompetent grandmother, who looks dead in an arm chair with her mouth hanging open, but who then scares them half to death by suddenly bolting upright; Thornton, Cox, and the kid hit one another in the balls during a boxing lesson, and the camera leaves the three lying on the ground writhing in pain, etc. There is a simulacrum of a plot involving the felonious activity of Thornton and Cox; they are caught in the end with Thornton being shot eight times in the back; Cox goes to prison, but Thornton inexplicably ends in the hospital recovering from his wounds (after eight gunshot wounds!) and awaiting his return to the arms of his girlfriend. The uneven Zwigoff strikes out with this one after the success of 'R. Crumb' and 'Ghost World'. (2012)

Bad Teacher 2011 Jake Kasdan 2.5 Cameron Diaz funny and sexy (e.g., when she shows up at the 7th grade car wash in short shorts) as junior high school teacher who hates her job; Justin

Timberlake as colorless fellow teacher and one of the targets of her money-grubbing machinations; Lucy Punch amusing as obsessive, goody-two-shoes fellow teacher, who is pathologically jealous of Diaz and determined to bring her down; Jason Segel as semi-hunky gym teacher that Diaz unaccountable ends up with. Often amusing but sometimes tasteless and – it turns out – aimless comedy about a young woman who hates teaching and is interested only in getting her hands on enough money to get a boob job that will get her a wealthy guy to “take care of me the rest of my life.” Diaz, who doesn’t care a fig about sex and romance, is pure calculating manipulation in the worst possible taste – she plays movies to keep her students quiet, she does drugs at her desk in front of her students, and she becomes interested in student fund raisers only to raise enough money to pay for her breast enlargements; in a long episode, she seduces and manipulates the answer key for student achievement tests out of an unsuspecting education bureaucrat so that she can win prize money for the best test scores. Perhaps the most tasteless scene in the film is her dry-humping sex (?) with Timberlake that finishes with a full frontal shot of Timberlake’s wet jeans and then his removal of them as Diaz walks coolly out the door. Much of the plot is taken up by the jealousy of Punch and her efforts to incriminate Diaz in the eyes of the clueless principal (John Michael Higgins), none of which however is ever successful. Striking how much Diaz gets away with. At the end of the film, she escapes unscathed despite her drug use in the classroom and her theft of the test answers; and she ends up inexplicably in the start of a “happily ever after” relationship with the persistent Segel. So, she has suddenly decided that not only is she interested in a romance, but in one with a gym teacher who lives with four Dobermans and doesn’t have any family money? Improbable, but there are enough funny moments in the film to keep it from being boring.

Bagdad Café 1987 percel Adlon (Germany) 2.5 Maianne Sägebrecht as very large, taciturn, hard-working Bavarian stranded in the Mojave Desert; Pounder as the harassed and very ill-tempered proprietor of the Bagdad Cafe; Jack Palance looking lean and craggy in his cowboy clothes – he is an ex-Hollywood set painter who hangs out in his Airstream trailer and paints mystical desert paintings to hang in the motel rooms. Bizarre film about a German tourist who has a fight with her Bavarian husband in the Mojave Desert, she leaves him, joins the crowd at the Bagdad Café, and gradually forms a friendship with Pounder. The situation there is pretty bizarre: Pounder, who runs the café, is a very ill-tempered woman who spends most of her time yelling; she too is left by her husband in the beginning of the film, and he spends the rest of the film watching her from his pickup truck; Pounder has a little baby she pays little attention to (the baby is usually taken care of by a passive Indian who works behind the bar), a teenage son who spends the whole film practicing Bach inventions, and a teenage daughter who speaks like a LA teenager and cares only about cruising with her friends in their pickup trucks; public safety is guaranteed by a sheriff, who is a mild-mannered Indian with two long pig tails. The film focuses on the efforts of Sägebrecht to restore some order to the place (she cleans everything up without asking permission) and to reestablish harmony by pacifying Pounder; the film ends with Palance slowly thawing out and shyly asking her to marry him – she seems to be accepting when the credits roll. A lot of picturesque little scenes featuring incongruous events and lovely, colorful cinematography of the Mojave Desert. The center of attention is definitely Sägebrecht, who holds our attention with her large frame, placid face, dedicated tasking, and introverted innocence. Palance is downright off the wall wandering aimlessly in and out of the camera frame; Pounder is annoying in her stentorian anger until she finally calms down (she always wanted her place to be tidy?). Most of the characters in the film are ethnic minorities. The film concentrates on nothing in particular: it is not really a comedy, although the viewer will occasionally crack a smile; themes are haphazard; the aim seems to show the colorful ethnic underside of lower-class America. Mildly interesting; saved by the presence of Sägebrecht. (2008)

Baisers volés 1969 François Truffaut (France) 4.0 Antoine Doinel, Claude Jade, Delphine Seyrig. Classic part of Truffaut’s coming-of-age saga of which this is third part. Charming, light-hearted look at the adventures of an uprooted but not bitter young man, who is discharged from the army, drifts through several unsatisfactory jobs (night clerk in a hotel, private detective (!), television repair man, etc.), dallies with the girl he thinks is his girlfriend (Jade), has an affair with the wife of the his boss in the shoe store, and then makes decision at end to marry Christine (Jade). Antoine is always on the move, running, walking, stalking. ... Atmosphere tends to be sentimental, as in film’s guitar song that regrets the

passing of love in one's youth. Photography of Paris is fetching and beautiful, adding to impression that life and love among youth is a beautiful adventure. Filled with New Wave ambiguities and puzzling moments and statements that end up making sense and being enlightening. Has wonderful scenes, as toward end Christine takes initiative, invites TV repairman Antoine to her house to work on (faked) broken down TV, and then after a cut, camera follows a trail of TV parts to bedroom where the two lovers are asleep. The next scene combines both writing and pantomime. Antoine and Christine sit at a table and share breakfast. He takes a slip of paper, jots down a note and passes it to her. She reads it, jots down a response and slides it back. After a final exchange, Antoine picks up a heart-shaped bottle opener and slips it onto Christine's finger. In a single contemplative two-shot that lasts several minutes, Truffaut delivers a wonderfully romantic marriage proposal. Film features an odd collection of minor characters and playful cinematic asides that present a complex view of the world: M. Henri's comic raid on an adulterous couple in Antoine's hotel; the detective agency's gay client who discovers his magician boyfriend has a wife and child; Antoine's clever method for obtaining someone's address (he calls them on the telephone and tells them they've won a prize); a montage of the pneumatique network underneath the streets of Paris; Christine's lesson on buttering a biscuit without breaking it; Antoine's manic repetition of his name in a mirror. While each individual moment feels lightweight as it passes, their cumulative effect creates a truthful portrait of ordinary life. In the film's final scene the newly engaged Antoine and Christine stroll in the park. A strange man who has trailed Christine for days approaches the couple and declares his love for Christine. He describes his love as "definitive" and unlike the "temporary" love of "temporary people". When he walks away, Christine explains that the man must be mad. Antoine, recognizing similarities to himself, admits, "He must be". (2004)

Ball of Fire 1941 Howard Hawks (wr. Charles Brackett and Billy Wilder; RKO) 3.5 Gary Cooper as youngish, bookish English professor, who can't stand split infinitives or expressions like "on account of, because" – his performance is less inexpressive than usual; Barbara Stanwyck as Sugarpuss O'Shea, sexy cabaret singer who speaks slang out of the side of her mouth but a dewy-eyed pushover when she falls for the man she loves; Dan Duryea as hood Duke Pastrami; Ralph Peters as his amusing clueless sidekick; Dana Andrews in small early role as mafia leader; Henry Travers as one of the picturesquely timid professors; Oskar Homulka as another one. Mildly amusing but expertly written and produced semi-screwball comedy that pokes fun at other-worldly professors rather than the rich. Cooper and six other professors living single in a mansion in New York have already spent six years producing a huge encyclopedia; realizing however that they know nothing about American slang (Carl Sandburg is quoted: "Slang is language that takes off its coat, spits on its hands, and goes to work."), they visit a nightclub where they hear Stanwyck singing a lively version of 'Drum Boogie' (Gene Krupa's band is entertaining with Krupa frenetic on the percussion); they hire her to help them, but their decision gets them mixed up with local small-time hoods; being a romantic comedy, the script has Cooper and Stanwyck falling in love, although they will have to overcome language, cultural, and social barriers to get together finally in the end. When Stanwyck temporarily moves in with the seven professors, one can't help but think of 'Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs', which was produced just four years before; one might be able to identify Dopey, Bashful, etc. The film has a very dated image of academics, who are seen as pleasant, naïve, absent-minded, buried in their books, and knowing very little about real life; they are mildly amusing as they quote the story of the Sword of Damocles, sing "Gaudeamus igitur", and mildly mock Freudianism; and they are very cute when they support Cooper's romantic interest in Stanwyck and participate actively in the campaign to win her hand; even these stuffy guys recognize the importance of love. The dialogue in the screenplay is exactly written with much amusing contrast between the stuffy Latinate constructions of the professors with the (perhaps a bit self-consciously) off-handedness of the slangy Stanwyck and the crooks; a nice example of a witty bon mot: Sugarpuss (referring to her throat) "A slight rosiness? It's as red as The Daily Worker, and just as sore!" Cooper's performance is adequate, but it is hard to accept him as a romantic lead alternating between bookishness and wittiness; Stanwyck shows terrific sexiness and flair in a role that recalls 'The Lady Eve' done in the same year (she reminds us of her nickname for Henry Fonda when she calls Cooper "Potsy"). The screwball antics are rather marginal until the end, when the professors, imprisoned in a room with the rather harmless-looking crooks, use their superior wits to turn the tables (they use a microscope to focus a

sunray on a rope holding a large picture hovering over the head of Duryea); they then commandeer a garbage truck from a neighbor and ride clinging to the side of it to where the damsel is in distress; they break into the room where she is being forced to marry Andrews and break up the show by shooting captured automatic weapons into the ceiling and the floor. Beautifully done movie that doesn't quite hit you between the eyes. (2010)

Ballad of a Soldier 1959 G. Chukrai (Russia) 3.5 Vladimir Ivashov as very beautiful, naïve, warm-hearted and generous 19-year-old soldier, Alexei, returning from the front to see his mother; Yevgeny Urbansky as soldier who is afraid to return to his wife because he has lost a leg; Zhanna Prokhorenko as very pretty, innocent, inexperienced girl, Shura, with a big light brown plait who meets Vladimir in a box car full of hay; Antonina Maksimova as Alexei's mother. Sad, nostalgic, romantic, effective classically styled film about boy soldier who knocks out a couple of German tanks and is given permission to return to his village to help his mother fix her roof. The film is filled with episodes encountered while traveling home – Alexei helps a paraplegic soldier get back to his wife, who receives him warmly in the train station; Alexei takes a message to a buddy's wife, only to find that she is bedded down with another man; he meets Shura in a freight car filled with hay, loses her, and then finds her again as their innocent love for one another develops; when he finally makes it home to his mother, he can only speak to her for a few minutes before he has to dash back to the front. The film begins with a voice-over by the mother walking across the Russian steppe and making it clear that after his short visit, Alexei was killed; this knowledge gives the film a sharp poignancy. The romance (non-sexual) between Alexei and Shura is as endearing and innocent as they get; Shura is frightened to death at first, but you can tell by her winning smile that she quickly warms up to the sweet and considerate Alexei; they barely kiss and they don't even trade addresses when they part for the second time; even if he had survived the war, it is doubtful they would have been reunited. The film style is pleasing and traditional: elegantly edited and photographed with eloquent close-ups of the beaming faces of the Russian common folk, especially of the beautiful Alexei and Shura. Made in the Khrushchev détente, the film has no propaganda about the nation's leaders and it even presents an adulterous wife. However, every character in the film is well-meaning and goes out of his way to help poor Alexei; the soldiers laugh and have a good time, truck drivers, although gruff at first, usually give him a ride; even the adulterous lady is ashamed of herself. The best kind of sentimental film – the feelings are genuine. (2009)

The Band's Visit 2007 Eran Kolirin (Israel) 3.0 Sasson Gabai as long-nosed, poker-face conductor of Egyptian police band visiting in Israel; Ronit Elkabetz as free-spirited, but equally unattached and lonely Israeli woman who takes the men in and shows hospitality when they are left unattended by the Israeli Arabs who are supposed to meet them. Low-key, rather slow-moving little film (about an hour and 20 minutes) about human loneliness, the search for love and connectedness, and cross-cultural connections. The main theme is emphasized by numerous shots of empty spaces in the practically deserted streets and buildings of this part of Israel, by slowly paced editing, and by an often silent audio track broken occasionally by unobtrusive music. The seven or eight members of the band are all quiet and reserved; the emblematic image is their all lined up in a row in their sky blue uniforms looking a bit sad sack and lost. They shyly settle in the meager Israeli apartments where they are spending the night, and then gradually the social ice thaws a bit and they get to know their hosts. Little dramas and revelations abound: one man is a frustrated composer (his unfinished composition stops in mid passage); another Israeli youth who has never been with a woman gets a wooing lesson from the Egyptian who accompanies him to the roller rink; the estrangement of an Israeli couple becomes painfully obvious; a young Israeli waits repeatedly next to the pay phone to hear from his girlfriend, and we are all a little thrilled when the phone rings at the end of the film. The main plot is the stark loneliness of the two principals; Elkabetz makes moves to create a closer relationship with Gabai (including going on a date to a cafeteria in town and talking for a while on a park bench), but the latter is too shy and wounded by his past (his wife died and his only child committed suicide) to respond; Elkabetz ends coupling rather unjoyously with a younger man in the band; Gabai takes some consolation adopting a closer father-like personal relationship with a young man in the group. The film is full of low-key humorous moments. It is reminiscent of Czechoslovakia's Prague Spring, where filmmakers like Milos Forman made simple,

unadorned, and humorous little films about people searching for relationships and significance. Ends with a romantic Egyptian song. (2007)

Barbara 2012 Christian Petzold (Germany) 3.0 Nina Hoss as thin, astringent, inexpressive Barbara always with a (fancy) cigarette in her hand; Ronald Zehrfeld as gentle, pudgy André, the head doctor quietly courting Barbara – he is a conscientious doctor and a reluctant Stasi informer; Rainer Bock as Klaus Schütz, a professional man from West Germany that has the right to travel in the East. Slow-moving, meditative, often ambiguous film about a woman doctor in East Germany – she has been sent to the province because she tried too hard to get out of the DDR. She is a conscientious doctor, who is involved in an unexplained resistance operation involving exchanges of large sums of money and aiding dissatisfied East German to escape their country. While maintaining her cover of normality in the hospital, she is planning to escape by raft to Denmark in order to be with her West German lover, who wants to marry her. In the end, she does not escape, but gives her place in the raft to a teenager, who has been brutally mistreated by the authorities in a summer work camp: thus her moral conscience triumphs over her instincts of self-preservation. In the last scene she is seated next to a patient that the gentle André has saved from death by surgery – it seems that she will have to resign herself to the sameness and boredom of provincial life in the DDR. The film is most notable for its depiction of the resigned hopelessness of East German society. The environment is unkempt, shabby, overgrown; everything needs a paint job or someone to smooth over the plaster. The atmosphere is tense, watchful, self-conscious: even the kind André is an informer for the Stasi. Everyone is cautious and mistrustful of their neighbors; they are in fear if a car stops near them in the street or if someone knocks at their door – maybe they will end up in one of the "extermination" camps where the girl has been sent. When interrogated by the police, Barbara is subjected to a "cavity" search by an impassive woman wearing latex gloves. The town is empty or thinly populated – few patients or doctors in the hospital, few cars on the road, virtually no pedestrians in the street. The empty stillness of the environment is emphasized by the absence of a music soundtrack. The film moves at a (sometimes maddeningly) slow pace, just like the pace of life in the DDR. Certainly not to everyone's taste, but the film gives a vivid picture of what it was like to live in Communist East Germany. (2014)

Barcelona 1994 Whit Stillman 3.0 Stillman-style light-hearted look at the lives and dilemmas of 20-something yuppie Americans living in Barcelona (Stillman used to live there). Taylor Nichols as the straight-laced, chatter-box Ted, who works as a salesman for a Chicago-based company and who is obsessed with finding the right – homely, not beautiful, and character-rich – girl as his mate; Chris Eigeman as Fred, his stubborn, cynical, in-your-face cousin, junior officer representing the US Navy in Barcelona; Tushka Bergen and Mira Sorvino as the two most prominent, very attractive Catalan girls that speak good English since they work in the local trade fair. The meandering narrative revolves around the spiny relationship of the two men, who had spent a lot of time together at "the lake" back in the Midwest as boys. Screen time focuses on casual witty talk about which authors you rely on to develop a sales philosophy; the best kind of girl to marry to ensure a good life (a thorny issue since the guys notice that Barcelona girls don't insist on a stable relationship before sex with a guy; one of them says that anyone that wants to marry a girl after meeting her is "facha" (fascist)); which cousin is responsible for the *mésentente* between the two, etc. Also a lot of attention to the anti-Americanism rife in Barcelona, a feeling promoted by the insensitive Fred walking around the city in full uniform and loudly contradicting anyone that criticizes the United States. A bit of marginally relevant drama is provided by the attempted assassination of Fred, because of an off-hand joking remark by his cousin that he is an operative for the CIA (this followed confusion in a discussion about the difference between the CIA and the CIO). Ramon, a boyfriend of Ted's girlfriend, characterizes the US thus: a place filled with crime, runaway consumerism, and vulgarity; populated by loud, badly dressed fat people watching their 80 channels of TV, prone to violence and racism, eating hamburgers (and hot dogs). The film has lovely, brightly lit shots of the streets and apartments of Barcelona; the characters are equally pleasing – the girls all stylish and sexy, the American guys young, dressed in light-colored suits, and treated with indulgence and even affection by the filmmaker (they would probably be satirized by other filmmakers). The film ends with a pleasant fantasy: Fred, having recovered from his coma sporting a jaunty black eye patch, is

back barbecuing at the lake with Ted, another American, and their three Barcelona wives-girlfriends: Fred explains to the bemused women how you tailor a bun to either the hot dog and the hamburger; Ted states that the advantage of marrying a foreigner is that no matter how obnoxious your behavior is, the foreigner will just attribute it to cultural distinctions. Film ends with a light-hearted bridging of personal and national differences. (2016)

The Barefoot Contessa 1954 Joseph Mankiewicz 3.0 Ava Gardner looking charismatic, smashing, and sexy especially in first part of film when her hair is long; Humphrey Bogart looking tired and rather aged (he was soon to die) as film director who is her mentor; Rossano Brazzi as effete Italian count who courts Gardner and marries her; Edmond O'Brien in AA role (!) as producer's gopher who sweats a lot, talks too much, and is generally annoying; Warren Stevens as poker-faced, sourpuss, inexpressive big-time arrogant producer. Archetypical 50s star vehicle with a Mankiewicz twist. Set in moviemaking world with luxurious Hollywood and European settings on the French and Italian Riviera, three top stars, and extreme melodrama. The story often skirts absurdity. Gardner is a flamenco dancer from a poor family in a small Spanish city; when she is discovered and rises to fame, she remains standoffish and refuses to indulge in Hollywood musical beds; when she decides to run off with South American playboy (an absurdly flippant Marius Goring), she refuses to have sex with him; but then she falls in love with Brazzi, and then is murdered by him when he finds out that she is having sex with one of his servants (a situation advertised by a targeted camera in several scenes). At the end, she confesses to confidant Bogart that she has conceived a baby with the lover for her husband, who it turns out had his balls blown off by the British several years before; and so it is supposed to be ironic that in killing her Brazzi has also destroyed the very being that he wanted most to bring into the world. Being a Mankiewicz film, there is of course a lot of talking, usually not to good effect. The entire film is told in flashback by various characters at Gardner's Rome funeral – they talk way too much. The girl from the poverty-stricken household in Spain speaks elegant English, often delivering philosophical disquisitions on serious subjects and using a lot of metaphors; the same can be said about most of the other characters; at least the dry, somewhat cynical observations of Bogart seem to be in character. The high-falutin' garrulousness of the film calls the viewer's attention to the unrealistic speech, and at 140 minutes makes the film way too long (cut at least 20-30 minutes!). The attempt to create an intriguing MacGuffin with Gardner's bare feet (apparently something the actress did in reality) falls flat. Watching Gardner however is a delight. (2008)

Barfly 1987 Barbet Schroeder 3.5 Mickey Rourke, Faye Dunaway, Alice Krige, Frank Stallone. Wr. Charles Bukowski. Well presented look at Bukowski's life on skid row in (apparently) LA. (Rourke) is in continual alcoholic haze, as he cruises into bars looking for free drinks and getting into fights with ("unoriginal macho energy") bartender Stallone to protect his dignity and show off for the other bar denizens. Very little plot: look at Henry's life, his affair with Wanda (Dunaway), who looks a lot better than the dirty, stinking Henry, but who in some ways is even further gone, his brief connection with literary patron Krige (How could she stand to have sex with someone so smelly and so far gone?), and then returns to same old way of life saying that living in Krige's environment is like "cage with golden bars." Nice opening and closing paragraphs: camera opens in streets with bright neon signs and then enters bar à la Hitchcock; and at end when Henry goes off to fight once again with Eddie, camera retreats out the front door back into the street with the same neon signs. Rourke's performance is very boozy and convincing; as is Dunaway in more restrained way. Some good lines from Bukowski: e.g., when Wanda asks him if he hates people, he replies, "No. I'm just happy when they aren't around." Music is pretty much continuous, with a lot of Beethoven and Mozart (presumably chosen/ suggested by Bukowski) as well as bar music. Image of drunk's life is pretty romanticized: Henry is way too functional (writing, getting tax refund, etc.) for a far-gone drunk. But still pretty entertaining for viewers who are not and not have been alcoholics.

Barking Dogs Never Bite 2000 Joon-ho Bong 3.0 Sung-jae Lee as Korean college lecturer highly annoyed by barking dogs in his apartment complex; Ho-jung Kim as his pretty, pregnant, rather bitchy wife; Doona Bae as kind of slacker teenager working in nearby office – she comes to life in her

campaign to help Lee. Uneven black comedy set in Seoul about a frustrated and alienated young man; his difficulties arise from his conflicts with his pregnant wife and his unfulfilled desire to be promoted from lecturer to a real professor. He expresses his irritation by hunting down barking dogs in his apartment complex; he kills the first one by mistake, then actually throws the guilty dog off the roof of the building, and then gets himself into hot water by losing his wife's dog. The climax of the film is Bae's rather awkward rescue of the third dog from the clutches of an incompetent street person who wants to eat him; the film's denouement is optimistic – Lee and his wife are reconciled, and she gives him most of her severance pay (she was fired after working 13 years for her company) to bribe the dean to give him the professor's job; the last scene has him lording disconsolately over a college classroom. The film is very entertaining. Like most of Bong's films, it is set in a youthful pop culture contest where the characters look and act western working in offices, living in Spartan rooms in large apartment complexes, and dealing with the pressures and tensions of modern urban life – street people, walking your dog, bureaucracy, ambition in the workplace, environmental hazards like insect spraying in the park (an amusing scene in which Lee loses his wife's dog). It is not really a thoroughgoing satire or critique of Korean life, since the analysis of Korean culture is not pursued very far. When the film emphasizes Lee's pursuit of the dogs and eating them, it becomes a spoof of a horror movie, e.g., when the dog stew-cooking janitor approaches Lee's hiding place with a bloody knife or the street person proposes to ram a skewer through the third dog's anus to cook him over his rooftop fire only to complain about his hairiness (does he really intend to eat the dog with the hair on it?). Toward the end the film edges toward romantic comedy with the developing sympathy between Lee and Bae and the smile that appears on the latter's face when she sets out to rescue the third dog and return her to Lee and his wife; Lee and Kim get along so poorly that a connection between him and Bae may be conceivable for a while, but in the end Lee is reconciled with his (suddenly generous) wife and Bae is happy to go hiking in the woods with her buddy. Film is sometimes dull and long-winded, but often sports a light comic touch that Bong puts to good use in later films. Worth watching.

Barney's Version 2010 Richard J. Lewis 3.0 Paul Giamatti pulls out all the stops as the pudgy, determined, basically passive, frequently rude Canadian Jewish producer of schlocky TV soap operas; Dustin Hoffman pretty adorable as his randy, loving, 'Mensch' dad; Rosamund Pike in a rather studied performance as Barney's stable, precise third wife; Rachele Lefevre as Barney's eccentric, outspoken first wife, who dies in the film's first sequence; Minnie Driver as his tall, wealthy, Jewish princess of a second wife; Scott Speedman as Barney's alcoholic, novelist friend who dies drunk in a lake accident; a great selection of Canadian filmmakers – Atom Egoyan, Denis Arcand, David Cronenberg – appear in cameo roles. Something of a high quality soap opera about the life and loves of a Montreal Jewish man; the film takes us through his three marriages, the first one in Rome a clueless disaster, the second one back in Montreal done for financial stability, the third out of Barney's desperate need for a wife and friend. The first two are quite amusing largely because of the colorful acting of Lefevre (she gives birth to a baby that is dark-skinned – obviously not Barney's) and the garrulous hysterics of Driver, who seduces Speedman because he could think of no other way to shut her up. Barney spies Pike at his second wedding reception and then pursues her relentlessly until she agrees to marry him. Part of the mystery of the film is how the fat, cynical, inattentive, and marginally alcoholic Barney can appeal to three attractive women, who respond, one supposes, to men who launch high-energy campaigns against/for them. He has two children with Pike, but he is too self-centered to do well as a family man – e.g., he is unhappy when his wife goes back to work and he is often found drunk in bars watching ice hockey games on television when he has promised to be with her during one of her honey-voiced interviews. After Pike leaves him for an annoyingly ingratiating radio producer, Barney goes into decline, suffers from progressive Alzheimer's, but his ex-wife remains loyal to him until his death. In the last scene she visits the grave that he had bought for the two of them; it seems she intends to be buried next to him. The film has its comic moments usually focused on Barney's gauche behavior. e.g., when he lights up a smelly cigar and then falls asleep at the dinner table with his wife's friends. Amusing to watch Hoffman do his thing as the horny-and-lovable-old man (he dies in a warehouse right after he tells his son that he is happy to know that he will soon be lying next to his wife in the family plot). The film is often touching, but sometimes seems facile and long-winded. (2011)

Battle of the Sexes 2017 Jonathan Dayton; Valerie Faris 3.0 Entertaining, well made film about the famous tennis match between Billie Jean King and Bobby Riggs in 1973. Emma Stone as a dedicated, competitive Billie Jean King; Steve Carell as entertainingly clownish Bobby Riggs focusing on his behavior as a hustler; Andrea Riseborough as King's lesbian lover she takes up with in the course of the film; Sarah Silverman as manager Gladys, who plays the "straight man" opposite the comic actors; Bill Pullman in thankless role as male chauvinist USLTA boss Jack Kramer; Alan Cumming as sashaying clothes designer with unconvincing English accent (even though he is Scottish); Elisabeth Shue almost 20 years after 'Showgirls'. The film gives an entertaining recap of the Bobby Riggs challenges, first in the "Mother's Day Massacre" in which Riggs vanquishes and humiliates Margaret Court, and then in the extremely popular contest with King in which he is dispatched in three out of five sets. It also details the feminist initiatives of King and her friends, who refuse to accept the miserly prize money allowed by the USLTA and create their own organization, the WTA, which launches its own tournaments. The real meat of the film is its treatment of the characters and personal issues of the principals. King has an unromantic relationship with her husband, who however is attentive and faithful as her manager; while touring in the film she discovers that her sexuality is more complicated than she thought, as she develops a strong romantic attraction for Riseborough and begins a sexual relationship; she has ambiguous and conflicted feelings, since she is still attached to her husband. Most entertaining aspect of the film is the character of Carell, who interprets Riggs as a dyed-in-the-wool hustler, who tells his fellow addicts in the Gamblersaholic meeting that their problem is not that they are gamblers, but that they are not good at it; who seeks publicity by playing tennis while holding the leashes of two dogs; who arrives on court with sheep wearing a little Bo Beep costume; who plays the first set against King with a Sugar Daddy (caramel) shirt on. Chastened by his defeat in the end he is reunited to his wife, who had previously dismissed him because of his incorrigible gambling habits. The film works because of the light-hearted intelligence of the screenplay and the charm and wit of all the players, particularly Carell. (January 2018)

Battleground 1949 William Wellman (MGM, Schary) 3.0 Van Johnson as lady's man Holley, wise-cracking and almost runs away; James Whitmore as no nonsense, good buddy, tobacco-chewing and spewing sergeant; Ricardo Montalban as Mexican American (killed); George Murphy as older soldier waiting to be sent home to take care of his family; John Hodiak as Jarvess, Jim Arness, Marshall Thompson as replacement recruit Layton. Very good Schary-style realist war movie on the defense of Bastogne that focuses more on the predicament of GIs, the "battered bastards of Bastogne," in combat than on heroics and propaganda. Almost all shot on MGM sound stage – very realistic with conifer trees draped in snow and snow falling all around. Labors hard to establish the individual personalities of the soldiers (see above), and then kills off some of them for pathos, but most make it through. Not many battle sequences and none are heroic – most of the fighting is hiding from artillery shells; no contact with officers or strategy; soldiers complain constantly that the people back home publishing the local newspaper know more about the war than they do – they aren't even sure which country they are in! Reminds one of the depiction of the citizen soldier in 'Band of Brothers.' Soldiers are stubborn and devoted; they look terrible – ragged clothes, stubbly beards (even the captured Germans look better); they complain and gripe a lot – no one knows what is going on, they are always hungry, hoping for a serious sickness or a leg wound that will send them to a hospital, "no one cares about us." Pretty smart ass and insubordinate to officers and sarcastic about the army – "I have found a home in the Army!" But they hang in there, do their duty, mourn their dead, and stand up effectively to the Germans. A lot of humor – razzing each other, the old guy who clicks his false teeth for emphasis, running joke about Johnson trying to cook scrambled eggs in his helmet, etc. Moments of pathos – Rodrigues freezes to death under the wrecked jeep, the young soldier is killed because he took his boots off one too many times, etc. Wonderful frame – in beginning Whitmore drilling his men mercilessly in the rest camp in Reims; at end he whips together the remnant of the platoon to march proudly in order toward the rear as the reinforcement troops advance toward the front. Film makes one proud of the service of these men in World War II. Pace sometimes drags, perhaps because of paucity of combat action.

Beach Blanket Bingo 1965 William Asher 1.5 Annette Funicello more or less grown up, not showing her navel (per Walt Disney), dowdy, pretty boring and a bit hefty; Frankie Avalon harmless and uninteresting as her partner (for the fifth time); Paul Lynde mugging annoyingly over the top as a publicity rep; Linda Evans looking cute and acting dumb singing a couple of songs; Harvey Lembeck turgidly and stupidly comic as a leader of a harmless motorcycle gang; Don Rickles comparatively funny (when he launches into his insult routine) and quite thin in early role; Buster Keaton pitiful and fat as background slapstick figure who chases a stupid German babe dressed in a fir bikini back and forth across the beach. Completely forgettable beach movie about, well, nothing. Focus is a bunch of surfers standing around in 60s bikinis (butts well covered) on a Malibu (?) beach singing empty and forgettable pop songs, dancing the vibration dance without touching, and running when someone shouts "Come on, gang!" Several subplots to maintain a semblance of interest: challenges to go skydiving; one of the guys meets a mermaid whom he buys a dress for and takes to a dance (luckily she sprouts legs and dons a bikini when she comes ashore); Frankie and Annette bickering over Avalon's attraction to other girls (but they kiss at the end); the head of the motorcycle gang is obsessed over Linda Evans and he "kidnaps he" – she goes along willingly. Exceptionally lame teenage film; some historical interest.

The Beast From 20,000 Fathoms 1953 Eugene Lourié (Warners) 2.5 Kenneth Tobey as army colonel, Paul Christian as atomic physicist, Paula Raymond as attractive paleontologist, Cecil Kellaway as leprechaunish paleontologist, Lee Van Cleef delivers final shot to monster. Early version of enormous prehistoric lizard awakened from icy sleep by atomic explosion; in a very bad mood he makes his way down the east coast of Canada and USA, sinks ships, kills the kindly professor in his diving bell (possible for a scientist to be so foolish?), then attacks New York (for no apparent reason); he rampages through the city and is finally destroyed in the roller coaster section of Coney Island. Film is obviously prototype for *Godzilla* made a couple of years later. Special effects by immortal Ray Harryhausen, whose lizard looks very good striding through the streets of New York, smashing cars, picking them up and throwing them, picking up and crushing a policeman, walking through whole buildings (monster loves to wave his head back and forth as he tears things apart with jaws); not so good in close-up next to human figures; final showdown on Coney Island is orgy of destruction as roller coasters catch on fire, and wounded by an "atomic isotope" shot into his wound, monster dies with flames licking all around and consumed roller coaster frames collapse. Tobey does his usual thing, at first very skeptical of what German-accented Christian has to say, but then doing his duty as military takes over and defeats the monster, cooperating seamlessly with the scientists. Raymond as usual attractive female scientist, who contributes to demise of monster and who falls in love with Christian and kisses him fervently at end. So, so 50s monster flick, but seems at origin of many of clichés of genre.

Beasts of the Southern Wild 2012 Benh Zeitlin 2.5 Quvenshané Wallis very expressive, even charismatic as Hushpuppy, a nine-year-old girl trying to survive with her father in the coastal lowlands wilderness of Louisiana; Dwight Henry as her African –American father (the mother mysteriously left some time ago), allegedly obsessed with teaching his daughter to survive in a cruel and indifferent world. Very odd film set in the extreme rural slums of coastal Louisiana (called the Bathtub). The environment is hostile and unattractive: a barren area where the only sustenance is shrimp and other shellfish (what a diet!) and where the inhabitants live in jury-built shelters surrounded by rusting machinery (shades of civilization), garbage and other detritus – when Henry lies down to die at the end, his bed is several layers of garbage in a house with gaping holes in the sides and roof. The inhabitants of the Bathtub are often presented as joyful types, black and white supporting one another, dealing courageously with the huge, Katrina-like flood that destroys everything they own, celebrating their holidays like children with fireworks going off on all sides, determined to remain anchored in their miserable shantytown despite the efforts of mainstream society to take them away; at the same time, they revel in miserable poverty and are rarely seen without being drunk with a bottle of beer in their hands. The film is ostensibly about Henry's campaign to teach Hushpuppy how to survive after his death – in the end he has Hushpuppy stand tall, show the muscles in her arms and proclaim loudly that she is tough, she is a man, and she can eat shellfish by ripping into them with her teeth and not using a sissy knife. He is however ill-tempered, unpredictable, and often violent in his treatment of her, and the viewer cannot help

but question whether the under-educated, under-parented Hushpuppy is ready for anything after her father dies. The dramatic core of the film is burdened by a metaphorical conceit – the earth is coming to an end because of climate change (shots of huge glaciers calving into the ocean), and enormous, predatory pig-like creatures called aurochs are roaming the earth rooting up and destroying everything in their path; except for Hushpuppy who shows her courage by standing up to them and staring them down in their murky eyes; after some hesitation, they meekly turn around and walk away. The whole world is destined to destruction and only the courage of types like Hushpuppy will save us? The acting of Wallis is eloquent and compelling, as is that of Henry, and there are memorable scenes such as floating on the river and the tears shed between father and daughter when he dies. The film cannot seem to decide whether to sing the praises of the noble savage – the inhabitants of the Bathtub, virtuous, dedicated to the rejection of hollow, civilized behavior, bravely confronting adversity and preparing their children for the (very difficult) future with the help of the proverbial prostitute with a heart of gold; or to depict the Bathtub as a sort of hell dominated by poverty, anger, and a hopeless dependence on alcohol. Perhaps an auspicious beginning, but only a beginning; a very confused film. (2012)

Beau Geste 1939 Henry Hathaway (Paramount) 3.0 Gary Cooper expressive enough in role as the noble Beau who dies in the end, Ray Milland as his worthy and affectionate younger brother, who is also in love with..., Susan Hayward in small early role as the betrothed of Milland, Robert Preston as Digby, the third brother who also dies fighting the Tuoregs, Brian Dunlevy in powerful role as Foreign Legion sergeant, mean and venal but who also is a devoted soldier, Broderick Crawford in small role as Foreign Legion companion. Foreign Legion desert adventure movie that probably appealed to kids as much as adults. Has terrific adventure-style beginning at Fort Zinderneuf set in the middle of the Sahara, where a relief column of the Legion arrives to encounter a triple mystery – why are dead soldiers stacked at the fort’s turrets, what happened to Robert Preston, why was the sergeant’s body holding the note about the great sapphire? Then flashes back to the Geste family – the three brothers (Beau played in his youth by Donald O’Connor!) and the female ward (Hayward). A mystery develops around the great sapphire (Plot driver is who stole it? One of the brothers?). The three brothers end up in the Foreign Legion, where they have adventures in the fort, especially surrounding the tyrannical notions of the sergeant Dunlevy and a mutiny to replace him (the brothers are of course [Code] loyal to authority, although they don’t care for the sergeant); the sergeant was the one who placed the bodies of soldiers on the parapet to give the Touregs an impression of strength – it works! In end, Cooper and Preston are dead, but Milland returns to his lady friend for marriage (and to live happy ever after), and discovers through a note that the aunt had sold the great sapphire and received a fake copy, and Beau had made off with the copy to cover her honor. Ends with appreciation for Beau’s nobility. Very well directed, beautifully restored, impeccable locations (looks just like a romantic version of the Sahara – Death Valley?). Film seems implicitly pro-Allied – the French and British seem to be good friends. Pleasing movie with little depth, just the right kind for Gary Cooper.

Un Beau Mariage 1982 Eric Rohmer (France) 3.5 Beatrice Romand, Arielle Dombasle, André Dusollier. From ‘Comedie et Proverbes.’ Sabine decides she is going to get married without knowing who. She is very determined, knows exactly what she wants; headstrong; petulant, impatient; rather childish; takes the initiative when her chosen man (Dusollier) doesn’t respond; refuses to take no for an answer; perhaps delusional; then when rejected, she is calm at first and then retaliates and walks out on her proposed betrothed in anger. Very pretty with pretty body and small breasts; we see her naked in beginning when she is having sexual affair with a painter; but when she breaks with him (in the middle of sex he answers the telephone to talk to his son), we see her body no more; now she is determined that she will find her husband without first having sex with him. Wonderful scenes and locations; seems like autumn all the time, perhaps winter at very end; beautiful interior shots and shots of interior Breton countryside. Acting and camerawork quite realistic; no music; all to avoid pumping up of emotions like Hollywood or “un film bien fait.” Focuses on dialogue among characters, although it is not entirely realistic; interesting little pauses as if to call our attention to something; talking is quite theoretical and philosophical (not as much as his 60s movies) – often discussing issues relating to the war of the sexes, especially between Sabine and her artist friend as to what the best way is to get your man; or debate with

old lover Claude about whether the best role for a wife is to stay home and be a housewife (he doesn't think so; Sabine does); language is also very correct and grammatically *comme il faut*. A lot of traveling shots of Sabine driving in her 4-chevaux, or walking down the street and in and out of doorways; or toward the end, of the train taking her back and forth between Le Mans and Paris (where she is somewhat half-heartedly studying for her masters in art). Interesting characters are all women, including Mom, who is a source of sensible good advice for Sabine. Edmond though is a bit passive and pompous and non-committal; it seems that Sabine would have tired of him. Ends with an attractive young man on train making eyes at Sabine; the comedy of love will continue. Sabine a little annoying at times, but basically charming. Rohmer seems to look at the condition of young women in a liberated age; freedom looks so good on surface, but what do you do to find your life's mate?

Beautiful Girls 1996 Scott Rosenberg 2.5 Timothy Hutton as frustrated aspiring pianist who returns to small factory Massachusetts town to attend a high school reunion; Michael Rapaport as annoying red-haired guy who keeps his hope up with photos of models on his bedroom wall, who+ is forever stressing about his girlfriend dating an old meat-cutter; Natalie Portman as 13-year-old next door who is wise, cute, flirty, and outspoken way beyond her years; Matt Dillon as snow plower having an affair with a predatory, aggressive older woman (Lauren Holly), but he can't break up with his adorable long-time girlfriend (Mira Sorvino); Rosie O'Donnell as town beautician who dispenses wise advice to her friends and rattles on in pungent, colorful, overwritten monologues; Uma Thurman looking pretty ordinary as glamorous attention-getting girl visiting from Chicago; Annabeth Gish as the rather colorless, successful New York lawyer that Hutton is not sure he wants to marry. Sometimes entertaining small film along the lines of 'Diner' about a group of (glorified) working class guys in small provincial Eastern town and their hang-ups and yearnings about women and what to do with their lives. This pleasant film follows all the guys through their several days together; a lot of talking using dialogue that is just too clever and seems to come straight from the pens of the screenwriters; a little bit of fireworks toward the end when Dillon gets beaten up by the husband of the woman he is messing around with and when Hutton finally emerges from his passive funk and rams the bad guys' car with the snow plow; and then an artificial ending that has Hutton opting for Gish and a non-musicians' job in New York despite the apparent lack of any chemistry between them and Dillon deciding to stay with Sorvino; commitment is in the air. Film is gracefully made; its main strength is the cast, most of whom play their roles well with the possible exception of Holly and the laid-back Hutton. Portman of course stands out in her too infrequent appearances as precocious, adorable, and genuine barely adolescent girl with a serious crush on Hutton (What did he do or say to deserve it?); she seems somewhat matured compared to her appearance in "Leon"; her goodbye scene with Hutton is touching.

Becky Sharp 1035 Rouben Mamoulian (RKO) 3.0 Miriam Hopkins clever, sharp-tongued, sardonic, smart-ass, flirtatious, yarn-spinning, manipulative social climbing governess wearing low-cut gowns; Frances Dee as the pretty, earnest, dull, and respectable Amelia Sedley; Nigel Bruce (Watson) as Dickensian, comically foolish, cowardly, and corpulent dandy Joseph Sedley; Cedric Hardwick as rich, haughty, exploitative Steyne lusting after Becky; Billie Burke sounding like the good witch as Lady Bareacres; Alan Mowbray as womanizing Rawdon Crawley who however falls in love with Becky; G.P. Huntley as passionate George Osborne, who is killed halfway through the film; George Hassell as over-the-top merry Sir Pitt Crawley with a gaggle of unruly small children; William Stack entertaining as pious Pitt Crawley, who however expresses his lust for Becky; Alison Skipworth as equally over-the-top, shrieky Aunt Julia Crawley; Colin Tapley as sensible, sensitive, but priggish William Dobbin supporting Amelia. Traditional studio version of 'Vanity Fair', based on a play that abbreviates the long novel effectively. This is the first three-strip Technicolor film, which however is severely damaged after almost 80 years of neglect. A lot of cutesy overacting (Sir Pitt, Aunt Julia, and of course the comical Joseph). The 82-minute film is focused entirely on Miriam Hopkins, who is in virtually every frame; she does an excellent job of projecting the cheeky, sparkling, irreverent, and ambitious Becky with a lot of sharp dialogue: Defining herself: "I've reached above my station. I have no fine pedigree." A relative: "Miss Sharp has left the house probably on some dark amorous errand." In Brussels: "The marching men. In an hour they will be dying for their country. Well, I am dying for my breakfast." Dobbins' judgment: "She's

hard, she's selfish, she will take advantage of you." At the end when she is about to leave with Joseph for India: "India, rich princes, taxes to collect!" The film is effective as long as it focuses on Becky's manipulations in London society, but gets duller and clichéd when she gets rejected toward the end as a music hall singer and decides to run off with Joseph Sedley. Quite a bit of humorous satire on the snobbishness of London society, the often absurd, baroque fashions of the young women, and the habits of gentlemen, who always seem to be gambling at the club, flirting, and getting into debt by living beyond their means. The ball scene in Brussels before Waterloo is filled with sparkling dialogue moving from character to character including a cameo appearance of the Duke of Wellington, and ending with panic and call to arms to Waterloo (no attempt however to portray the battle). A memorable high-angle shot of the miserable Becky, collapsed on the carpet in her luxuriant fabrics. Perhaps a bit too typical of late 30s studio classic adaptations, but nevertheless entertaining. (2013)

Bedlam 1946 Mark Robson (producer Val Lewton) 3.5 Boris Karloff as obsequious, loquacious, literary-speaking, sarcastic, and vengeful Master Sims, the head of the St. Mary's asylum known as 'Bedlam' – he pats and paws a pretty girl when he enters the common cell; Anna Lee as the pretty, sometimes sexy, kind-hearted, spunky, fiery and formidable Nell determined to reform the asylum; Billy House as the rotund, high-living, and sometimes effeminate-seeming Lord Mortimer; Richard Fraser as handsome Quaker mason speaking in 'thous', distressed at the cruelties practiced in the asylum, and encouraging Nell to support reforms of kindness; Ian Wolfe as the lawyer in Bedlam with delusions of grandeur. Not very scary star vehicle for Boris Karloff with a strong theme – the need for asylum reform in 18th century England (suggested by the famous Hogarth print) and a kinder treatment of inmates. The insane asylum is presented as a place of oppression and misery filled with a cacophony of voices and arms groping through the bars grabbing at passers-by; but it also includes genteel upper-class types, such as the lawyer Long, who says he pleaded in king's court and was put in Bedlam by his enemies. The film has several ironic references to the 18th century being the age of reason; in fact, corrupt, pleasure-loving upper classes are amused by the antics of the "loonies". Background is the competing theories of how to treat the insane: Sims' insists they must be tamed by brute force, while Nell and the Quaker think that decent conditions and kindness will improve them. Nell, who has been committed to Bedlam by a plot of Sims, is able to win the argument when she enters the brute's cage and he does not attack her and when later the other inmates rally around her when Sims threatens her. The concluding scene has Sims seized by the inmates and given a "fair trial"; ironically they decide that he is sane and must be released; leaving however he is stabbed by the pretty girl; the inmates then wall him up to hide his body, but he awakens long enough to realize what is happening (obviously copied from Edgar Allan Poe). In his trial Sims admits that he has been cruel to the inmates because of his fear of losing the favor of his superiors and thus his position in society. Lee and Fraser look at one another soulfully, exchange thous, and apparently live happily ever after. The film is not really a horror film, but there are some creepy and suspenseful scenes, such as when Nell leaves the card game with the asylum's upper class men to search for the man who is groaning; with a single candle through shadows in the common prison, illuminated close-ups; sudden clank and she is right next to the guy in the chains, whom of course she releases and wins over to her side. Karloff stands out in his almost Shakespearean diction; the plea for a kinder treatment of asylum (and prison) inmates is well-stated; cinematography plays well with dark, light, and shadow. One of the best of the Lewton cheapies.

Before the Devil Knows You're Dead 2007 Sidney Lumet 3.5 Philip Seymour Hoffmann as vain, arrogant, intelligent, heroin-taking guy who needs money; Ethan Hawke as his clueless kid brother whom his relatives all call "a baby"; Marisa Tomei smashing and sexy as Hoffmann's wife and Hawke's lover; Albert Finney overacting rather badly as the father of the boys – he is bent on revenge after the death of his wife. Excellent terminally pessimistic film about two needy brothers who decide to hold up the jewelry store of their parents; partly from chance (the mother decides to work instead of the regular Saturday morning employee), partly from bad decisions (Hawke decides to hire an idiot lowlife to do the holdup for him), everything goes wrong: the mother is killed, as is the lowlife character. The consequences are of course devastating: Hawke is panicked and always trembling with fear and loathing; Hoffmann, who is angry with his father for the way he raised him, outdoes himself with risky plans to

cover their tracks. Destruction rules in the long climax: Hoffmann murders his drug dealer and another of his clients to steal the dealer's money (shooting through a pillow to muffle the sound of the discharge); Hoffmann is then shot trying to intimidate a man (also lowlife) who is trying to blackmail him; then as he seems to recuperate in the hospital, Finney comes into the room, attaches the heart monitor to himself to escape detection, and smothers his son to death as the latter says, "Dad, Dad". He will probably not be detected. No sign of redemption at the end of the film apart from the survival of Tomei, who has already left Hoffmann before the violence, and Hawke's escaping with a bagful of money. Interesting editing/script technique, as Lumet repeats the events just before and just after the robbery several times to fill in the experience of the different characters; he films the robbery only once, and resumes a linear presentation about a week after it is over. A bit of overacting (Hawke's trembling and Finney's grimacing and groaning), but all characters are convincing. Devastatingly depressing film unless the viewer distances himself a bit. Message seems to be that evil multiplies itself: don't get started. (2007)

Before Night Falls 1996 Julian Schnabel 3.0 Javier Bardem as Reinaldo Arenas, Cuban poet and novelist who dies of AIDS (accelerated by his friend) in New York in 1990; Andrea di Stefano as his first (bisexual) boyfriend; Olivier Martinez as handsome friend Lazaro who helps him die. Impressionistic, lyrical, poetic depiction of life of the Cuban poet; goes from his childhood in Oriente province (near Castro's guerillas in the Sierra Madre), to his early life and infatuation with the Castro regime, his persecution by the regime, his attempts to escape, his exit in the Mariel boat lift, and his lonely life and death in New York. Arenas is very handsome (it appears that Bardem resembles him), seductive, obsessed with sex (Johnny Depp as fastidious interrogator apparently gets him to confess by using his own beauty and subtly displaying his "magnificent member"), and devoted to enjoying paradise on earth (several scenes of wild homosexual parties -- dancing snuggling, kissing); yet he is an energetic and devoted writer who published many novels in his comparatively short life. Seductive picture of hedonistic atmosphere of Habana before and just after the Cuban Revolution -- flaming gays cruising around town in brightly painted American cars, the guys enjoying themselves on the beach, the general enthusiasm of most everyone when Castro overthrew Batista. Grisly scenes of Arenas' persecution by the Cuban police after the regime turned against the homosexuals in the early 70s, his mistreatment in the El Morro prison (particularly gripping was his confinement to a solitary cell where he could not even stand up); he was always clear that he was afraid to die. Ironically, he was obsessed with escaping from the Cuba that he loved and the regime that he had originally supported and that had originally tolerated gays in Cuba, but once he found freedom in the USA he appeared unhappy and unfulfilled. The last part of the film focuses entirely on negative issues -- his suffering, loss of his will to live, and his death. The film does not fully depict Arenas' sexual voracity. Style of the film is ecstatic and impressionistic, cutting forward and backward to his lost paradise (?) with his mother, the characters sometimes speaking in heavily accented English, sometimes in Spanish. Memorable images of a "mad romantic" and his mistreatment at the hands of a brutal regime. (2007)

Beginners 2010 Mike Mills 2.5 Ewan McGregor as shy, solitary 30ish man trying to come to terms with the death of his father and to develop a relationship with a woman; Christopher Plummer perhaps the best things in the film as a frank and compelling man in his 70s who decides to come out as a gay man; Mélanie Laurent weak and hesitant as French actress that hangs out in ritzy hotel rooms (!) -- she develops a halting relationship with McGregor; Cosmo the Jack Russell dog plays Arthur, who practically steals the film with his quiet attentiveness and amusing subtitled remarks. Earnest, slow-moving, often mannered film focusing on McGregor's coming to terms with the coming out and death of his father and his hesitant movement toward a relationship with Laurent. The story is narrated by McGregor starting with the cleaning of his dad's house after his death. The best parts of the film are the flashbacks to McGregor's life with his mother (her lack of affection toward his father and her eccentric ways are meant to explain the origins of McGregor's unwillingness to commit himself to a relationship) and especially to his father as he slowly dies of cancer. Plummer is honest and life-affirming as an older man who proclaims his gayness after pretending that he was heterosexual during 44 years of marriage and who then faces his death with courage; the scenes of his interaction with his son are often moving, thanks to the sensitive acting of the two principals. The film moves very slowly, particularly the scenes between

Laurent and McGregor. Both characters are reluctant to commit themselves to a relationship, McGregor because of his background with his parents, and Laurent apparently because of her father, who keeps calling her during their trysts to threaten suicide – she eventually gives in to McGregor’s suggestion that they just disconnect the phone (just don’t deal with the problem!). They thus spend a lot of time in Laurent’s bedroom looking at one another and not saying much (Laurent’s English enunciation makes her hard to understand) with the camera lingering excessively on their faces; to show their developing intimacy they act cute – gamboling in the park and roller skating down the halls of Laurent’s hotel. The two break up toward the end of the film, but both regret it and at the end they reunite tentatively. The humor interjected by the faithful presence of Arthur, who is constantly following the humans around, looking at their faces, and even making silent commentary, provides indispensable comic relief and even some insights (“I can understand about 150 words, but I can’t speak”). Mills livens things some with light-hearted, documentary-like comments about various time periods when the main characters were born (picture of Georges Pompidou as president) or something important was happening in the past. Faster editing, snappier dialogue, and even a little comic relief would have provided more momentum for a draggy screenplay. (2013)

The Beguiled 2017 Sofia Coppola 3.0 Civil War corporal Colin Farrell has melodramatic impact on inhabitants of a private girl’s school in Virginia, which seems to lie between the two armies. Colin Farrell as part rogue, part polite Irishman who as Union soldier arrives at the elegant school fleeing from a nearby battle; Nicole Kidman reserved, authoritative as the starchy, elegant Southern woman who runs the school; Kirsten Dunst as the (apparent) assistant teacher, an unmarried woman open to the charms of Farrell; Oona Lawrence as the pre-teen Amy who fearlessly rescues him from under a tree, brings him to the house, and then defends him to the rest of the girls; Elle Fanning as the girl that takes Farrell (momentarily) into her bed; Angourie Rice (Miss Jane who plays the violin) and Addison Riecke round out the young teenagers left in the school. Most of the film is a slow-moving character and cultural study of the erotic impact of the handsome wounded soldier being cared for by Kidman in the parlor. Farrell’s aggressive flirtatiousness sets the girls agog, vying to take him his food, giggling among themselves, entering his room to offer assistance, (Fanning) kissing him on the mouth in the guise of a kiss good night, collaborating in keeping his presence a secret from the Confederates soldiers who pass by. The misty, gauzy cinematography adds an air of mystery (and perhaps a little irritation), as the viewer, enjoying the low-key acting and mise-en-scene, awaits the payoff. And it eventually happens. When Farrell recovers (rapidly) from his wounds, he becomes more sexually aggressive, bedding Fanning, and then reinjuring his healing leg so badly that Kidman decides to amputate (she possesses an astounding amount of medical information). Farrell becomes *outrageusement*, shouting, gesticulating, and in revenge for the amputation threatening to murder the lot with the pistol stolen from Kidman; and after he has rough sex with the Dunst, Kidman decides to poison him with the mushrooms he loves; the same Lawrence who had saved him in the first place chooses the deadly ones, and after a momentary uncertainty as to whether the clueless Dunst will also take them, he eats a plateful and dies instantly! The film ends with the girls carefully sewing Farrell’s body into a shroud (make those stitches even!) and then carrying it in stately fashion to the street, where they leave it to be picked up by the soldiers. It is a little difficult to determine the main point of the film. Surely the plight of women in the mid-19th century war is paramount – dressed in their voluminous white finery (Kidman’s stylish clothes being the exception), studying French and domestic arts, hormones coursing, obsessed by the arrival of a good-looking man, resolving his threat to them by their own initiative.... Excellent acting, slow-moving scenario. (November 2017)

Behind the Candelabra 2013 Steven Soderbergh 4.0 Michael Douglas in eye-popping, show-stopping performance as Liberace, the outrageously campy Las Vegas, Radio City Music Hall performer; Matt Damon as his boy toy companion, Scott Thorson, to whom Liberace becomes strongly attached; Dan Aykroyd humorously matter-of-fact and down-to-earth as Liberace’s business manager; Debbie Reynolds unrecognizable as Liberace’s mom speaking with a strong Polish accent; Scott Bakula as Damon’s country and western boyfriend; Rob Lowe hilarious and outrageous as Liberace’s perfectly smooth-faced, plastic-looking although highly competent plastic surgeon. Always showy, always interesting recounting of the four years of Thorson’s relationships with Liberace. The film plays out in

performance venues where Liberace is playing with his outrageous props – rhinestone-loaded pants and jackets, huge swirling fur capes, Thorson in his white and gold chauffeur’s uniform driving the enormous Bentley on stage to back up his employer; and in Liberace’s over-the-top homes in Las Vegas and Palm Springs (Liberace claims he does his own decoration) – capacious spaces, gold and white, mirrors everywhere, kitschy furniture and decorations, and of course in the bedroom the enormous spa and quadruple bed. Douglas is memorable in his portrayal of the 60-year-old entertainer: always glitzy, speaking in the effeminate tone that his fans seem to miss as a sign of homosexuality, expertly spinning out his professional persona on stage, unattractively aged until he got his major facelift, bald head with lesions covered by his luxuriant wig, dominating and exploitative in his relationship with Scott, although showing his vulnerable side in his search for love and acceptance. Damon Stars as star-struck young stud, who enjoys living in the lap of notoriety and luxury, sharing intimate domestic moments with Liberace eating dinner or soaking in the spa, and having what seems to be unsatisfactory sex with his lover-employer. The relationship soon becomes exploitative as Liberace forces Scott to have a face lift in order to resemble Liberace (!) and to start a regimen of diet pills that soon segues into an extreme heroin dependency. Scott, just a teenager when he started, soon becomes dissatisfied with his domestic dependency on his “employer” (he is always on the payroll), wanting to have a social life and do something on his own, such as become a veterinarian. The heroin-fueled breakup is shattering, as Scott rages and smashes furniture. The postscript has Scott getting a small settlement from Liberace; the final touching scene has Liberace call Scott to his bedside, where he is dying of AIDS, and telling him affectionately that of all the relationships in his life, his made him “the most happy”. Excellent performances, colorful environment, psychologically penetrating screenplay – What more could you want? (2013)

Belle 2013 Amma Asante 3.0 Gugu Mbatha-Raw as curious, pretty mulatto girl, Belle, raised in an aristocratic family in late 18th century England; Tom Wilkinson excellent as her uncle, England’s Lord Chief Justice and loving adoptive father of Belle (she calls him ‘PaPa’); Emily Watson lovely and interesting as Wilkinson’s wife; Penelope Wilton (‘Downton Abbey’) as Wilkinson’s maiden sister, who promotes Belle’s emotional progress by recounting her disappointed romantic ambitions; Sam Reid quite over-the-top as idealistic lawyer in training, -- he despises the slave trade and hesitantly courts Belle; Miranda Richardson pungent as heartless, racist, ambitious mother of two young men in the courting game in Hampshire. Compelling Hollywood-style British film about the travails of a mulatto girl in English gentle society of the 1780s (we know from the beginning that everything will eventually turn out for the best). Raised with great affection by her adoptive parents, Belle becomes gradually aware of the condition of Blacks in the 18th-century world and she must decide whether to accept a position in local society or to break free, cast in her lot with Reid in London, and take a position against the slave trade. The screenplay follows a connected parallel track: Wilkinson’s pending decision about the infamous Zong case (after throwing their slave “cargo” overboard, the ship’s crew claimed reimbursement from their insurance company); and the increasing inclination of Belle toward Reid and against the (very lucrative) slave trade. The art direction and costuming are lovely, colorful, and very Jane Austen – perhaps three decades before Austen’s novel, but attractive country gentry already are trying to figure out who to marry, guided partly by romantic inclination but just as much by the demands of marrying well in society. The viewer roots for Belle to abandon the suit of Richardson’s (rather kind) younger son and to bolt for Reid – one knows that her father is too kind and paternal to hold it against her for long. One roots also that Wilkinson will decide the case against the execrable institution of slavery, which after a few red herrings in the screenplay, he does majestically in a great hall before assembled lawyers and other persons of importance. On the correct legal level he rules that the slave owners committed fraud in murdering their slaves, but then goes on in his statement to denounce slavery as a moral stain on the honor of the nation. English history then processes toward the abolition of the slave trade (1811) and slavery itself (1833), and Belle marries her heart’s delight and has two sons. Very agreeable, well-acted, well-written in proper period English, a treat for the eye. Mixes Austen-style romantic comedy with serious political issues. Urban scenes were filmed in Oxford. (2014)

Belle de jour 1967 Luis Buñuel (France) 3.0 Catherine Deneuve reserved, often impassive and even glacial, as young woman who is apparently frigid but has intense sadomasochistic fantasies, Jean Sorel as Alain Delon-like handsome, distant and hands-off husband, Michel Piccoli as typically ambiguous womanizer friend who pressures Deneuve although he never beds her. A big hit in the late 60s, this movie has become a classic: Deneuve is repressed but apparently horny in the presence of her perfect husband who does not turn her on, and she takes a part-time job as a prostitute a few days a week in the afternoon to satisfy her curiosity/desires. It is ambiguous (the most appropriate term for this film) whether she is looking for a satisfying romantic relationship with her husband (which after all does include good sex), or whether she is just a very sexual woman who wants to explore her desires. Her experiences in the whorehouse are amusing, although not at all explicit: she begins sex with a more or less deformed fellow, then with a guy who wants to play a role (she flunks the test and the Madame has to bring in a substitute), and eventually she handles Marcel, a handsome, charismatic fellow with steel teeth that she is attracted to. If film is about sex, there is not enough nudity nor enough explicit sex: Deneuve does not seem to enjoy herself enough. The film of course attacks the mores of the bourgeoisies (upper middle classes) although not as head-on as in some of Buñuel's other movies – e.g., the husband expects his wife to be virtuous (he admires her for her reserve) and out of presumed inhibition he does not treat her romantically; and Piccoli is attracted to her because of her virtue and her contempt for him (he later takes his revenge on her by revealing her afternoon activities to the wheelchair-ridden Sorel). The author mixes real sequences and fantasy, although it is often difficult to differentiate them. The most apparent fantasy sequences are the ones in the carriage, all of which seem to represent Deneuve's sexual fantasies – the famous early one in which Sorel has his two footmen strip her to the waist and beat her with whips and then have sex with her; another where the footmen throw mud /shit at her while she is tied up; another (particularly amusing/ridiculous) one in which Deneuve is picked up by an effete aristocrat who has her dress in a sexy, gauzy costume and then lie as if dead in a coffin surrounded by candles while the guy masturbates (apparently) under the coffin; and the final scene in which the carriage passes empty of passengers (?) in front of Deneuve's window. Final scene is maddeningly ambiguous: after careful cutting with a shot of Sorel's hand seeming to indicate that he is dead (he had been shot by Marcel), he arises happy and smiling from his wheelchair, and after some innocent (as usual) cuddling, the two witness the passing of the empty carriage. Finale seems to indicate that Sorel is dead, or worse than dead, and that there is no further hope of love between husband and wife: Deneuve's explorations have destroyed any hope of a connection between the two.... In any case, it is hard to know. Strongest element of the film is the author's exploration of sexual themes in the unconscious, not something one often sees in movies. (2006)

Ben-Hur: A Tale of the Christ 1925 Fred Niblo 3.0 Ramon Novarro as lithe, handsome (often wears very short tunics!), God-fearing Jewish nobleman Judah Ben-Hur; Francis X. Bushman in absurdly magnificent uniform as Messala with painted lips, old friend of Ben-Hur who has turned impossibly arrogant; May McAvoy as gentle Esther, the daughter of Simonides, the Hur slave – as actress she is at her best with soft expression and upraised arm; Betty Bronson as a very demure, pretty Virgin Mary. Famous silent spectacular made at MGM. Mixes color with black and white footage. Introduction tells the story of Jesus' birth; whenever Jesus or his mother is depicted, the film goes quiet, solemn, and soft focus, e.g., Jesus first depicted as slender arm that reaches out to give water to Ben-Hur. The film shows the Romans as brutal tyrants and oppressors, arrogant and cruel. The Jews chafe under their domination; all wish for delivery by a military leader, who Ben Hur hope will be Jesus. Very expensive film – mass scenes with hundreds of extras: Gratus' procession in Jerusalem; the galley slaves toiling in unison; pictures of the magnificent galleys lined up. Enormous spectacular naval fight between Roman ships and pirate ships in which Ben-Hur saves the life of the Roman commander, who adopts him. The film's piece de resistance is the chariot race between Messala and Ben-Hur, which becomes a test of the mettle of as Roman and a Jew. Takes place in Antioch. The chariot scene is magnificent. Vast, geometrical, multitude of thousands as the four-horse racing chariots line up at the start; shots of the chariots racing over ground-level cameras; Messala of course plays dirty trying to wreck Hur's chariot and beating him with whip when close; realistic deadly looking accidents, of which Messala is victim of

one. When Messala is defeated and he loses his entire fortune. A fair amount of sexiness also, e.g., the long banquet scene in which Flower of the Nile attempts to extract information from inattentive Hur. Music on the disc is often based on Wagner.

Bend It Like Beckham 2002 UK: Gurinder Chadha 3.0 Parminder Nagra as young British girl of Sikh nationality who would like to be a women's soccer player, Keira Knightley as her very toothy English sidekick who persuades her to join the local team and finally to go off to Santa Clara University on a soccer scholarship, Jonathan Rhys-Meyers as the team coach who slowly, although responsible, falls for Parminder, Shaheen Khan as the hilarious mother of Parminder trying to keep her from wearing shorts and to keep her in the home to learn traditional Indian recipes, Anupam Kher as the father who is a bit more understanding than Mum. Entertaining teenage-style movie that plays comically on the impact of native western culture on Sikh immigrants. All the characters are good humored and wouldn't hurt a fly. The parents are worried that they are losing their daughter, especially since she is constantly lying and prevaricating about her activities, but they come around in the end – totally predictable. The girls have their drama about whose boyfriend the coach is going to be, but after some significant snitting, they reconcile and go off to the USA at the end where women's soccer is accepted. More comic relief from the guy friend of Parminder, who turns out to be a good-natured and humorous gay guy, and from Keira's mother, who is desperate that her daughter won't catch a good man (how can she when she is dressed up in those sexless soccer clothes) and then convinced that Keira has a lesbian relationship with Parminder. The soccer scenes are unconvincing, probably from having to "cheat" on the framing since the actresses don't really play soccer; there is too much joyous dancing at the end when Parminder's sister finally goes through with her wedding. Some good satire on the culture of Indian immigrants (nice self-observation of the mostly Indian film crew), the place of soccer in English culture; but again very good natured, and even the sexists and racists (the gay guy's friends) are funny and harmless. Apparent that English society is already treating the second generation of immigrants fairly, even if the first generation was discriminated against (the father wasn't allowed to play cricket in the English clubs, but at the end of the movie he is playing with white guys). Entertaining, cheerful, and harmless. Celebratory atmosphere owes a lot to Bollywood tradition. (2006)

Berlin: Die Sinfonie der Grosstadt 1927 (Germany) Walter Ruttmann (cinematographer Karl Freund) 3.0 Celebrated documentary that sets out to depict a day in the life of Weimar Berlin in an aggressively edited format. Film is divided into five acts divided by time of day: before the city wakes up with many shots of trains arriving from the provinces in Berlin; morning activity as everyone opens their shops and goes to work; lunch break; afternoon work; and evening in which Berliners take advantage of the great city's night life. The film does not seem to have a political point of view despite Ruttmann's later (1934) adherence to National Socialism. The first part of the film is neutral, but it then begins to emphasize febrile activity and some violence in the afternoon, before it returns to amusement at night. The film emphasizes the high-tech basis of the city's life – speeding trains, streetcars, and automobiles often glinting on the wet streets, shiny precision machinery turning, a telephone switchboard, one shot of passengers boarding a three-motor airplane. It focuses on middle class/wealthy pursuits such as walking down the streets in homburg hats, dining in cool-looking cafes, strolling in the park, driving fancy cars, looking in shop windows at sexy women's underwear, flocking to the glitzy evening shows. Working class people also appear, although in lesser numbers: sweeping their steps, arriving and then working in factories, having a drink in a bar instead of attending the more expensive middle class pastimes. Little to no sign of political activity (the republic was still reasonably popular in 1927), and virtually the only police one sees are cops directing traffic or escorting children across the street. There are scenes (apparently acted out) of a fight in the street (cause is unknown) and of a suicide on one of the bridges complete with the horrified expressions of the bystanders. The film is conceived as a kind of symphony that moves to the rhythm of music (originally provided by a live orchestra, but then by a soundtrack added in the early 30s). The editing is performed in aggressive, rhythmic fashion like Eisenstein or Vertov: short clips are juxtaposed in a cadenced way; some metaphoric shots – dogs fighting in the street or a front-seat shot of a roller coaster plunging down the slope – make sociological points such as the prevalence of violence and of feverish movement in the city. The film appears to want to establish Berlin

as a great world city next to New York and Paris and to make a statement about modernity in the early 20th century. Wonderfully restored in the 1990s with an evocative soundtrack. (2014)

Bernie 2011 Richard Linklater 4.0 Jack Black in the performance of his lifetime as the gifted, gentle, effeminate, much-liked assistant funeral director in Carthage Texas; Shirley MacLaine heavily made up, prune faced with an eternal frown playing the much reviled but very rich older woman that Bernie hooks up with – “the meanest women in Carthage”; Matthew McConaughey as publicity-seeking local district attorney affecting Texas cowboy mannerisms; Rick Dial sincere and effective as Bernie’s admiring boss; a large cast of Carthage locals – some of them apparently not actors – who are interviewed throughout the film; Sonny Davis as one of the interviewees with pungent remarks about the principals and especially about the jury members at Bernie’s trial (“They had more tattoos than they had teeth”). Hilarious homespun mockumentary about the most popular man in Carthage, Texas, and what happens to him when he murders Shirley MacLaine. Black is hilariously perfect as the nicest guy in Carthage – he knows exactly how to comfort the relatives of the departed, he sings in the church choir, he is active in civic affairs (singing and dancing in ‘The Music Man’, and giving a pep talk to Little Leaguers when he is arrested for the murder of his friend), and he continues to do good for the locals with MacLaine’s money during the eight months that her body lies at the bottom of the deep freeze in her garage; he is particularly popular with the town’s elderly ladies. He begins a kind of romantic, obviously non-sexual relationship with MacLaine when he comforts her at the funeral of her husband; she responds, but when she becomes impossibly controlling and dominating (she even overchews her food to annoy Bernie), Bernie gets frustrated and impulsively shoots her in the back four times with the gun that he is supposed to use to kill armadillos prowling around her house – there wasn’t a smidgen of premeditation in his action. Bernie is arrested, and when he is tried for first degree murder in a nearby town (Which God gave the DA permission to try him for premeditated murder?), he is found guilty by a jury composed of total yokels, and he is condemned to life imprisonment; he of course organizes a choir and gives cuisine lessons in prison. Throughout the film the director interviews Carthage inhabitants, all of whom express consistent support for Bernie and contempt for MacLaine; they are a constant source of amusement with their East Texas twang, their folksy ways and colorful language, their unreasoning, unreserved affection for Bernie, and even the insistence of a couple of them against all the evidence that Bernie did not shoot MacLaine in the back. The film is incidentally a comment on the solidarity and decency of small-town folk, who know a good man and an “evil” woman when they see one and who stand behind their hero, no matter what. The humor of the film perhaps lags during the trial, but otherwise a tribute to the skill and good humor of director Linklater and the entire cast. (2012)

The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel 2011 John Madden 2.5 Judy Dench as pudgy, conscience-stricken recent widow attracted to a low-cost retirement hotel in India since she has lost most of her savings; Tom Wilkinson as retired judge who – for reasons at first unexplained – makes the same decision; Bill Nighy razor-thin, good-humored, culturally curious Englishman with the same destination; Penelope Wilton as his toothy, unhappy, and negative-minded wife who accompanies her husband to India reluctantly; Maggie Smith as former housemaid who, although initially full of racial prejudice, travels with the group to get a hip replacement at a reduced price; Ronald Pickup as horny older guy who thinks he will perhaps find more action in India; Celia Imrie as attractive older lady whose well-being depends on her attractiveness to men; Dev Patel (‘Slumdog Millionaire’) as loopy, hyperactive, motor-mouthed young hotel manager trying to make a success of the run-down hotel; Tena Desae as Patel’s pretty girlfriend who works in an Indian call center. Intermittently entertaining big-budget film about seven old farts setting off to a sunny clime to find new life before it is too late (cf. ‘Enchanted April’). The film’s affect is optimistic, often syrupy, at least sentimental – you know that the ending will be uplifting and that most of the characters will find some sort of fulfillment. India is presented as a land of color, chaos, stench, anarchy, and an opportunity for alienated, straight-jacketed westerners to experience real life once again. All the principals are affected in some way: Dench deals with her bad memories and ends up pairing up with Nighy, who because of an inextricable traffic jam, ends up separating from his fearful, sour wife, who returns to an uncertain fate in England; Maggie Smith goes through an inexplicable transformation making friends with an Untouchable family, rising from her wheel chair to

persuade an investor to donate funds for the reconstruction of the hotel, and then presiding queen-like over the hotel in one of the movie's last shots; Wilkinson dies about halfway through, but only after he reveals his homosexuality to us and experiences a life-affirming, joyful reunion with his former Indian lover (followed by all the principals attending a carefully documented Hindu funeral in which Wilkinson's body is burned to ash and then sprinkled into the river); Pickup discovers Viagra (although he apparently doesn't use it) and lands a lifelong mate that he met in a fancy city club; inspired by the example of others, Imrie decides she still has some life in her and is last seen conversing in luxurious surroundings with a distinguished Hindu man; Patel and Dedae, both members of the new Indian generation, overcome the objections of Patel's mother and go off at the end to live happily ever after. Yes, joyful life after 65 is uncritically affirmed in this sentimental, unrealistic film. (2012)

Best in Show 2000 Christopher Guest 4.0 Christopher Guest runs a fishing shop in North Carolina, and is indelibly attached to his bloodhound; Eugene Levy with hilarious artificial buck teeth; Michael Hitchcock and Parker Posey as semi-hysterical yuppies wearing prominent teeth braces and often reading L.L. Bean and Orvis catalogs; Catherine O'Hara who says she had hundreds of boyfriends before she met her husband; Fred Willard, Bob Balaban; Michael McKean and John Michael Higgins as gay Tribeca couple. Hilarious mockumentary and satire of American culture in general and of the dog show scene in particular. Everybody has foibles that we can sympathize with. The yuppie couple that first met in Starbucks (they saw each other in separate Starbucks across the street from one another) and who have an extremely neurotic dog is perhaps the funniest; movie opens with a counseling session in which they apologize to the dog for having sex in front of him; the dog misbehaves and is disqualified from the competition when they can't find his bumble bee toy (Posey has a great fit in the hotel and in a shop when she can't find a replacement toy); then movie ends with another counseling session in which couple has a new dog, and the dog is humping the leg of the psychiatrist! Second funniest is neurotic Levy, who has to deal with wife who had had sex in past with "hundreds" of men, and they seem to meet half of them in the movie. The gay couple is also hilarious, and depicted sympathetically. Willard is hysterical radio announcer as he plays off straight man English commentator; he is the master of the tasteless irrelevant comment that invariably non-plusses and embarrasses his partner. Good humored, understated approach that insults no one, but gets us to smile constantly and to laugh often enough. (2007)

The Best of Enemies 2015 Robert Gordon, Morgan Neville 3.0 Documentary focusing on the famous 1968 confrontation between William F. Buckley and Gore Vidal. The film includes short excerpts from most of the debates, focusing on the two stars' attacks on one another rather than on their analyses of the Republican and Democratic Conventions. The program fills in a fair amount of background – the two men are patricians and on opposite sides of the political spectrum; Buckley's campaign to launch and secure a conservative movements in the USA (he was a great fan of Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan); their obvious bad blood, and even hatred, before they came together in Miami and Chicago. Buckley seems calm and ideological most of the time, whereas Vidal from the beginning is intent on defeating and embarrassing Buckley, whose person and ideology he abhorred. The famous blow-up came during the Chicago Convention, when Vidal, disgusted by the behavior of the police, let slip an allegation that Buckley was a "crypto-Nazi". Buckley's response was astounding: almost uncontrollable facial rictus staring at Vidal with hatred, calling him a "queer" and telling him that if he repeated the accusation, he would hit him in the face and he would stay "plastered". Vidal stayed calm, apparently secure in the knowledge that he had defeated his enemy. For the rest of their lives they relived the moment: Vidal satisfied that he had dealt the blow; Buckley tortured that he had overreacted and abandoned his lifelong Olympian restraint (he even wrote a long essay on the subject for Esquire magazine). Buckley comes across as the more sympathetic figure (easy going in many ways, devoted to a specific cause), while Vidal is more of a literary figure (excellent historical novels during the 80s) and more vitriolic. Both spoke with much irony, pompous long sentences (especially Buckley), and British-sounding elite accents. Interesting that such elite behavior played so well on US television at that time that it moved lagging ABC news past its rivals to the top of the ratings. The authors think that this beginning of on-screen TV debate was a harbinger of the deeply divided cable news scene current in

2015. Entertaining and interesting documentary that doesn't pack many surprises for aficionados of the American political scene. (2015)

The Best Years of Our Lives 1946 William Wyler 4.0 Dana Andrews, Fredric March, Harold Russell, Myrna Loy, Teresa Wright, Hoagy Carmichael, Cathy O'Donnell, Virginia Mayo. Spectacular high-quality soap about three GIs returning home from World War II. All three have difficulty getting adjusted, March (sergeant and former banker) because he and his wife have become more independent (and he drinks too much), Andrews (Air Force captain and former soda jerk) because he had impulsively married superficial materialist slut and falls in love with March's daughter (Wright), and Russell because he has lost both his hands, has inferiority complex that he must work out before he can marry ever faithful Cathy O'Donnell. The men have camaraderie because of their common service in the (noble) war, although they were in different services. Emotion is deep and genuine, although essentially sentimental: Russell, a real paraplegic, evokes great feeling and genuineness, although he had no previous experience and was never to act in a film again. Wright is her usual luminous and beautiful self – simple, wholesome and genuine, and unconsciously funny when she announces to her parents that she is going to “break up” Andrews' marriage to Mayo. Message is that reintegration into civilian life is hard, except perhaps for March who gets good bank job. Audience happy to experience happy ending —all three men get the women they want and will live and love happily ever after. Photography and direction is outstanding. Toland and Wyler reduce editing with deep focus photography and long takes – very expressive shots down corridors; beautiful shot in the end in Harold's marriage ceremony where long shot/long take/deep focus forces audience to find Andrews and Wright and then watch with satisfaction as they move toward one another and begin to bond again. Hollywood at its best. (2005)

La bête humaine 1938 Jean Renoir (also wrote the screenplay) France 3.0 Jean Gabin as 30s train engineer, who loves his engine and falls in love – fatefully – with...; Simone Simon sexy and oddly pretty as classic *femme fatale* married to Fernand Ledoux and the object of Gabin's passion (the future star of 'Cat People' appears on screen for the first time caressing a cat!); Fernand Ledoux bald-headed and paunchy as the middle-aged station master and husband of Simon; Renoir has an extended cameo as a working class Joe. Tragic example of poetic realism that is so dark that the fatalistic Zolaesque machinery is almost visible. The best thing about the film is the scrupulously realistic art direction and social environment: fabulous locomotives set in real French rail yards c. 1935, Gabin and his firemen seem actually to be running the engine on the line between Le Havre and Paris, the train courses at high speed through the countryside, whizzing through small stations, plunging into tunnels and shooting out of them at high speed, engineers walking next to the huge wheels of the locomotives; not to mention the dingy and unglamorous working class interiors and costumes of the workers. The scenario makes it clear that since he comes from a line of alcoholics, Gabin is a sort of cursed person destined to destruction; falling in love with the dangerous Simon is perhaps an outcome of the bad gene; he is respectful and affectionate toward her most of the time, but on one occasion he comes close to throttling her. For the husband Ledoux, love also is destructive: he is so jealous of Simon that he forces her to join him in murdering the older man who had sexually abused her when she was still a teenager (the murder is of course committed in a train compartment). The outcome of the plot is perverse: the police arrest (and apparently condemn) the wrong man (Renoir) for the murder that Ledoux committed; and Gabin, overcome with disgust at himself and despair – and perhaps with guilt – commits suicide by jumping off the cab of the speeding train. The editing does not have the invisible Hollywood character; the music editing is particularly intrusive and the soundtrack music often does not appear to match the content of a scene. The film is perhaps not as depressing as the Zola novel, mainly since the characters have a certain sense of nobility (Gabin) or charm (Simon). The machinery of doom would not have been so creaky if the script did not make so many references to bad genes, bad blood, sickness, etc. (2006)

Better Luck Tomorrow 2003 Justin Lin 2.5 Perry Shen as nerdy spike-haired Chinese high school student, Ben, who is preparing himself carefully (without help of parents) to get into Harvard or Stanford, but who is also drawn by a life of crime (starting with distributing cheat sheets to students); Karen Anna Cheung as cute Chinese-American cheerleader, Stephanie, providing the romantic interest

for Perry's bifurcated life (she has a tattoo and is rumored to have appeared in a porno film); Jason Tobin (the crazy one, Virgil), Sung Kang, Roger Fan as sidekick hoods. Well made, low budget, occasionally interesting Independent film about Asian American high school life; the theme is that goody-two-shoes Asian Americans who spend their days polishing their SAT scores and winning the national championships of the Academic Decathlon can sometimes be tempted by the excitement of sex, crime, and rock and roll; for perhaps the first time in American movies Asian-American kids are presented against type. A lot of shots of the kids horsing around, pulling the wool over the eyes of authority figures to the accompaniment of rock music and a lot of "fucks"; they have complete freedom to do whatever they want since their parents are awol from the film (the only adults in the film are teachers). Many imaginative, flashy film techniques: the camera continually circles the kid being murdered; fast motion, quick cutting; flash panning and rapid intercutting between Ben's guilty encounter with Stephanie and the guys burying Steve's body; closing the elevator door to shut off a conversation; periodic return to scenes of Ben practicing shooting foul shots or shots of dictionary definitions to show his academic obsessiveness. The film climaxes with a confusing and largely unmotivated murder of Stephanie's boyfriend, Steve (why would placid and self-doubting Ben bash the guy's head in with a baseball bat?), and then it gets worse when Virgil tries to commit suicide. The best film trick is to begin the film with a shot of Ben and a friend crawling through the grass in somebody's backyard to dig out a ringing cell phone from the body that had (apparently) been buried there; and then when in the subsequent story line the viewer is returned to the same scene after the murder, the guys discover that the call is from the victim's girlfriend Stephanie, with whom Ben is in love; hence, guilt and remorse. The film ends in ambiguity: even though her (dead) boyfriend is missing, Stephanie, has decided she wants to date (her boyfriend's murderer!) Ben; he doesn't know what the future has in store for him; all he knows is that somehow he made some bad decisions whose consequences now cannot be reversed. (2010)

Beyond the Valley of the Dolls 1970 Russ Meyer (co-writer Roger Ebert!) 1.0 Dolly Read and Cynthia Meyers as two pretty sluts; John Lazar as the bizarre Z-Man, who speaks in Shakespearean periods and then turns into a rampaging maniac murdering at least four people at the end of the film. Completely bizarre, pointless, and random film apparently about a rock band of three girls that moves to LA seeking fame and fortune and gets caught up in the most extreme manifestations of the LA lifestyle. Seems to exist totally to titillate scandal-hungry 1970 audiences with lots of briefly glimpsed boobs and a few butts, drug-taking (emphasis on marijuana and downers), a fair amount of implied homosexual and lesbian activity. Very little actual sex and no frontal nudity, just a lot of scantily clad bodies caked and smoothed out in make-up making suggestive remarks. Editing seems always off balance, cutting back and forth aimlessly in the middle of something so that the viewer is left puzzled. Filled with 'groovy' talk that is trying so hard to be cool that it is unbearable after 40 years. Some of the famous Meyer moralistic overlay: perhaps Lazar's final bloody rampage is a punishment of some of the bad actors (Did 'Friday the 13th' pick up on the example?), and there is a climactic voice-over that nails down the moral of the behavior and fate of each of the many characters for those of us who weren't aware that this is the equivalent of a medieval morality play. It's fun watching amoral girls running around mostly naked and jumping into bed with random partners, but adequate acting skills, a coherent script, and a theme that doesn't require forced voice-over explanation would all be welcome. Apparently received an 'X' rating, and it still made money. (2009)

Les biches 1968 Claude Chabrol (France) 3.0 Stephane Audran, Jacqueline Sassard in her last film role, Jean-Louis Trintignant as the passive lover-architect, who falls first for Why (Sassard) and then more permanently for Frederique. Chabrol's return to personal films just before his 1969-70 run of classics. Audran picks up Sassard, has lesbian affair, takes her to Saint-Tropez (Frederique is rich), where the two women have successive affairs with Paul (Trintignant). Scenery in South is pretty spectacular and it makes you want to visit the Cote d'Azur – wintry but sunny views of the shore from Frederique's villa, boats, pine trees, etc. Film is director's film. Theme seems less important than camera style – washed out colors (can't be sure with an old VHS print), constantly moving, prowling camera that passes in front of mirrors and seems choreographed with the blocked movement of the characters; quite different from the minimalist, matter-of-fact narrative style of his classic phase. Dramatic pace is therefore quite

slow. Film features Chabrol's classic perversity, although it is a bit buried beneath the flourishes of camera style. Why and Frederique are first wary lovers, then they become jealous of one another as they vie for the attention of Paul. When Frederique finally lands him, Why is at first jealous, but then appears to fall into the role of a daughter, as she dresses up and makes herself up like Frederique, and smiling a lot and looking much more glamorous seems to be happy with their happiness. She however goes through a change when she stands at their bedroom door and listens to them making love; her jealousy appears to return, reinforced by an Elektra's desire (?) for her father (Paul). Film has been seeded with hints of violence (Why's admission that she is afraid of the water since she can't swim, at least two shots of a ceremonial knife in Frederique's villa). In the end she stabs Frederique to death in her own apartment, and then camera withdraws outside and retreats from the apartment as Paul enters, presumably to be murdered also. Usual score consisting of astringent modern chamber music. (2006)

Il Bidone 1955 Federico Fellini (Italy) 3.0 Broderick Crawford in affecting performance as 48-year-old professional con man with nowhere to go; Richard Basehart as younger con man who is torn (sobbing) between his disreputable job and his family; Giulietta Masina in superficial undeveloped role as Basehart's loving, trusting wife; Franco Fabrizi in usual role as fun-loving guy with a girl in every port. Surely the least of Fellini's 50s film about a team of con men exploiting the credulity of pitiful, ignorant peasants -- their regular con includes two of the men disguising themselves as priests, "discovering" a worthless "treasure" in the peasants' backyard, and then conning them out of real money to say masses for the souls of the dead. Usual Felliniesque light-hearted treatment of the relationships and destinies of a group of the losers of Italian society in the 50s -- they joke around, get drunk and cry about the pointlessness of their lives, talk loudly over each others' voices, etc. Some (rather ineffective) drama about Basehart's guilt about not being a good husband to Masina and his daughter -- he doesn't support her well, he lies to her, etc.; in the end, he abandons the group before the last con and goes home to stay. The strong point of the film is the character of Crawford intensely played by the American actor (he seems to be lip-syncing Italian pretty well). He has no family, and conversation with Basehart usually brings out his loneliness; he does have a pretty daughter who is going to college to whom he is intimately attached. The film ends tragically when Crawford steals the con money from his group presumably to help his daughter; they then beat him up and leave him next to a mountain road to die, which he does with much fanfare (reminiscent of 'La Strada'). Nino Rota's score is fun to listen to, but seems overwrought in many passages. Very little of Fellini's personal flights of fancy -- along with 'Cabiria' perhaps the most neo-realist of Fellini's 50s films. (2008)

The Big Clock 1948 John Farrow 3.0 Ray Milland suave and competent as magazine editor working in the mammoth Janoth publishing industry and struggling to make time in his life for his wife and child; Charles Laughton memorable with a wispy mustache as the arrogant, fast-talking, overbearing, and impulsive head of the corporation (based on Henry Luce, Janoth is far more obnoxious than Charles Foster Kane); Maureen O'Sullivan (married to Farrow) in small role as Milland's wife trying to extract him from his all-consuming job; George Macready as the clipped, competent, hyperactive, and very loyal lieutenant to Laughton; Harry Morgan (billed as Henry) in uncharacteristic role as Janoth's tough guy, carrying a gun toward the end of the film; Elsa Lanchester in cameo role as kooky artist squealing and making wisecracks as if she were still playing 'Bride of Frankenstein'. Well produced thriller that includes a lot of noir elements about Janoth's impulsive murder of his mistress (witnessed by Milland but without being identified by Janoth) and the campaign waged by himself and Macready to blame it on Milland. After firing Milland for insisting on his vacation, Janoth recalls him to head the investigation to find the (unidentified) man that Janoth had seen watching him. The screenplay gets increasingly convoluted and dense as all the action takes place in the huge Janoth Building: with Janoth and Macready breathing down his neck, Milland is conducting an investigation essentially to identify himself as the killer; a lot of screen time is taken up with Milland dispatching investigators to follow up on clues, and even though he sometimes assigns unqualified men, they finally get very close to detecting him (e.g., Milland hides his big brown fedora hat in the wastebasket when they find out that the man they are looking for wore one). The film ends in a hokey shootout when Janoth fires on Milland and then falls down an elevator shaft as he attempts to escape in his private elevator. Although Farrow uses film noir

lighting in some parts of the film when Milland is being pursued through the building, most of the film's lighting is high key. The film seems to paint a critical picture of the American corporation – the tyrannical CEO, his sycophantic assistant, the willingness to resort to criminal actions to protect one's position; on the other hand the employees seem lively and happy enough, although they are cynical about Janoth's predispositions. Much is made of time pressing ahead inexorably both in governing the work of the employees on the job and in depicting the pressures weighing on the persecuted Milland; the central metaphor is the huge international clock that Janoth has installed in the foyer of his building. The film was jazzed up and made into an international thriller forty years later with the flat-footed 'No Way Out', which is inferior to the original (I'll take Milland over Kevin Costner any day). An entertaining thriller with interesting observations. (2013)

The Big Combo 1955 Joseph H. Lewis 3.0 Hard-hitting, cynical gangster film featuring epic confrontation between charismatic crime boss and an obsessed, persistent police lieutenant. Richard Conte bigger than life crime boss ("Mr. Brown" making one think of 'Reservoir Dogs') that calmly eats his ham and eggs after ordering murders; Cornel Wilde as the policeman dedicated to ending Conte's career; Jean Wallace as Conte's girlfriend, with whom Wilde is in love; Brian Donlevy in thankless role as Conte's lieutenant constantly mocked and humiliated by his boss; Earl Holliman (emotional) and Lee Van Cleef (hard as nails) as two of Conte's henchmen; striking Helene Stanton as Wilde's friend who is murdered by Conte; Helen Walker as Conte's cast-off wife, who holds the secret to the investigation. Film focuses throughout on the contest between Wilde and Conte, even to the point of Wilde arresting Conte and his henchmen on a trumped-up charge and Conte kidnapping Wilde and beating him up (emphasis on loud noises in the ears) and later ordering his men to murder him (killing instead Helene Stanton, who was waiting for him in his apartment). The film is quite violent with several murders, the two main characters spewing hatred toward one another. Conte becomes increasingly isolated as the film progresses – his girlfriend fraternizes with the police, his ex-wife agrees to cooperate with Wilde after initial hesitation, his lieutenant, Donleavy, hatches a plot to kill him, Conte himself kills Van Cleef and Holliman when the police close in on him. Film is well directed throughout with emphasis on film noir cinematography: the finale, for example, has Wallace use a car's adjustable light to illuminate the hated Conte when pursued by the police, and when he is killed, Wilde and Wallace walk out of the gloom of the airport hangar into the comparative light on the tarmac; it is not clear whether they will recover from the betrayals and murders to build a relationship. Conte is perhaps the main reason to watch the movie: compared to the quiet-spoken Wilde, he exudes anger, contempt, a sense of superiority, and an utter disregard for morality and human feeling. Some characters are hard to fathom, e.g., Wallace's abiding affection for Conte, for whom she repeatedly expresses her repulsion. Film puts together noir lighting, 50s police procedurals, and the gangster genre. (February 2018)

Big Eyes 2014 Tim Burton 3.5 Amy Adams as shy, ordinary 50s housewife, Margaret Keane, who goes to San Francisco to pursue a career as an artist; Christoph Waltz as hyper enthusiastic, glad-handing con man, Walter Keane, that takes Margaret under his wing at a street art fair; Krysten Ritter as dark-haired skeptical friend; Jason Schwartzman as amusingly frustrated owner of gallery that features real art; Terence Stamp unforgettable as acerbic Times art critic, John Canaday, who with his piercing, bright eyes sneers contempt for the Keanes' low brow product. Enjoyable, often stylish Tim Burton treatment of Margaret Keane's pop art treatment of "big-eyed waifs" and her struggle to achieve recognition for her achievement. She and her husband achieve fame and wealth through Walter's aggressive marketing of Margaret's paintings; since few potential customers are willing to pay the price for the original works, he sells thousands of posters and postcards, becoming a pop art sensation of the 50s and 60s. Through most of the film Margaret accepts the deception that her husband is the author of the paintings, but with the help of her daughter and Ritter, she gradually comes to realize that Walter is a con man with no substance aside from marketing skills: it turns out that he didn't even study art in France, nor probably paint the cityscapes he claims are his. She divorces him (second husband jettisoned), moves to Hawaii, befriends Jehovah's Witnesses, and eventually brings a suit against Walter for slander. In a highly amusing court sequence Walter mugs and overacts, the judge acts non-plussed in humorous close-ups, and in an inspired moment has the husband and wife paint in the courtroom:

Margaret produces an adorable big-eyed waif bust, while Walter sits fidgeting in front of the easel trying to convince the court that he can't paint because of a sore arm; his canvas remains blank. The film ends in a triumph for Margaret -- she has finally achieved autonomy and proven that she is the artist. While watching the film, the viewer can't help but wonder what it is about -- the place of pop art in US culture, the bizarreness of American society, or -- most likely -- a light-hearted feminist tract about a woman in the antediluvian 50s claiming her independence and her due. Adams sometimes tries the viewer's patience with her passiveness and cluelessness, and Waltz's acting is so mannered that you wonder how Margaret could have been taken in by him; but the two work well together to make an intriguing pair. The film is photographed in a bright, 50s-style pallet (the Campbell Soup reds on the supermarket shelves!), but Burton generally eschews his flights of surreal fantasy; a notable exception is Margaret's journey through a supermarket (the temple of 50s consumerism), where every customer and sales girl features bizarre over-sized eyes. Enjoyable, engaging film, where the viewer is encouraged to empathize with and root for a vulnerable heroine. (2015)

The Big Heat 1952 Fritz Lang (Columbia) 3.0 Glenn Ford as upstanding, obsessive cop who pursues the trail wherever it leads, Gloria Grahame as ditzy gangster's moll who falls for Ford and who goes through a moral transformation, Lee Marvin as pretty sadistic henchman of the crime boss who gets our attention by throwing scalding coffee in Graham's face (scarring her for life), Alexander Scourby as the crime boss. Noir-influenced police story about a police sergeant who investigates a suicide aggressively and who gets in trouble when he discovers that the police leadership is tied to the local crime syndicate. Several murders along the way; it seems that almost everyone is corrupt in this morally dark film, including the wife of the man who commits suicide in the beginning of the film. Ford must pay the price for pushing his case so hard -- when Scourby decides to have him killed by exploding his car, Ford's wife is killed instead. The wife's death only makes Ford more determined to find and punish the killers, and at one point he throws scalding coffee in Marvin's face to get even for what he did to Grahame. Ford plays it fairly bland, but he is dead determined to get his man, no matter what the consequences: the drama is in part the search for the guilty, but there is also a theme of the price one must pay for obsessively seeking justice. Ends in some reconciliation: the guilty are either dead or caught; Grahame dies, but she has been morally redeemed by her loyalty to Ford, and Ford is so touched that he is finally able to tell her about his wife; in the end, once the crooked cops have been removed and the cowardly ones in the department have turned around, Ford is able to return to his job, much to the satisfaction of his police friends. The film is not really noir (no femme fatale, no fate, no tragic ending for the protagonist), but the dark, morally convoluted world obviously owes much to the trend. This viewer thinks that the film, although good, is rather overrated. (2006)

The Big Lebowski 1998 Joel Coen 4.0 Jeff Bridges perfectly cast as the lazy, layabout, incompetent, post-hippie, pot-smoking, jobless "Dude"; John Goodman having a great time as the big, angry, disputatious, Vietnam vet who can't stop talking about what happened in Nam; Steve Buscemi playing against type in small role as humble, mistreated buddy of the other two -- he never finishes a sentence in the movie; Julianne Moore as Euro feminist who paints a little like Jackson Pollack and wants to have a baby with Lebowski; Philip Seymour Hoffmann hilarious as embarrassed, Establishment, often tongue-tied assistant to the Big Lebowski; three slender, black-clad incompetent hoods with German accents who are sometimes harassing the Dude; John Turturro appearing in just two scenes as the gay, pampered Mexican bowler Jesus -- "Don't fuck with the Jesus!" Sam Elliott as drawling cowboy narrator that doesn't seem to belong in the film. Hilarious Coen Brothers product that uses a Raymond Chandler-like plot to create opportunities for jokes and satire. The story starts with a bang when a couple of hoods break into a clueless Dude's apartment thrusting his head in as toilet and then pissing on his rug -- "It tied the room together!" The plot does not make much sense; and there do not appear to be any consistent themes (verified by Coens in their interview). The Coens seem to relish taking swipes at whatever comes their way. The Dude is the laziest person alive -- soft and vague in speech except when he comes up with a verbal zinger; Goodman is perhaps the angriest (he pulls out a pistol when a decrepit bowler wants to score a strike when he has stepped over the line, he takes on the cowardly Germans when they confront him outside the bowling alley about the money the Dude is supposed to have, etc) and he is always posing

as the guy with the answers and the plans that never work out; the two of them together argue and disagree constantly (the scene in the diner when they are talking about the detached toe with the green nail is perhaps the funniest) and they are terminally incompetent; no plan they try out ever works – the money drop toward the beginning was a fiasco, and the ash scattering scene at the end when the wind blows the ashes back in the Dude’s face is very amusing. The screenplay is full of memorable spoken lines that delight fans of the film; every other word is ‘fuck’ or some derivative thereof: when the Ranger asks the Dude why he uses so many swear words, he replies “What the fuck do you mean?” Scatter-shot, off-the-wall humor unique to the Coen Brothers. (2006)

The Big Lebowski 1998 Joel and Ethan Coen 4.0 Extremely entertaining film with negligible thematic, character, or plot sophistication about the LA adventures of the Dude when he is mistaken for a rich man with the same name. Jeff Bridges unforgettable as slobby (wears dirty tee-shirts, smells his clothes before putting them on, lies around with his legs splayed out), pothead layabout (described by another character as probably the laziest man in Los Angeles), who is “currently unemployed”; John Goodman also unforgettable as extremely angry (his frequent outbursts are hilarious), incompetent (he is often absolutely sure about things that turn out not to be true, e.g., the wisdom of not giving the ransom money to the Nihilists, his throwing the Big Lebowski on the floor since he thinks he is not “really spinal”) Vietnam veteran, who rattles on in inappropriate moments about his buddies who died “face down in the mud”; Steve Buscemi in low-key role as Donny, who says very little, is constantly being told by Walter to “shut the fuck up, Donny”, and who dies of a heart attack when the trio is attacked by the Nihilists at the end of the film; John Turturro in memorable role as Jesus, the top-notch, in-your-face, gay bowler, who wears tight-fitting baby blue outfit and who says to our heroes in the classic scene – “You got it, man. Don’t fuck with the Jesus”; Philip Seymour Hoffmann amusing as the enthusiastic assistant to the Big Lebowski; Julianne Moore looking good with her clothes often off as a feminist abstract painter who “paints” her canvas as she swooshes by strapped to trapeze apparatus; Sam Eliot as a cowboy with a luxuriant mustache who occasionally narrates the story and shows up in the bowling alley to chat with the Dude (no clue as to what his function in the story is); not to mention Ben Gazzara and the three guys who played the blustering, cowardly German Nihilists. The film really makes no sense; it appears to be loosely based on a Raymond Chandler plot, in which there is a kidnapping and two femmes fatales, and the protagonist pursues a kind of investigation from one scene to another, but there is no private eye and no resolution of the mystery. The plot provides the excuse for a lot of gags playing off the laziness of Dude and the anger of Walter; also satire about Los Angeles. Many of the funniest scenes are silly, bearing little relationship to plot or character: Dude is upset in the beginning because a thug has peed on the rug that “ties the room together”; the classic scene in the diner when Walter insists that the severed toe with the green painted nail did not necessarily come from the kidnapped wife and the Dude is as usual is terminally annoyed with Walter’s blind stubbornness; thugs burst into the Dude’s bathroom when he is soaking in the tub and they throw a ferret/marmot creature in the tub to threaten his genitalia; Walter won’t pay the \$280 for the funeral home container to carry Donny’s ashes to the ocean, so he goes to Ralph’s to get a coffee can; and when standing by the ocean Walter finally finishes his irrelevant speech in which he invokes mainly the loss of his friends in Nam, he then scatters the ashes – right into the Dude’s beard. The film’s music is catchy – with one excellent musical comedy number representing one of the Dude’s dreams. The action constantly returns to the bowling alley, where our three heroes find an activity that comforts and distracts them. The word “fuck” is used more often than probably any other movie made in the U.S.A. No movie this funny and this entertaining should receive less than four stars. (2010)

The Big Parade 1925 King Vidor 3.0 John Gilbert (not looking at all like the dashing aristocratic lover of later films) as the World War I volunteer that we follow from his initial hesitation with his wealthy family through the bitter experience in the trenches to his return with one leg amputated; Tom O'Brien as man from Bowery who is a buddy of Gilbert, and Karl Dane as bizarre looking steelworker with them; Renée Adorée (!) as French girl that Gilbert flirts with before the battles begin and to whom he returns triumphantly at the end hobbling on his crutches. Film takes a long time getting going – the middle section where the troops are billeted in a French village is light-hearted and aimless

focusing on competition for the attention of Adoree, horseplay among the soldiers, eagerness to receive mail from home, etc. The battle scenes are gripping and disturbing: a lot of men die, especially when the soldiers attack walking calmly in line standing fully up; Gilbert is shot in the leg and ends up lying wounded in a trench with a German machine gunner who eventually dies. Gilbert loses his leg, but his two buddies are killed in action. The drama of war is personalized by focusing on Gilbert: from privileged son who doesn't like to work and has no interest in joining the army despite the pressure of his gung-ho father, to light-hearted wooer of the affections of Adoree and good buddy who is faithful to his friends, to dedicated, conscientious, and sensitive soldier, to, it turns out, dedicated lover who returns to France after the end of the war to woo Adoree. Last scene of movie is emotional with Gilbert hobbling joyfully toward the equally ecstatic Adoree. Film is the first of the serious war films that set the standard for later ones. One can see its influence on 'All Quiet on the Western Front', e.g., lying with an enemy soldier in a trench while the latter slowly dies. Although the film has a 'happy ending', it focuses on the futility and cruelty of war. Film doesn't quite pack the dramatic punch of its reputation, but one can understand its importance in the history of war films. (2008)

The Big Picture 2010 Eric Lartigau 2.5 Romain Duris nervous and compulsive as Paul, Paris lawyer, fond father, and aspiring photographer who does not have a good relationship with his wife; Marina Foïs attractive as his wife – angry that she is not able in the marriage to express and expand herself as a writer; Catherine Deneuve looking amazingly good in cameo role as Duris' employer; Branka Katic as sexy girlfriend that Paul meets after he moves to Montenegro (or is it Serbia?); Niels Arestrup very colorful but rather pointless appearance as drunken journalist in Montenegro. Promising thriller (based on an American novel) that turns into rather pretentious existentialist meditation that undermines the plot. Duris ('Moliere') accidentally kills his wife's obnoxious lover when he confronts him; and the narrative promisingly has him steal the dead man's identity à la Highsmith; he transports the body on a sailboat onto the ocean and then blows it up; everyone thinking that he is dead, Duris then disappears to somewhere in the Balkans, where he seems to have enough money to live and to start his dream career as a photographer. At this point the film changes directions: the camera follows Duris up and down the picturesque streets of his new home, in and out of art galleries, and into the bed of Katic. As He becomes increasingly successful photographing local dockworkers (so, it couldn't be Serbia), West European entrepreneurs contact him to take his works to London and Paris; Duris books passage on a freighter, and when there is a vicious fight among the workers, he whips out his camera for another photographic scoop, only this time he can't take credit because of the publicity; the film ends with the Italian media following the story in a frenzy with Duris standing anonymously off to the side; suspended end of film. The film's locations are real and the characters are convincing, particularly the nervous, driven Duris. However Gallic pretentiousness raises too often its ugly head: the pesky Hollywood-style narrative is mitigated in the second half of the film leaving the viewer disappointed and scratching his head at the finale; worthwhile activities do not include working at a marriage or making one's living as a lawyer, but only artistic, self-expressive pursuits (the two photographers); and of course the principal is devoted to his children. Any French director contemplating adapting an American thriller should first consult Guillaume Canet ('Ne le dis à personne' 2006), Jean-Pierre Melville, etc. (2013)

The Big Red One 1980 Samuel Fuller 4.0 Lee Marvin as the silent, paternalistic sergeant about whom we know practically nothing, and who leads his squad core of four men through three years of combat; Mark Hamill, Robert Carradine (stand-in for Fuller, since he smokes cigars, and writes pulp novels), Bobby Di Cicco, and Kelly Ward as his four men; Stéphane Audran as Resistance worker in Belgian nuthouse; Siegfried Rauch as Schroeder, Marvin's German counterpart and nemesis. Outstanding, rather long (158 minutes in the restored version) film about World War II directed by Fuller based on his own experiences. The film is a soldiers' counterpart to 'Patton': it follows the GIs of the First Infantry Division from its landing in Morocco, through Tunisia, Sicily, Normandy, Belgium, and finally to a death camp in Czechoslovakia. The director keeps us interested by including a lot of grisly battle scenes, perhaps the most interesting being the maneuvers the squad went through to knock out a German gun hidden on a hilltop in Sicily. More interesting are the numerous, often amusing vignettes he gives us: Marvin rejects the advances of a homosexual German orderly by complaining about his bad

breath; Marvin and the GIs agree after some hesitation to bury the rotting corpse of a Sicilian kid's mother after the kid leads them to the German gun; all the guys help a French girl give birth to a baby in a knocked-out German tank; Stéphane Audran kills several German soldiers while pretending she is loony in a Belgian asylum; a Belgian woman identifies a German soldier disguised as an American by noticing the way he eats and then she kills him; the soldier who had said in the beginning of the film that he couldn't kill anyone shoots a German soldier hidden in a crematorium after he witnesses the horrors of the concentration camp. The key theme of the film seems to be survival. The five main characters somehow survive the vicious firepower of combat, while the replacements who arrive to fill the places of fallen soldiers are killed almost immediately. The end of the film contains no triumph, but horror at what the soldiers discover in the death camp and the achievement of just having survived the grueling experience of the war. Marvin is taciturn and inscrutable; we learn nothing about his background and what he did in the army between the two wars; he rarely shows emotion, and yet is moved by the suffering of innocents – children like the little girl in Sicily who decorate his helmet with flowers, and the little boy that he carries on his shoulders at the end until he died. American kids can be efficient killers and stand up to the Germans face to face, but they are ultimately soft-hearted and liked by the people they liberate; when a fanatic boy sniper kills one of their squad companions, the rest cannot bring themselves to kill him – Marvin ends up giving him a spanking. The pragmatic approach of the Americans is contrasted with the fanatic Nazi enthusiasm of Rauch, who executes at least two people in the film because they doubt Hitler. The film ends with Marvin stabbing Rauch, even though the war is over, but when the men find that he is still alive, they urgently give him first aid and Marvin carries him off on his shoulders. (2009)

The Big Short 2015 Adam McKay 3.5 ('Moneyball') Comedic, didactic film about three groups of characters that see early the real estate bust coming in 2008 and then short the bonds containing subprime mortgages (CDOs). Christian Bale as aggressive, quirky fund manager, who wears t-shirt and sandals and listens to acid rock while he works; Steve Carell with dyed hair – loud, short-tempered, crusading against the big banks (one of which he supposedly works for); Ryan Gosling another fast-talking, arrogant fund manager that convinces Carell's group to support him; bearded Brad Pitt as a former financial manager, who despite supposedly retiring to a quiet life, decides to help two rookie investors; Hamish Linklater, Rafe Spall, and Jeremy Strong pungent and interesting as Carell's investment acolytes. The film is very entertaining and does a decent job of educating the viewer on arcane financial manipulations. Through most of the film the talk is about the stupidity of the banks, whose myopic focus on short-term profits blinds them to the bad mortgages in the instruments (Carell's "dog shit wrapped in cat shit"). All of our players take measure to verify that things are as bad as Bale says: an amusing trip of Carell and his guys to talk to mortgage brokers in Florida, who mock the stupidity of the banks when they loan hundreds of thousands of dollars to penniless immigrants; in another visit to Las Vegas another group finds that the creators of the CDOs don't know what they are doing and spend their time firing automatic rifles on gun ranges. Our guys then buy credit default swaps, essentially very expensive (premiums are millions of dollars per month) insurance policies on the bonds – if they fail, the holders will receive a big payout. For various reasons – the self-interest of the rating agencies who think only of continuing to collect fees from the banks, the cluelessness of the bank executives – values of the bonds hold steady or increase, even when the underlying mortgages fail in large numbers. A great deal of suspense is generated by the frustration of our protagonists, as they rail against the "fraudulent" nature of the system (Bale) and agonize over whether to sell their swaps before their time. The Krach eventually comes, and when they cash in their policies, all of our guys get very rich. Not entirely a happy ending, since the latter part of the film emphasizes the huge cost of the operation – people lose their homes, lose their jobs; it might even be the end of the world economy. The film is made with a shaky camera and quick editing with all the characters talking very fast. In case the viewer doesn't understand what is happening, the director cuts several times to celebrities, who clarify the shenanigans to the camera – for example the celebrity chef, who explains that when customers don't order his fresh fish, he cuts it up and puts it in a bouillabaisse. The film makes your head reel, but is always entertaining; joins 'Inside Job' and 'Margin Call' among excellent films addressing the 2008 housing bubble. (2016)

The Big Sick 2017 Michael Showalter (producer Judd Apatow; writers Kumail Nanjiani and Emily V. Gordon) 3.5 Cross-cultural romantic comedy with finely tuned comic performances especially from supporting players. Kumail Nanjiani as aspiring Pakistani-American stand-up comedian who falls in love with Caucasian American Emily; Zoe Kazan a bit cute as his outwardly cheerful girlfriend, Emily; Anupam Kher as Kumail's sensitive, rather youthful father; Zenobia Shroff as Kumail's comically controlling mother; Adeel Akhtar as Kumail's comic, bearded nerdish brother; Holly Hunter as Emily's sharp-tongued, affectionate mother; Ray Romano as Emily's dad played as a kind of superannuated college kid. The film follows the broad outlines of a romantic comedy based on the real-life experiences of the writer couple: couple meets cute in a comedy club when Emily gives Kumail a "whoop" that he interprets ironically as an insult; they of course hook up, pursue an adorable romance, then break up when Kumail lets Emily know that the relationship is opposed by his parents and that he can't leave them behind; Kumail grows closer to Emily's family during her lengthy stay in the hospital because of a mysterious infection; in the end, the recovered Emily can't seem to forgive Kumail, and he decides to move with friends to New York to pursue his stand-up career; he is doing his Big Apple best in New York, when he hears a "whoop" from the audience; the two exchange looks and amusing remarks, and we know that they will live happily ever after. The film's pace drags a bit in the middle while Emily is in her extended coma and Kumail bonds with both Emily's Mother (Hunter) and father (Romano): Kumail is buddy-buddy with Romano and almost seems to be falling in love with Hunter – big, almost romantic kiss and hug when they part at the end. The tone is light-hearted throughout except for the hospital sequences: Kumail, a professional comedian, uses lightly ironic, insouciant humor throughout; Emily stand out mostly with her broad, toothy smile that she pockets in her emotional break-up scene; Kumail's parents and brother are side-splitting in their exaggerated insistence that Kumail live by the rules, love Allah (when sent to the basement to pray, he lays the prayer rug on the floor and then plays video games), and to marry one of the approved Pakistani girls who appear "accidentally" at the family door as arranged by the mother; Hunter seems a little over-the-top with her uncompromising, yet loving and lovable character; although often bickering with his wife, Romano thoroughly enjoys himself acting playfully immature with Kumail. A successful example of the kind of rom-com that has you mix tears with laughter while tackling significant issues such as cross-cultural romance. (September 2017)

The Big Sleep 1946 Howard Hawks 3.0 Humphrey Bogart in iconic role as Chandleresque p.i. Philip Marlowe imperturbable caught up in a web of blackmail and murder; Lauren Bacall a bit reserved as deceptive (who isn't in this film?) older sister – her role seems rather peripheral compared to Bogart, who is on screen in every scene; Windsor effective as Bacall's nymphomaniac, drug-addled younger sister (reportedly since she stole the show from Bacall, they edited out many of her best scenes so that the star wouldn't be overshadowed); Charles Waldron in the first scene as the world-weary old colonel with two corrupt daughters; Elisha Cook Jr as harmless small time crook who is poisoned under the passive gaze of Marlowe. Very famous, but rather dissatisfying private eye film based on the confusing book of Chandler (three writers including William Faulkner worked with some frustration on the adaptation). Film's narrative makes little sense – we rarely understand what is happening, and when plot points are explained to us, they still don't make sense. There are at least six murders: there are so many of them that the viewer becomes calloused and just doesn't care – it's like a game; the viewer usually finds out who committed the murder (the one exception of the apparent murder of the chauffeur in the Packard, which famously even stumped Raymond Chandler when he was asked), but again someone explains it very fast, it seems normal and we just move on to the next one. The plot is very linear – the viewer just follows Bogart from scene to scene in his investigation, getting in deeper and deeper; there is finally a resolution of sorts, but it seems cobbled together and we can't be sure that all the pieces are tied together. The strengths of the film are however manifest. The art direction is excellent: every scene has the high gloss, though realistic studio look that creates a certain distance with the story – the interiors are interesting (especially the bizarre oriental-decorated house where the antique dealer is murdered), the streets are convincing, the rain seems real, etc. The cast of course is historic – the second or third pairing of Baby and Bogie. Bogart does a good job with his persistent, low-key, decent private detective, but Bacall does not have enough screen time either for star power or to involve her character in the narrative, and the chemistry between the cool, cynical Bacall and the unromantic Bogart is tepid; they don't even

seem to like one another. The celebrated cynical, witty Chandleresque dialogue is also fun to listen to (“She tried to sit in my lap while I was standing up.”), but it goes by very fast and at times one wonders whether a character would really talk like that. The film takes us through a world of 40s LA corruption – nymphomania, blackmail, compulsive gambling (is that casino in the state of California?), and of course violence and murder (depicted in typical Hayes-imposed restrained fashion), usually filmed at night. The film doesn’t really qualify as a film noir, since the protagonist is not really flawed, the *femme fatale* ends up living happily ever after, there is no sense that the narrative is moving inexorably toward destruction, there is no fatalistic voice-over, etc.; the dark evening scenes don’t have the usual film noir chiaroscuro. Overall an enjoyable film, but it misses the ‘great’ status because of its irritating plot(-less) structure. (2007)

The Big Steal 1949 Don Siegel 2.5 Moderately entertaining chase film reuniting Greer and Mitchum in a scenic Mexico. Robert Mitchum his usual laconic, wise-cracking, laid back, and this time rather thin ununiformed army officer looking for the guy that stole as payroll; Jane Greer a bit colorless as the random young woman that gets caught up in the chase; Patrick Knowles as the mustachioed bad guy, who doesn't actually have the money but is aiming to collect it from a source in Mexico; William Bendix as brutal US Army Officer willing to kill to get the money back; entertaining appearance from a mature and unglamorous Ramon Novarro playing a Mexican policeman who has a sense of humor and is trying to learn English – he kind of hangs out until the final scene resolves the narrative. Since most of the film was done in Mexico, it has colorful Mexican locations: mainly driving down roads near Vera Cruz, but also in cities, fancy hotels (reminds the viewer of Merida), and small towns teeming with Mexican peasants dressed in white clothes and sombreros. Siegel orchestrates an aggressive pace, notably in an extended chase down a precipitous mountain road with Bendix in hot pursuit firing at our protagonists’ car (back screen projections dominate). Through most of the film the viewer is kept in suspense-confusion about the source of the missing funds and the roles of the protagonists; the loose ends are tied together in a hurried and rather unconvincing final confrontational scene. Entertaining to see Greer and Mitchum back together, but both seem to be going through the motions indicating that they may not enjoy working together; the final kiss culminating their relationship is not very convincing. Film is primarily an entertaining crime-chase film with none of the psychological exploration and philosophical doom of film noir; Greer’s character and performance is far less interesting than her appearance in ‘Out of the Past’ two years before. (2016)

Bigger than Life 1956 Nicholas Ray 3.0 Searing Sirk-style 50s soap opera following the disastrous side-effects of cortisone on a high school teacher. British actor James Mason, a curious choice for an everyman middle class American, pulls out the stops convincingly in a violently emotional role; Barbara Rush dignified and patient as the quintessential middle class housewife (would an American woman really take so much lying down?); Walter Matthau as sensible good friend, who collaborates with Rush to try to calm Mason down; the ubiquitous Christopher Olsen as Mason’s long-suffering son. Film is ostensibly about the dangers of miracle drugs that have not been sufficiently vetted: the normally mild-mannered Mason has a deadly disease that is treated successfully with cortisone; the side effects are horrific, especially when Mason abuses the prescription that the doctor – Robert Simon – gives him: non-stop talking, arrogant pontificating in front of the school PTA, vengeful wounding of his wife whom he threatens to divorce, tyrannizing over his son, and when on the basis of the biblical story of Abraham he decides to murder his son, his wife and to commit suicide, he has a violent fistfight with Matthau, crashing through the bannister on the stairs, and ending up in the hospital. There ensues a bit of suspense with Rush waiting impatiently for news of her husband and then uncertainty about whether Mason will recover his sanity (or become “psychotic” and not even recognize his family). The film ends with an almost absurdly happy ending: after all the drama and suffering, Mason suddenly commands wife and son to rush to his bed and the film ends with a maniacal embrace. The style of the movie is slightly reduced Sirkian – violent emotional gestures, suddenly crashing music, close-ups of Mason’s maniacal expressions and darting eyes. The film seems to have a subtext of criticism of the 50s middle-class dream: doctors aren’t as competent as thought, and the wonder drugs pumped out by the pharmaceutical companies are dangerous; Mason and family appear on the verge of falling out of the middle class –

overwhelming medical bills, Mason moonlights secretly as a taxi dispatcher while not telling his wife (class anxiety), Rush has a hard time paying her bills, the fight with Matthau violates any code of middle class behavior. The ending seems lame: even the doctors have no solution for Mason's disease except to continue to give him the same drug, but this time monitoring him to make sure he doesn't abuse it. Rush's extreme passiveness throughout her husband's illness makes the ending possible. A tragic conclusion – perhaps the death of Mason – would have had a much greater impact; it worked in the remake of 'Imitation of Life' and 'All that Heaven Allows'. Still the hyper-dramatic style and Mason's performance makes the film worth watching. (2016)

Birdman 2014 Alejandro Iñárritu 3.0 Michael Keaton as highly conflicted ex-movie superhero that decides to redeem himself/rekindle his celebrity status by producing his own Broadway adaptation of a Raymond Carver short story; Emma Stone as his lost-girl daughter employed as her dad's assistant – she is fresh out of rehab; Edward Norton as talented, egomaniacal actor hired for the play – he is a source of continued irritation for Keaton; Zach Galifianakis as Keaton's friend and producer obsessed with making the play a success (at all costs!); Naomi Watts as an actress in the play and lover (soon ex-lover) of Norton; Lindsay Duncan as attack-dog Times theater critic, who hates Keaton because of his celebrity identity and in one of the film's many intense dramatic scenes vows to kill his play with her pen. Self-consciously brilliant film that refuses to move back from showmanship and let the story and characters take center stage; and yet in many places it is compellingly watchable. The film is in part the story – almost like a soap opera – of a set of unhappy and unpredictable actors trying to make their mark on life, some even trying to find peace and stasis. The spotlight is on Keaton; he is accustomed to celebrity status as the star of three sequels about Birdman, who has superhero powers such as telekinesis and flying, but he is now trying to find validation producing his highbrow Broadway show; he feels bad about his broken relationships with women and his poor performance as a parent to Stone. Haunted by an alter ego that seems to be his Birdman character, Keaton struggles from one crisis to another. The film's ending plays with the theme of suicide, leading the viewer to believe that he is going to shoot himself with the pistol prop on stage (intense suspense); but he only succeeds in shooting his nose off, and the film ends with him disappearing out of the hospital window, apparently to fly within sight of his worried daughter (He is somehow free? Or he has escaped completely into a fantasy world?). The film also focuses on a critique of American popular culture – celebrity status and the financial and aesthetic realities of Hollywood and the theater. As a superhero celebrity, Keaton cannot escape the adulation of his fans crowding the outside of his theater; exploiting his celebrity status to sell his chaotic, melodramatic Broadway play, the audience breaks out in adulatory applause, it would appear, primarily because the cast features two stars; the script makes reference to the reign of special effects and the necessity of resorting to Meg Ryan's plastic surgeon, etc. The critic says to Keaton, "You're no actor. You're a celebrity." The film is often funny – Keaton trapped outside the stage door in his underwear and having to run through the streets; he is filmed by excited fans, who then post the clips on social media; Keaton using his superhero powers to drop a prop on the head of a bad actor, who then returns in a wheelchair to claim civil damages; Keaton and Norton get into a fistfight over Norton's attempt to fuck Naomi Watts during the play's bed scene (his erection is clearly visible through his underwear). The film has also ecstatic moments, such as when Keaton (imagines he?) flies over the cityscape to the accompaniment of the slow movement from Rachmaninoff's 2nd Symphony. Intense film that is often enjoyable and gripping; one feels like the authors try to pack too much into two hours. (2015)

The Birdman of Alcatraz 1962 John Frankenheimer 3.5 Burt Lancaster as Robert Stroud, the lifer in federal penitentiary (most of the time in solitary confinement in Leavenworth and not in Alcatraz), who became renowned for his care of birds and his scientific work on them; Karl Malden as the Leavenworth warden, who has a life-long love-hate relationship with Stroud; Thema Ritter as Stroud's loyal mother, until she disowns him over a woman; Betty Field lackluster as the loyal assistant and wife who alienated Mom; Telly Savalas in emotional performance as fellow inmate who moves the audience despite his low-life criminal personality. Famous story of the Birdman that spans his career from just after his arrest until just before he dies, when he is transferred out of Alcatraz to a prison medical facility. The film focuses a great deal on his care of birds and his struggles with the prison administration to keep

them in his cell and then to conduct research (he actually published a highly regarded veterinary manual on bird diseases); at one point he was riding so high in public opinion (his mother had inspired stories on him in major newspapers) that he was actually given two cells to store his birds and equipment. The second part of the film is devoted to his life in Alcatraz without birds – he wrote an unpublished book on the history of the American prison system and helped squelch a hopeless prison rebellion. The film is beautifully directed and photographed all the way through: the expressive, often noble shots of Lancaster's face, he bent over working in his cell, his conversations with Malden, etc.; the editing gives a strong and immediate sense of the space and the atmosphere in prison. Film has a liberal slant typical of the age. All the way through we have a palpable sense of the men's lives wasted whiling the hours away often in total useless idleness; two men try to break out because the aimless idleness is near to driving them crazy; Stroud cannot secure parole because of Malden's vendetta against him; Malden does not allow him to publish his book on the oppressive prison system because it reflects discredit on Malden and the system that he has worked for for so long. The film criticizes the prisons bitterly for not making an honest effort to rehabilitate the prisoners. But the prisons shown in the film are models of fairness, security and due process compared to 2009; there is no indication of what the alternative might be. Nevertheless, a moving, interesting, and superbly directed film. (2009)

The Birds 1963 Alfred Hitchcock 3.0 Tippi Hedren as glamorous, always made up, hair usually perfect but sometimes artificially askew, wooden actress; Rod Taylor as tanned hunk who spends good part of time rescuing TH from dangerous birds; Susanne Pleshette as schoolteacher and old girlfriend of Mitch, who is jealous of Melanie's relationship with him; Ethel Griffies as the ornery ornithologist in the café who says that a bird attack is impossible (on theoretical grounds); Jessica Tandy, straight laced and strong-looking mother of Mitch, who weakens and needs the protection of males by about halfway through the film (famous scene of her running and then driving away noiselessly after she finds the eyeless body of a farmer friend). Not a very tense movie in most places. The two stars are flat and boring and fail to involve the viewer. Tippi is boring and overly glamorous (although she is presented as a San Francisco socialite), and we just don't care what happens to her; Rod Taylor almost as much. AH plays with mother-son Oedipal business between Taylor and his mother, but it doesn't work very well. The women in the movie strongly need the protection of the men, usually Rod Taylor. The movie by and large lacks Hitchcock humorous touch with exception of beginning sequence in bird shop in San Francisco where there is a lot of light-hearted play with love, affection, play-acting, lying (mostly Melanie); and of café scene, where various piquant provincial characters spend 15 minutes together, generating humor, interest and some drama (interrupted by famous catastrophic gasoline scene). Ethel Griffies plays hilarious ornithologist in café scene; there are also an Irish drunk announcing the end of the world, and an ornery bird-hating traveling salesman (?) who agrees to take the distraught, almost hysterical mother (her children seem to be enjoying the show) to safety. Film very successful in evoking the rural, seaside charm of Bodega Bay in the 1960s. Special effects are convincing (before days of computer graphics!); one never sees large flocks of birds the same, especially on the California coast! The seagull knocks Melanie in the head as she returns from her surprise, secret visit to Mitch's house, the famous and effectively paced jungle gym scene in which successive looks at the monkey bars show an increased number of birds, and then the camera follows one crow slowly down to the gym, where there are hundreds waiting patiently! The "God's eye" view looking down on Bodega Bay from way above the burning scene, with gulls hovering and descending cautiously toward the mess. The final siege scene in the Taylor family house is gripping with the furious birds using every stratagem to break in and the humans, under the leadership of the man in the family, defend themselves gamely; particularly grueling is Melanie's enduring of repeated attacks when she enters the upstairs bedroom. Ending is interesting: just as we are never given a clear explanation of why the birds attack, the humans leave the house tentatively, driving slowly, leaving it open as to whether the attacks have stopped, whether Mitch et al. will get through, whether the birds will come again, etc. Interesting touch is lack of music sound track, which is replaced by electronic track with bird sounds and flapping of wings. Ideology is vaguely environmental – somehow man has pushed things out of sync, and this is the consequence – attacks from normally peaceful creatures. Not Hitchcock's most character and theme-rich movie, but excellent frights, special effects and local atmosphere. (1963) (2006)

The Birth of a Nation 1915 D. W. Griffith 4.0 Lillian Gish Extraordinary movie that affected the direction of the development of motion pictures. Incredibly racist in very explicit, in your face, and naïve way – the Civil War disrupted the natural affinity between northern and southern Aryans, and the white race had to join hands together again to defeat the Black menace. Movie loaded with black menace, especially of sexual variety – black men spend most of their waking hours lusting after white women. Blacks also depicted as shiftless and ignorant, most notably in the legislature scene, where they vote in favor of miscegenation, drink on the floor, and take their shoes off and put their bare feet on their desks. Pointed citation of Woodrow Wilson’s ‘History’ and his fulsome praise of the movie. After defeat of blacks, explicit references to Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, etc. at the end, hoping that we (whites) will never go to war again. Explicit glorification of Ku Klux Klan, who are a sort of revolutionary hero risen up and rightfully fighting to protect southern civilization and womanhood against the racial menace. Very annoying to have to look at white actors in blackface playing the majority of the black characters. Greatest scenes of Part II (Reconstruction) fueled by fear raised by black lust for Elsie and Flora. Civil War scenes (Part I) very vivid and realistic, reminding one of Matthew Brady; also true epic grandeur. Mixes different types of scenes – historical tableaux (e.g., Appomattox Courthouse surrender); touching, sensitively edited domestic scenes, especially of the southern Cameron family (especially the return of the Little Colonel to the Cameron family home); great epic scenes, especially of Civil War battles; exciting chases where he uses cross-cutting aggressively to create a sense of excitement and suspense (attempted rape of Flora, the endless ride of the KKK at the end of the movie). (2004)

Birth of a Nation 2016 Nate Parker (also screenplay) 3.0 Hard-hitting Spielbergian-style drama about the genesis and evolution of the Nat Turner Slave Rebellion in Virginia 1831. Nate Parker as quiet, studious Black slave in early 19th century Virginia; Colman Domingo as manly buddy of Nate; Armie Hammer as Sam Turner, Nate’s (bearded) sensible master, who has bad teeth and assuages his conscience by drinking; Penelope Ann Miller as Sam’s decent, God-fearin’ mother; Aja Naomi King as pretty slave Cherry Ann bought at Nat’s insistence and soon his wife; Mark Boone Jr. as heavily bearded preacher rogue; Jackie Earle Haley as brutal leering white trash rapist. Film is situated in the woods and verdant fields of 19th century Virginia and in plantation houses filmed in Savannah, Georgia (often shown to soothing, bucolic music). It begins with black and white boys playing together, but spends most of its time on the evolution of Turner’s attitudes. Nat is a precocious boy, who somehow taught himself how to read; he is then schooled in certain parts of the Bible by the kindly Miller, and he learns so much about the Good Book that he is commissioned by his master, the genial Hammer, to preach to other slaves about submission and discipline. His attitudes however are soon transformed by the sadistic treatment meted out to slaves by the smaller farmers and white trash, tobacchy-chewing overseers: field hands are tortured brutally, as in the scene of chiseling out of teeth and force feeding witnessed by Nat. Most common is the sexual exploitation of female slaves, who are forced to have sex with white masters. The film focuses on the sweet romance of Nat and Cherry, who quickly marry and produce a daughter, but Nat’s patience with slave society is destroyed by the brutal rape of his wife, the fury of white society when he dares to baptize a penitent white man, and the cruel whipping of Nat ordered by Sam in the aftermath. Nat remarks that the Bible has passages commanding submission to authority (the God of Love), but also Old Testament injunctions to rise against one’s oppressors like the Israelites (the God of Wrath). Nat recruits a handful of slaves to attack the system and “lead his people to Jerusalem”; it makes no difference that some slave-owners are just, the system is corrupt and the rebels must “destroy them all”. He makes liberal use of the vocabulary of the Civil Rights Movement pronounced to the strains of humming choruses. The uprising is a short spasm of violence, in which the rebels slaughter white plantation owners while they sleep – even his own master Sam whom he hacks to death with an axe. They soon meet disaster when they foolishly confront a gang of rifle-bearing white men in a garrison (?) and are then trapped by army soldiers. Nat gives himself up to stop the slaughter of Black people. He is then hung – strangled slowly so that he turns his eyes to heaven, where he imagines the figure of a beautiful female angel with wings. There follows a brief scene of black soldiers clad in Union uniforms charging toward the camera, thereby depicting the Rebellion as a precursor of freedom and the Civil Rights Movement. Film is particularly interesting in its examination of the relationship between Christian

ideas and liberation – respect your masters (Ephesians 6:5) or rise up against your oppressors (Psalm 7:6). (2017)

Biutiful 2010 Alejandro Iñárritu (Spain) 3.0 Javier Bardem very moving as a saintly figure in the midst of poverty and exploitation; Maricel Alvarez as his mentally ill wife, whom he loves but can't trust; Diaryatou Daff as the saintly Senegalese woman who sacrifices herself for Bardem and his children while he is dying. Extremely gritty and often depressing film about mid-level gangster working with illegal Chinese immigrants and the sale of knock-off products in the streets of Barcelona. The film goes to great lengths to portray the seamy poverty and ugliness of the Barcelona slums – moist floors, peeling walls, low, discolored ceilings, dozens of illegal immigrants sleeping in a crowded basement rooms, Senegalese men selling illegal goods on the streets of the city and running desperately from the police during a raid; all captured with oppressive close-ups of heads and faces and a shaky, bobbing hand-held camera to lend the scenes authenticity. Bardem has to be the most oppressed man in the world: he is dying of prostate cancer which is illustrated not just by the pained, exhausted expressions on his face, but by the bloody urine he frequently dispatches to the toilet; he struggles to keep abreast of his two children, whom he loves deeply (a manly looking man with the sensitivity of a good mother); he has to deal with his unreliable, unfaithful divorced wife who moves in and out of the life of him and his children; he feels responsible for the well-being of the Chinese immigrants sleeping in the damp basement, and yet when he installs gas-fired space heaters to warm them at night, he asphyxiates most of them. Bardem plays the role admirably with a combination of intense emotion, deep sincerity and sensitivity. Although the film ends sadly with the heart-rendingly detailed recounting of Bardem's death, the film is really about some sort of redemption. He is a good man at heart, deeply concerned about what will become of his children after he is gone; he believes that life will continue after death; he has visions (?) of contact with dead people, for which he sometimes receives payment; he has angels in his life, including Bea, a vaguely identified woman who encourages him in his spiritual beliefs, Daff who assumes responsibility for the children when she hesitantly accepts money from Bardem when he is near death, and then of course his little daughter, Hanna, who lies in bed and accepts his mother's ring from him at the moment of his death. A post-scene in a beautiful snowy wood where Bardem breaks into his best smile suggests that there is some kind of fulfillment for him now that he is freed from the prison of his terrestrial existence. The film can be very moving, beautiful, and it generates great sympathy for suffering humanity; it is however over-long, often oppressive in its negative images and situations, and rather vague about its idea of spiritual regeneration. Recommended if you are ready for an intensely dramatic cinematic experience. (2011)

Black Angel 1946 Roy William Neill 3.5 Dan Duryea in a nice guy (for a change) role as apparently innocent man helping the wife of a death row man find the real murderer; June Vincent a bit miscast as a dutiful housewife who refuses to believe her husband is guilty of murder (she does have a couple of sultry crooning musical numbers); Peter Lorre is straight Lorre role as a suspect who was too easily blackmailed; Broderick Crawford in rather ho-hum role as investigating police officer who shows up at the right time. A kind of whodunit with noir overtones. A man is convicted of the murder of a blackmailing woman; while he waits on death row, his wife (Vincent) and Duryea are unofficial Hitchcockian investigation team looking for the real murderer, who turns out to be ... Duryea himself, who had killed the woman -- his ex-wife -- in a drunken stupor which he could not remember. Good suspense toward the end – Duryea, who now realizes that he is the real murderer, is about to be sedated by a menacingly avuncular doctor in the psychiatric hospital (hypodermic syringe pressed against Duryea's forearm) while the husband approaches his execution time on death row, and he is saved only by a last-minute phone call from Crawford. The twisty plot is entertaining, and the viewer is satisfied with the ending, which makes sense. There are anti-noir elements -- the femme fatale is murdered in the beginning of the film, no pools of shadows or stark chiaroscuro, etc. But as we approach the end, fatalistic elements take over. Despite his decency, Duryea looks like a loser from the beginning -- his aimlessness and his alcoholic stupors --, and there is logic in his fate when we discover that he is the murderer. Film is efficiently shot in crisp, well-restored and expressive black and white; well-tended atmosphere of little people in Los Angeles scraping by and spending a lot of time in the nightclubs. Excellent atmospheric musical numbers sung by Vincent. Nice small role performances from Constance

Dowling as the blackmailer in the beginning and from the man who plays Duryea's janitor. Entertaining little thriller that benefits from the fatalistic realism of the noir era. (2007)

Black Book 2006 Paul Verhoeven (Holland) 4.0 Wildly entertaining anti-Resistance movie by Verhoeven, his first film after leaving Hollywood. Carice van Houten as the sexy, vivacious Jewish girl that joins the Dutch resistance; Sebastian Koch as the surprisingly personable SD captain that collects stamps; Halina Reijn as sexy party girl working in German headquarters; Thom Hoffman as the charismatic but treacherous Doctor Ackermann. Verhoeven's 'Soldiers of Orange' in 1979 was a patriotic epic glorifying Dutch Resistance fighters during World War II. This one is shockingly ambiguous – we learn finally at the end that certain members of the Resistance (the charismatic Hoffman and the lawyer Smaal) and of the Nazi Sicherheitsdienst in Holland are working together in a criminal plot to rip off rich Dutch Jews, whom they have told to get their money together for an escape to British lines in Belgium. The Germans have their good, decent guys – Koch, who despite being the head of the Sicherheitsdienst, is a nice guy who loves his deceased wife and children and who, while carrying on an affair with the ever willing van Houten, is trying to conclude a truce with the Resistance to avoid further bloodshed at the end of the war. Last part of film has the restored Dutch/Canadian authorities mistreating supposed Dutch collaborationists almost as badly as the Nazis would have done – van Houten has a huge bucket of shit dumped on her (and of course in a typical ironic twist Hoffman, who will soon be revealed as the arch villain, bursts in to save the victims). Film has more shocks, twists, and sudden outbursts of violence than five such normal movies: begins with a wounded American bomber accidentally dropping bombs on van Houten's hideaway (wonderful graphics; she is a Jew in wartime Holland), then only a few minutes later she and the other Jews trying to escape on a boat are brutally gunned down by SS and then their bodies are robbed of their valuables even in their most intimate places; and it goes on from there. Carice van Houten is a revelation destined for stardom – very beautiful with an engaging smile, terrific body (perfectly formed breasts that we see an awful lot of), confidence and self-assurance; she carries the movie expertly – we follow her willingly wherever she goes and we don't object when she does outrageous things, such as dye her pubic hair blond to help in her seduction of Koch. Verhoeven is pretty outrageous; crazy excess abounds – enormous body count (remember 'Storm Troopers'?), brutal surprises that we never have time to digest, explicit and sexy sex (both van Houten and Reijn bare their bodies and have sex with the Germans), and many shocking details that no other director would have included – e.g., when Carice wants to pass as a Dutch woman, she dyes blond not only her hair but also her pubes that she shows to the horny Ackerman; and of course the huge bucket of excrement. Other memorable surprise scenes include the beginning Dutch one, where Carice, a Jewess, has to recite a Christian scripture passage in order to earn her breakfast, which she then begins ironically by making a sign of the cross in her oatmeal with syrup; or the characters' frustration with a container of chloroform that doesn't work – it turns out because the label says best used before 1941; twice the ambiguous trick in which the pursued Carice assumes that a male groin protrusion is an erection, only to find out that it is a pistol. Characters are believable, but they are a little irrelevant; the film moves so fast that we don't have time to appreciate them. Underneath the fun and games, the film is essentially cynical: there is little true idealism, since all the characters are after their own advantage, and many of them are traitors; the myths of the virtue of the Resistance and the blanket evil of the Germans are punctured continually throughout the film. Reminds one of certain Hitchcock films with frequent rhythmic shocks – 'North by Northwest' and 'The 39 Steps' of course come to mind. Fiendishly entertaining movie. Why can't Hollywood do more of these? Why couldn't Verhoeven do one when he was working there? (2007; 2017)

Black Hawk Down 2001 Ridley Scott 3.5 Josh Hartnett as recently promoted Sergeant Eversman, the closest thing to as protagonist in the film; Eric Bana as Hoot, a battle-hardened, experienced soldier; Tom Sizemore as Lt. Col. McKnight, the commander on the ground; Ewan McGregor as Grimes; Sam Shepard as General Garrison, the commander remaining at the base. Gritty, realistic account of the American attempt to extract some rebel militia leaders (under their leader Aidid) from their headquarters in downtown Mogadishu; it ended in fiasco with the death of 19 American soldiers and perhaps 1000 local rebels and civilians. The expedition was planned as an efficient

“extraction” carried out by humvee-transported US Army Rangers in about a half an hour with support from Black Hawk helicopters. Having complete surprise, the expedition started off well enough with the arrest of the targets and bundling them into the humvees, but things began to go wrong when the rebels shot down two helicopters. Because the Americans were committed to “everybody comes back”, Garrison rushed in reinforcements to retrieve the wounded, which resulted in even more casualties, since the rebels were better organized and especially better armed than the Rangers had anticipated; they had hundreds of automatic weapons, truck-mounted machine guns, and highly destructive rocket-propelled grenades. Most of the film follows the desperate attempts to rescue the wounded and bring back the dead bodies. The film ends on a chastened tone when all the men return to base supported by UN armored cars (most of them Pakistani). The film is incredibly immediate, gripping, and picturesque. The director and cinematographer give the viewer dramatic shots of the surroundings viewed from helicopters, of the men in battle, of the rebels rushing the rapid-firing Americans with no apparent concern for their own lives, of wounded men covered with blood and gore, of dead bodies with their legs blown off, of a severed hand (that a soldier picks up and places in his pocket to carry back), and of hundreds of Somalis (called “Skinny”) dying bloodily as they charge the enemy; the editing always seems to keep the viewer oriented in a chaotic situation and to make the events exciting. The script makes an attempt to differentiate the soldiers by introducing them in the beginning of the film, but they all look pretty much the same to begin with (young, nice kids, shaved heads), and once they have their helmets on and are dirty and sweaty from being in the field, it is very difficult to tell one from another; the exception is perhaps Hartnett who since he was promoted to squad leader just before the raid, is not so sure if he can do it, but who rises admirably to the occasion. The film appears to be a tribute to the bravery and particularly the solidarity of the men – what gives them courage and carries them through the nightmare is their devotion to one another and their commitment to bring out the wounded and the dead. The film does not appear to have a political message – some of the men are just doing their job (following orders), others believe in the humanitarian mission they are performing. A rather depressing film, but incredibly vivid, gritty and occasionally moving. (2011)

Black Narcissus 1947 Michael Powell; Emeric Pressburger (Britain) 3.0 Deborah Kerr as conflicted nun who is superior in a convent school in the Himalayas; Jean Simmons in brief appearance as sexy, earthy, animal-like young Himalayan seductress from the village; Sabu as the overdressed, prissy Young General who seduces Simmons; David Farrar as the often bare-chested expatriate Englishman representing attempted adaptation to the pagan ways of the Himalayan village; Kathleen Byron as the often hysterical Sister Ruth, who cracks under the pressure of cultural conflict. Sometimes interesting and affecting, but sometimes hackneyed film about the fate of a community of nuns in a pagan foreign culture and a conflict between puritanical western Christian culture and the local pagan (Hindu?) culture. The nuns arrive in the palace located picturesquely on a dramatic precipice and open a school (a prince had used the building as quarters for his many women); at first successful, the stresses and strains soon take their toll: Sister Philippa plants flourishing flowers in the vegetable garden, Sister Ruth soon becomes frantic from sexual obsession with the local Englishman, and Kerr herself becomes stressed because of her own unfulfilled romantic yearnings (depicted by stylized flashbacks of her with her fiancé in Ireland); the film climaxes with a physical confrontation between Ruth and Kerr on the edge of the precipice that ends with Ruth plunging to her death. The performances are mixed: Kerr does the best she can with her role; Byron is over-the-edge frenzied and out of control with shocking hyper close-ups of her bared fangs; Farrar struggles to make sense of his character supposedly caught between two worlds. The strong point of the film is the cinematography: the whole film is shot on location with brightly painted backdrops in place of real shots of the Himalayas; beautifully composed, colored and decorated shots of interior rooms, particularly the delicately patterned common room in baby blue; the murals of bare-breasted maidens providing a backdrop to much of the action; the fertile fields of flowers planted by one of the nuns; the emaciated, wrinkled image of the Indian holy man who sits motionless on the nuns’ property. Much play made of luxurious and sensuous items that contradict the nuns’ astringent lifestyle: beautiful jewelry, rich colors, sumptuous, luxurious clothing, and sensuous perfume scents (hence the title ‘Black Narcissus’, the name of a scent), not to mention the seductive, sinuous movements of the dancing girl Simmons. Magical moments that come mostly from the richly painted ambiance; interesting theme

about cultural and moral conflict between the ascetic values of Christianity and the presumably more natural culture of the East. However, the conflict is dated (calls to mind Bergman's 'Wild Strawberries') and the theme is sometimes undermined by the melodrama. Not up to the Powell-Pressburger highest standards. (2010)

Black Orpheus 1959 Marcel Camus (France) 3.0 Brenno Mello beautiful, passionate, committed, romantic as Orfeo, a streetcar conductor in Rio de Janeiro; Marpessa Dawn innocently beautiful, smiling, passively awaiting Orfeo's initiative as Eurydice; Lourdes de Oliveira as hotty Mira, Orfeo's sexy fiancée, who is a fabulous dancer and jealous of Euridice; Lea Garcia as another girl of the Rio favelas; Jorge dos Santos as the charismatic little boy and cherub who adores Orfeo and promotes his affair with Euridice. Hyperkinetic, dancing retelling of the Orfeo and Euridice legend set in the slums, hillsides, and streets of Rio de Janeiro at Carnavale time. Much of the film is filled with the rhythms of bossa nova (apparently very popular around 1960) and the frenetic gyrations of the dancers keeping time – one can't help but get a bit tired of it after a while. The story is divided into three main parts: scenes on top of the favela hills of Rio with brilliantly blue views in the background in which we get familiar with the dramatis personae; the actual dancing and cutting up in the Carnival celebration when Euridice is pursued again by Death; the dark section where she is killed by electrocution, the pursuit of her body in the morgue, Orfeo's following of her into the (scary) Underworld, where he breaks the rules and insists on looking at the ugly old woman whose body is harboring the spirit of Euridice; and the climax again out in the bright light where the vicious jealousy of Mira causes Orfeo to fall to his death with the body of his beloved in his arms. Affecting, although sometimes tiresome, version of the Orfeo legend. It is very romantic and tragic: Euridice is pursued by death and Orfeo her lover and beloved tries to protect her; but the jealousy of his fiancée Mira and the ineluctability of Death defeats him; in the end the two fall off the cliff together, their bodies lying at the bottom one on top of the other. The atmosphere is musical, joyous, romantic, hedonistic; the poor people of the favelas do not seem unduly depressed by their circumstances; their music, dancing and love are adequate compensation for any suffering they may have. After Orfeo is killed, the children return to the seaside mountaintops to play their guitars to abet the rising of the sun (they don't seem particularly sad about Orfeo not being able to do it any more), and then dance and sing their way down the hill: no social protest here – contrast the gritty, desperate conditions in 'City of God). If you can take the large amounts of dancing and singing, the film is gentle, sensuous, romantic; you can't help but love characters that are so musical and happy. (2008)

Black Swan 2010 Darren Aronofsky 3.5 Natalie Portman giving the most intense performance of her life as new York dancer determined to dance the dark-side Black Swan in 'Swan Lake'; Vincent Cassel as brilliant, seductive, manipulative artistic director of the ballet; Barbara Hershey rather disquieting as ballet mom ('Turning Point'!) who didn't make it "out of the corps" herself but is now determined to see her daughter through to the top; Mila Kunis as a kid lingo-talking dancer from San Francisco projecting ambiguity about whether she is a good friend or an enemy dedicated to replacing Portman in the top spot; Winona Ryder "cruelly" cast as a has-been dancer replaced by Portman. Smashingly photographed, riveting, often excessive and ambiguously themed ballet film that includes a psychological storyline and strong portions of *grand guignol* horror. Portman begins as a true ingénue surrounded by pink stuffed animals in her bedroom; she is constantly reminded by Cassel that she needs to develop her dark side in order to dance the black swan as well as the white swan ("go home and touch yourself; live a little"). Ballet rehearsals are long and exacting and Portman sacrifices her body (e.g., torn toenails) in order to achieve technical perfection. The second level of drama is inside her mind. The film seems to be in part about her painful emancipation from the restraining apron strings of her mother, who wants to keep her innocent, childlike, and under her control. Portman goes through a wrenching psychological transformation depicted by the horror and strain shown in close-ups of her face (perhaps too much of it), but especially by horrifying images that the viewer has to puzzle out whether they are real or imagined. Her dreams about being approached and dominated by the evil magician from the ballet and the scratches apparently made by her fingernails on her back, and her throwing up her meals in the toilet are real enough; curious symmetrical rows of bumps on her shoulders and body and little barbed thorns that she has to extract from her skin or – at the end – her bloodshot eyes are all clearly fantasy; but the

audience is uncertain when she is fantasizing about lesbian debauchery with Kunis in her bedroom while mom is banging on the door or when she becomes convinced that Kunis is plotting against her to take the lead role from her or when she imagines that she has murdered her in her dressing room. Portman's journey toward insanity recalls the experience of Catherine Deneuve in "Repulsion". The film culminates grippingly on the stage with Portman's triumphant performance of both swans: we accompany her from the wings as disguised in an evil mask she executes a flawless series of fouettées to draw a standing ovation from the audience; she then ascends the stairs and 'dies', but after she falls to the mattress, we discover that the shard of glass that she thought she had murdered Kunis with is actually lodged in her own belly; she has reached "perfection" because not only has she executed a flawless performance, but she has died in reality as her heroine dies in the story (the standard ending of a ballet film would of course have her stand up and take triumphant bows before the audience). The film perhaps suffers from narrative ambiguity: Is it about a girl driven to insanity by the repression imposed by her mother? Is it a ballet film? Is it a ghost story where the girl is beset by evil spirits unleashed by the rigors of ballet and by the power of the story, requiring her death at the end? Whatever, it is an enthralling and exhilarating experience. (2011)

Blackboard Jungle 1955 Richard Brooks 3.5 Glenn Ford butch cut and soft spoken, but stubborn and determined to make a difference in inner city public school; Anne Francis in more or less decorative role as pretty, kewpie-doll looking, hesitant, supportive, pregnant, vulnerable wife; Louis Calhern as cynical and distinguished-looking veteran teacher, who is full of cynical observations about students, but who comes around in the final scenes; Richard Kiley as smiling, pleasant new teacher who "really wants to teach" but can't in the school; Margaret Hayes as seductive new teacher who is almost raped; Emile Meyer as harsh assistant principal in charge of discipline; Sidney Poitier perhaps too nice and handsome as a kid with an attitude but whom Ford tries to motivate; Vic Morrow as disheveled, violent, filled-with-rage kid, who most successfully resists Ford's attempts to convert; John Hoyt as authoritarian, domineering principal; Paul Mazursky. Famous film about juvenile delinquency and the problems of teaching in inner city schools in the 1950s; all-boys school seems to include only slouching, duck-tailed, loud-mouthed, talk-back, discourteous, racially prejudiced, violence-threatening, gang-belonging, property-destroying kids with major attitudes, hostile to teachers (they all call their teachers "teach"), and not a bit interested in academics; classrooms are always chaotic with everyone talking at the same time; almost no academic work happening; the students even rape and beat up their own teachers (Ford in the alley and Kiley in his own classroom when he is trying to play some jazz for the kids); they even call up Francis to insinuate that Ford is having an affair with Hayes. Film is very well dramatized with Ford struggling somehow to get through to his students, dealing with his wife's delicate pregnancy (she gives birth early but the baby survives), and surviving insinuations about infidelity; the film's theme is dramatized by Ford's ongoing confrontation with unreformable student Morrow and by his ultimately successful attempt to get the intelligent Poitier back into the system to make something of his life. Film ends with Hollywood-style salvation: using counter-violence Ford defeats knife-wielding Morrow in a classroom confrontation and delivers him for a spell in reform school; he then strolls off into a New York landscape after renewing his "pact" with a smiling Poitier. To show its patriotism and confidence in youth of America, script has Ford visit a university where model students learn attentively and sing the national anthem; also pro-civil rights in its sympathetic presentation of Negro gospel music and its condemnation of racial prejudice, particularly against Blacks who stand up for Ford in the final fight. Cool 50s jazz score with one rock song, "Rock Around the Clock", over the titles; excellent sets impersonating a working class quarter in New York; generally excellent acting that gave birth to several careers (Poitier, Mazursky, Morrow). Very good 50s problem movie. (2007)

Blackmail 1929 Alfred Hitchcock 3.0 Hitchcock's first sound movie has interesting aspects, but a simple scenario that seems dragged out to reach the 80-minute mark. Anny Ondra pretty, naïve, giggly, flirty, and appetizing; Sara Allgood in small role as Anny's mother; John Longden as police detective who at first doesn't seem much interested in girlfriend Anny; Cyril Ritchard as the artist who tries to rape Anny; Percy Parsons as stupid blackmailer. Ondra allows herself to be picked up by an artist when her boyfriend is not looking, and she then accompanies him naively to his room; when the guy tries

to rape her, she kills him with a knife in self-defense; she leaves the apartment and her participation in the crime is covered by her policeman boyfriend; things become complicated when a man who had observed her presence blackmails her (a foolish blackmailer who seems most interested in caging a cigar and a meal from Anny's family); girl and boyfriend appear to be in trouble, but they are bailed out by a complaisant scenario that has the blackmailer (who is suspected by the police) fall to his death through the dome in the British Museum; Ondra's would-be confession to the police is interrupted by an equally complaisant phone call, and the lover's exit police headquarters with their secret unrevealed. Film is in mediocre condition, and suffers from early sound syndrome – disembodied voices, awkward silences, a slow pace that drags out scenes; the latter is particularly evident in the shop scene in which the blackmailer takes his time in manifesting his intentions. The bedroom scene in which the would-be seducer is killed instead has interesting characteristics – a bit of sexiness as Anny dons a ballerina's costume in her buddy's presence, glimpses of a painting of a disquieting clown (the portrait returns in the final scene), Anny's wielding of a sharp bread knife to kill her assailant, her hesitations and waves of confusion and guilt after the deed as she pushes her way through crowds on her way back home. The director resorts to expressionist sound distortion when Anny loudly pronounces the word "Knife!", and when Anny's scream is edited to merge with the landlady's scream when she discovers the dead body of the artist. Also apparent is Hitchcock's preference for well-known public places in the crisis scene, in this case the British Museum (the music hall in '39 Steps', Mt. Rushmore and the United Nations in 'North by Northwest', etc.), and popular light-heartedness exemplified by the gossipy lady in the shop scene. Very interesting for Hitchcock fans. At this point in his career, Hitchcock comes off as more comfortable with manipulation of visuals than his use of sound. (January 2018)

Blade Runner 1982 Ridley Scott 3.5 Intensely dystopic science fiction movie that has a "blade runner" pursue and destroy human-like runaway robots (replicants) that have escaped to earth. Harrison Ford mostly low key and deadpan as the blade runner that agrees to hunt down the replicants; Rutger Hauer steals the show in disquieting and finally moving performance as a replicant seeking – if not immortality – at least an extended life; Sean Young as replicant (with implanted memories) with whom Ford falls in love; Emmet Walsh as Ford's boss; Daryl Hannah as beautiful replicant (designed as sex worker) with major acrobatic abilities; Brion James and Joanna Cassidy as replicants. The strong point of the film is the vision of the future of American cities and the details of society less than 40 years after 1982. From the outside and above, Los Angeles has tall smokestacks belching smoke and flame and enormously large monumental buildings; on street level lots of rain, puddles, trash, and all is crowded in narrow streets; most everything seems owned by the Japanese (what happened to all the Hispanics?); enormous, brightly lit advertising signs dominate the cityscape; corporations are all powerful, particularly the Tyrell Corporation that designed the replicants intended to serve American colonies as slaves in outer space. The narrative, such as it is, is modeled on film noir gumshoes – Ford is a kind of detective with assassin's powers who follows clues from character to character until he "gets his replicants", all of whom are killed in spectacular, bloody fashion with the exception of Young, whom he escapes with at the end to an uncertain future. Hauer is memorable: a shock of white hair, disturbingly violent without the slightest compunction to kill, and yet evincing our sympathy in the last scene on the rooftop describing his anguish at the prospect of imminent death (replicants are programmed to die in four years). The plot pretty much follows a typical gumshoe script: taciturn private detective hired to find someone, he finds him or her (true that traditional films noir don't have him kill the subject), he falls in love with a woman, and they will enjoy some happiness (probably not for long in this film). Some implied criticism about the tendency of humans to reduce "people" to slave labor and then dispose of them. The dystopic environment is brilliantly executed, but is incomprehensibly different from actual social and cultural conditions only 37 years after the production of the film. Narrative sometimes tries one's patience, but challenging and analytical. (October 2017)

The Blair Witch Project 1999 Daniel Myrick, Eduardo Sanchez 2.5 Heather Donohue as assertive young woman determined to make a documentary on the Blair Witch legend in a small town in Maryland; Joshua Leonard as the 16mm cameraman with her – the evil force picks on him, slimes his backpack, and he disappears before the others; Michael C. Williams as the more laid back companion,

who survives with Heather until the end. Famous sleeper hit of 1999 that shocked moviegoers by ingeniously presenting the tragic expedition into the Maryland woods as a documentary – the three kids were never seen again, but the footage they shot on two cameras (the 16mm was intended for their documentary and the color video camera was apparently recording the making of the film) was later discovered and presented to the public. An introduction has the kids preparing unsuspectingly for the expedition and interviewing some of the local yokels, whose vague testimony on the legend builds up the suspense. Things are a little rocky from the beginning, since the guys suspect the competency of Donohue (they are constantly accusing her of getting them lost) and challenge her leadership; as they progress deeper into the woods, they hear strange (unidentifiable) noises outside their tent, they lose their map, they encounter strange runic, magical signs (bundles of twigs bound together in fasces or tied into the shape of a cross), Josh disappears, after which they hear his voice circling their tent at night, Michael and Heather find some disgusting severed flesh inside a pouch outside their tent; and in the tense finale, they follow voices into the woods, find an abandoned house, search through it for Josh, and they both apparently are murdered in the cellar. The evil force pursuing them is never visualized. Instead the script focuses on the escalating confusion and panic of the kids: they turn on one another shouting shrilly when Michael for some reason throws away their map; they do more or less the same when they realize after a day's walking that they have returned to their starting place (so, no way to escape the woods); Michael and Heather become desperate when they hear Josh's voice in the darkness; in a famous scene Heather (with her face lighted from below by her flashlight) confesses her responsibility for the disaster and says goodbye to her parents; and the screaming and wailing go non-stop when the two enter the abandoned house. The filming technique is so unusual that the attentive viewer is besieged by questions: namely, why in the world would the filmmakers have both their cameras running almost all the time, even in their most intimate and terrified moments (the end when both of the survivors realize that their ordeal has entered its most deadly phase). All three protagonists use consistently foul language, especially when they are frightened; the informally bobbing and weaving camera might make the attentive viewer nauseous. The terror might have been enhanced, at least for this viewer, if the threat had been visualized in some way, especially toward the end. Impressive that such an inexpensive film made by film school students was such a hit. (2011)

Blind Husbands 1919 Erich Von Stroheim 3.5 Von Stroheim as seducer Austrian army officer who turns out not to be so manly once he is on top of the Pinnacle where he is powerless and scared to death, Francellia Billington as the wife of Dr. Armstrong – she is constantly struggling with her virtue and overacting a bit, Sam DeGrasse as American surgeon on vacation with his wife in the Dolomites – nice fellow who doesn't give his wife much attention or affection; he reads a book and falls asleep as she pines for love, Gibson Gowland as Sepp the craggy Austrian mountaineer, bosom buddy of Armstrong – he saves the doctor from death at the end. The twin of 'Foolish Wives,' the first of Von Stroheim's voyeuristic morality tales at the dawn of the feature film era. Set in Dolomites (Southern Austrian Alps) around turn of century; sets very exact with peasant Catholic culture and lots of children running in the streets. Von Stroheim is unbending womanizer who has wife in his sights, and he courts her continuously through first part of movie. She is at first receptive and sorely tempted, since her husband pays her little attention (interested more in books, mountain-climbing and male friends). She falls into moral quandary and does a lot of hand wringing, but is saved by her moral sense, her love for her husband, and by the watchfulness of the earth figure, Sepp the mountaineer, close to nature and in contact with the strong forces of natural morality – he tricks both potential lovers in the inn and surprises the prowling Von Stroheim when he tries to sneak into the wife's room. Long ending sequence on the Pinnacle, which the Lieutenant (for some reason) agrees to climb with Armstrong, who is an expert mountain climber. Armstrong discovers at the top that Von Stroheim and his wife are having an affair (out of vanity VS exaggerates how far they have gone), and refuses to guide him back down the cliffs. Armstrong discovers on the way down that his wife is innocent, he falls and is rescued by Sepp. Von Stroheim, not knowing what to do, falls to his death (poor special effects). In last shot husband and wife ride away hand in hand in the carriage and they kiss in the end! Thus, audiences get to enjoy the thrill and danger of potential infidelity, but virtue is preserved intact in the end. (2005)

Blithe Spirit 1945 David Lean (Noel Coward play – Britain) 3.0 Rex Harrison as cynical, somewhat misogynistic and irascible mystery writer Charles (he shouts a lot) haunted by his first wife; Constance Cummings as rather proper second wife Ruth who shows impatience with her husband; Kay Hammond as mischievous, Poltergeisty dead first wife Elvira whose ghost won't leave Charles alone and does her best to provoke Ruth; Margaret Rutherford as theatrical, batty, and ultimately incompetent medium (unable to “control her natural exuberance”) who first conjures up Elvira, apparently by mistake. Amusing upper-class Coward play brought to the screen by Lean and his team. Harrison and Cummings spend the first part of the film arguing and disagreeing about whether Elvira could have returned (at this point only Charles can see her); Ruth then takes it seriously and implores Rutherford to help her get rid of the first wife (failure, of course); plot twist is that Elvira wants to kill Charles in order to have him with her in paradise (or whatever they call the other place), but she kills Ruth instead; the rest of the play is devoted to Rutherford's aleatory search for the right formula to get rid of both of them – Harrison seems to want just peace from both; and in a final twist Charles also dies in an automobile accident and the three – blanched out as ghosts – are left sitting on the railing of a quaint English country bridge rolling their eyes together. The film is fluffy and fairly witty; it is fun to watch the actors do their stuff and listen to some of the clever lines; and the film is set in English Technicolor (why in this drawing room film?) in the picturesque English countryside with cute cottages, scenic winding lanes, little stone bridges, etc. The film treats death very lightly: Elvira might miss Charles in the other place, but she seems well-dressed and happy when she returns, and she is not unhappy to go back when Rutherford finally works it out; the deaths of Ruth and Charles are mere excuses to put them into the same spirit category as Elvira. Harrison is delightful in his restrained, annoyance-rich delivery of the King's English; but he is after all just an elegant curmudgeon who didn't have a close relationship with either of his wives, and when he drives off just before his death, he seems delighted to get away from both of them. The women are bitchy or eccentric (Rutherford), and men are better off not taking them seriously. Special effects are top rate for the era. (2007)

Blonde Venus 1931 Josef von Sternberg (Paramount) 3.0 Marlene Dietrich as the indecipherable cabaret singer/loose woman/fond mother, Herbert Marshall as the miscast but effective down-and-out husband with bad health and no money, Cary Grant in superficial role as playboy who turns soft-hearted at the end and brings Dietrich back together with Marshall, Dickie Moore as the adorable little boy who maneuvers the two parents back together at the end like Hayley Mills in *Polyanna*, Sidney Toler as New Orleans (?) detective who falls for Dietrich. The adult leads consist of two Englishmen and a German, along with an American actor who played Charlie Chan; at least Dickie Moore was born in Los Angeles. Very sentimental movie about woman who goes back to the musical theater in order to earn money for her husband; she likes the loose living and takes up with Grant, but she also loves her son, flees to New Orleans to keep from having Dickie Moore sent back to his father; in the end man and wife are reunited by machinations of the endearing little boy. Dietrich's character is pretty unfathomable and changes from scene to scene – fond mother who goes to any extreme to keep her son from being taken by the police, faithful, self-sacrificing wife, immoral woman living with her lover, etc. She tells Grant toward the end “I'm not in love with anybody, and I'm completely happy,” but the man knows better, telling her that he will “melt that crust of ice around your heart,” and he leads her back to New York to stay her son and be reconciled with her husband. Film was obviously conceived by Sternberg as a visual extravaganza for Dietrich – the story be damned. Great sequences: the opening scene where six naked German maidens are bathing in a sylvan lake half or two-thirds hidden by soft focus and hanging branches; the first musical number with Dietrich singing “Hot Voodoo” after entering the stage in a gorilla suit, and the peeling it off in humorous mock striptease; at about 1:03 the slat scene in New Orleans café with Toler – astounding close-ups of Dietrich; final shot shows Dickie's fingers caressing revolving music box playing gentle German song that Dietrich has just sung her son. Dietrich also appears in her mannish white sequined tuxedo singing another song; her voice is not her strong point. She is extraordinarily beautiful – sensuous and inviting and yet gentle and pure – with none of the hardness of features that she acquired later in life. (2006)

Blood and Sand 1922 Fred Niblo 4.0 Rudolf Valentino, Nita Naldi as the vamp, Lila Lee as sweet wife Carmen. Excellent melodrama (much better than "The Sheik!") about rising bullfighter who is ruined by success; he moves from simple provincial life with beautiful wife and child to the big time in Seville, where he is seduced by the vamp; and when his conscience gets the better of him, he is destroyed, killed in the ring. Even with some silent-style overacting, Valentino (slim, athletic, boyish good looks, bright regular teeth, smoldering eyes exploited in close-up, sensitive and languorous) does good job with this truly dramatic role – the naïve country fellow seduced by the bloodsucker woman, his bad conscience and guilt, his facing death bravely and begging his wife for forgiveness. Carmen is a bit vapid, but Naldi does great vamp – flamboyant clothing with long trains and multiple long necklaces, lounging around idly in outrageous Moorish apartment with servant wearing tight brocade underpants, a coiled snake ring that was supposed to come from Cleopatra, great self-confidence, indeed unbending pride that keeps her from visiting Juan Gallardo when he is dying. Story is fairly complex and moving, and focuses very little on bullfighting – only two of them, one amateur one in the beginning and the final big-time fatal one. Through long-haired liberal philosopher, film has strong moralistic tone – such is the fate of those who rise too fast in the world (unlike novel, very little is said about the cruelty of bullfighting). Tragedy in end is enhanced by the parallel between Juan's death and the death of the good bandit who has befriended him. Musical score is extremely dull; the print is passable but flickery with insufficient contrast. (2005)

Blood and Sand 1941 Rouben Mamoulian 3.0 Tyrone Power handsome and rather charismatic as the rising bullfighter Juan Gallardo, Linda Darnell a dark, pure beauty as his sweet childhood sweetheart and long-suffering wife, Rita Hayworth as bombshell Doña Sol who steals Juan away from his wife (she is sexy and glamorous, but her body is stiff and her face frozen in an eternal toothy grin), Laird Cregar as Curro, the bullfighting critic who exploits the sport for his own reputation. Film is beautifully produced with great stars, a highly melodramatic story, and drenched in high-key Technicolor – many of the scenes are dominated by their color scheme: the warm yellows and browns of the crucifix scenes in which various characters pray to the Lord, the blues and silvers of Rita Hayworth's boudoir scenes, etc. It is a bit risqué for a 40s movie – Power abandoning his adorable wife for the seductive femme fatale! Curro says of Doña Sol: If bullfighting "is death in the afternoon, she is death in the evening." But appearances are saved by intense moralism: the bullfighting environment is quite corrupt – Cregar's opportunism, the cut-throat competition of the sport (Anthony Quinn is waiting in the wings to take Power's place when he fails), the fading of Power's prowess in the ring when he is fooling around with the evil woman; Power is mortally wounded (tragically?) from a goring in the bullring, and he dies remorseful in the presence of his wife and under the watchful gaze of the crucified Christ. A good music soundtrack with emphasis on classical guitar. The bullfighting sequences are effective, and Power looks dashing and convincing as a bullfighter. Movie could be better, but there are too many melodramatic clichés with too much emphasis on glamour and color. (2006)

Blood Diamond 2006 Edward Zwick 3.0 Leonardo DiCaprio pretty riveting as ex-soldier of fortune who now does ruthless things for Africa's #1 diamond merchant; Jennifer Connelly in a rather silly role as American newspaper reporter looking for *the* story on "conflict diamonds" and who after interviewing DiCaprio by snuggling up to him during a slow dance, eventually falls in love with him; Djimon Hounsou as the noble African (his usual role) who lost his family, but then recuperates all four in a happy ending. At times gripping story about greed, obsession, and extreme civil violence in West Africa (Nigeria, Guinea and Sierra Leone) and in the context of the mining of illegal diamonds and its bloody consequences; the plot center of the film is a large diamond that Hounsou found in the river he is mining and the greedy race for its possession that ensues. Film is moralistic and lecturing the audience throughout about the devastation caused by this trade, which is abetted by the penchant of western women for diamonds. An enormous amount of brutal violence that fills the screen up to ten minutes at a time; it includes a denunciation of the practice of the "rebel" army in Sierra Leone of kidnapping boys (10-11 years old?) and brainwashing them into vicious killing machines. No doubt that photography of the countryside is wonderful, and one goes away with a much better knowledge of the geography of that beautiful part of the world. DiCaprio is excellent: he is very hard nosed, an ex-soldier used to fighting

guerillas in Namibia, and he resists with vicious outbreaks (e.g., when Hounsou almost gives them away to the rebel army) along the way to redemption. But he finally gets there professing his love to Connelly on a portable phone as he dies and then sacrificing himself for Hounsou and his son as he holds off greedy soldiers trying to get their hands on the fabulous diamond. All five members of the African family are reunited, and they even succeed in selling the diamond in London apparently for their own benefit, although this is a bit contrary to the point of the film that this is dirty money. The loose end is that the son will have to be reeducated, but in the rosy glow this does not seem to be a big issue. (2007)

Blood Simple 1984 Joel and Ethan Coen 4.0 **Some notes only:** John Getz as Ray; Frances McDormand as his lover, Abby; Dan Hedaya as her disquieting, viciously jealous husband Marty; M. Emmet Walsh as the Texas-drawling, sleazy private detective Loren Visser without a smidgen of honor (contrast with traditional noir detectives) – he tells the viewer that there are complainers everywhere in his state; in Russia you might get help from your fellow man, but in Texas you are on your own. This first Coen film is a neo-Film Noir, one of the best. A lot of shadowed cinematography, bizarre and ghoulish sense of humor (the rotting fish, try to wipe up the blood but only end up smearing it around, the difficulty of killing Marty, the ending with Loren’s cackling laugh punctuated immediately by the Four Tops), very complex plot propelled by multiple misunderstandings (it doesn’t always make a lot of sense), very violent, filled with suspense and tension, especially in the last part of the film. Brilliant film style and memorable set pieces. Some interesting camera tricks that don’t seem to have much to do with the narrative or the characters – Ground-level dog’s eye cam as he walks through the house. Camera bounces over the drunk while it tracks along the top of the bar (almost seems that the guy got in the way on the film set). Flying newspaper surprises the viewer when it hits the screen door. Scene in which Loren meets Marty next to the river is very amusing – the kids’ catcalls, the dialogue between the two principals. As is the scene toward the end where after Abby nails Loren’s hand to the window sill with a knife, Loren blasts his way through the adjoining door, and then reaches through to release his hand.

The subsequent sequence is also ghoulishly entertaining. When Abby shoots Loren through the door, she says “I ain’t afraid of you, Marty” since she think she has shot Marty, whom she is very afraid of. In reply Loren – in his usual smartass way – says “Well, ma’am, if I see him,” (in hell?), “I’ll sure give him the message.” Loren is looking up at leaky sink pipes, where he is fascinated by a single drop of water that hesitates to drop; when it falls, the picture cuts to black and the Four Tops blast “I can’t help myself” on the soundtrack.

Don’t look for too much meaning or significance in the film, just “the sleight-of-hand rogue cunning of a Hollywood thriller” (Gleiberman) (2014)

Blow 2001 Ted Demme 2.5 ‘Goodfellas’ look-a-like crime film about George Jung’s journey from West Coast marijuana distributor to fabulously rich cocaine kingpin. Johnny Depp with long, blonde, feminine hair as George; Frank Potente makes sexy impact as Depp’s first girlfriend; Penelope Cruz sexy and fiery, but not much to do as George’s wife – she complains bitterly at the end about lack of money, just like George’s mom (Rachel Griffiths, having trouble with the New England accent) when he was a kid; Jordi Molla as George’s drug-running confederate that he met in prison – he later betrays him; Ray Liotta stiff as George’s straight-arrow dad who remains faithful to his hapless son until the end; Cliff Curtis makes memorable impression as ruthless, charismatic Pablo Escobar. Especially in the beginning, the film comes across as a ‘Goodfellas’ clone – humorous, self-deprecating voice over by Depp (even sounds like Liotta), and overall an amusing tone as George and his buddies get rich selling West Coast marijuana in Boston and then moving to the Columbia cocaine trade. As time passes the tone gets increasingly more serious – not a lot of violence (Escobar’s off-hand execution of a DEA informant is an exception), but Depp’s conflicts with girlfriends and wives, betrayal by his confederates, and especially his multiple imprisonments, the last of which seems to be permanent. After Depp’s retirement from the drug trade, the film becomes mushy as Depp declares that all that matters to him now is the well-being of his beloved daughter. When Depp decides to pull off a final drug event, he is betrayed by his fellow conspirators and is sentenced to what amounts to life in prison. The ending is pitiful: looking old and exhausted, he imagines welcoming his daughter affectionately in the prison yard; when her image

disappears from sight, he shuffles off sadly escorted by one of his guards. The film has a good cast, Depp holds the center well, and there are amusing moments. A minor addition to the drug czar film. (December 2017)

Blow Out 1981 Brian DePalma 4.0 John Travolta, Nancy Allen, Dennis Franz, John Lithgow. Superior DePalma product about sound man who accidentally witnesses a political murder recording it with his sound equipment, and then doggedly pursues his own private investigation (the innocent bystander who follows his own sense of integrity to the end) until murder is solved. Travolta is engaging and credible as the competent professional who won't give up; Allen plays her usual compromised, ditzzy self (was this film the last straw in her marriage to DePalma?), Franz as hyper sleazy private eye specializing in framing and blackmail, Lithgow the political operative gone over the top. Director involved us from the beginning by making Travolta and Allen attractive and engaging, and having us hope for them in the sweet romance developing between them. Plot has a lot of inconsistencies – e.g., given that Travolta loves Allen, why would he put a wire on her and send her out to meet the 'reporter,' who he must suspect by now is the killer? References to other films – begins with mock shower scene in the B movie introduction to the film (a joke, since we take the movie within a movie we are seeing seriously since it matches DePalma's style and subject matter!); obvious debt to 'Blow Up' of Antonioni, where photographer tries to discover the reality behind the recording. Investigation based on DePalma's experience in film-making, as we spend a lot of time with Travolta listening and relistening to the sound recording to find out if there was a gunshot before the tire blew out, and then watching over his shoulder as he puts together photos that Franz has taken of the accident to produce a rudimentary film of it, and then synchronizing it with the sound recording for a sound film! DePalma shows his great expository competence as he leads the viewer through these reconstructions. A great joke McGuffin all the way through is Travolta's search for an adequate scream to go with the murder of the coed in the initial shower scene: the first one is grating; the B director has amusing scene in which he tries out three actresses doing bad ones; he tries two women to loop in a good one – no luck; and then the brilliant and extremely sad finale – after Allen is murdered by Lithgow, Travolta takes the recording of her scream (remember she was wearing a wire) and synchronizes it in final scene of the film; her scream works perfectly, and Travolta is devastated as the film ends. Filming and editing style is more mainstream than 'Dressed to Kill.' DePalma shies away from hyper operatic sequences and slow motion, time dilation sequences. Some slow motion in parade sequence, but basically done in real time. A good lush, although limited, symphonic score by Pino Donnagio. A great and entertaining film for viewers who love movies and what goes into making them. (2005)

Blow-Up 1966 Michelangelo Antonioni (Britain) 3.0 Consistently static film using a thriller genre to illustrate ennui and alienation in the London mod scene. David Hemmings young, smooth-faced, sexy tussled hair, close-fitting white pants as unhappy fashion photographer in London; Vanessa Redgrave attracting attention by taking off her top (no nipples seen!) as woman Hemmings photographs in the famous park scene; Sarah Miles as the unavailable, married woman next door that Hemmings seems to be in love with. Sometimes unintelligible, slow-moving, but somehow fascinating film that extends ennui from the Italian aristocracy to ordinary Londoners. In initial scene Hemmings demonstrates his unhappiness by his aggressive, snarling treatment of the hyper-mod models that he is photographing in his loft-style apartment. All the scenes shot outside the studio are eerily empty – barely any traffic or pedestrians in the street. The heart of the film are the central scenes set in the iconic park where he photographs Redgrave gamboling (and then cringing?) with her lover (?), back in the studio where he becomes obsessed with the blow-ups of the pictures he took (after a great deal of work revealing the presence of a dead body next to a line of bushes), and then back in the park where he (apparently!) discovers the body, although we wonder whether it exists only in his imagination. Much of the fascination of these scenes comes from the precise editing that suggests mystery and suspense in the park scenes and that impels Hemmings' obsession with the photographs. In the meantime, little sexually teasing scenes: Redgrave takes off her shirt perhaps to tempt Hemmings to give back the film he had taken of her; and two pretty girls dressed in sexy colored panty hose gambol with Hemmings on the floor stripping off their clothes but never having sex (an object of keen fascination for viewers back in the 60s).

The main plot lines of the film just peter out: when Hemmings goes out on the street to find the elusive Redgrave, she disappears; and the screenplay does not follow up the “discovery” of the body – Hemmings never considers going to the police. The film is often too self-conscious and mod “cool” – the mod clothing, the gratuitous sex scenes that seem inserted to expand the film’s market. The emptiness at the heart of the film is at times moving. (September 2017)

Blue is the Warmest Color 2013 Abdellatif Kechiche (France) 3.0 Léa Seydoux as Emma, a well-known, blue-haired lesbian artist in Lille in her 20s; Adele Exarchopoulos pretty with a bow mouth as Adèle, a lonely, emotionally needy 15-year-old in a lycée anxious to experiment with her sexuality. Long (3 hours!), detailed, emotionally intense chronicle of the lesbian relationship between the two young women set firmly in contemporary French culture and society. The three-hour film focuses on the emotional and sexual odyssey of Adele. It covers first Adele’s uncomfortable existence in her lycée, where she does not seem to fit in (even now she is teased for being a lesbian) and she does not connect with guys; she then connects with Lea for a long idyll dominated by eager, passionate sex (their famous sex scene lasts about 7 minutes); their differences in age and social background then drive them apart culminating in a violent quarrel propelled by Emma’s anger; Adele tries to continue with her life teaching in the first grade (a few years must have passed for her to become a teacher) without forming a bond with anyone else; the two have a brief reunion somewhat later; Adele’s tears flow, but Emma refuses to leave her family and restart the relationship; Adele attends Emma’s successful art show (Adele is featured in her lesbian sex paintings), and the film ends with her walking away from the camera down the street with perhaps a hint that she is ready to connect with men and her social environment. The film is intimate and detailed: it chronicles Adele’s life with long takes and lingering close-ups, whether it be sex, teaching her children, or having dinner with Emma’s parents or with her own; one might expect it to be half as long (about an hour and a half) as it is. The result is some impatience on the part of the viewer, but also greatly enhanced intimacy with the lives of the two protagonists, especially Adele, and images of their bodies and faces that are difficult to forget. Adele’s life is treated as separated from her environment: she is kind of an outcast in her school; her parents have no influence on her aside from giving her a fondness for spaghetti; she becomes emotionally dependent on Emma alone; after the two break up, Adele has a hard time integrating herself in society aside from her teaching; it is apparent at the end that she will continue living on her own for some time. Their social backgrounds are clearly delineated: whereas Adele’s parents eat noodles and emphasize the importance of learning something that will enable their daughter to make a living, Emma’s parents feed Adele exotic (and sexually suggestive) oysters and talk constantly about art; just before their quarrel, Emma suggests that Adele should do something more interesting than just teaching grade school. The film, which fits into the coming-of-age genre with the emphasis on Adele clarifying her sexuality, is open-ended. Very touching at times; but it is difficult to sit through a three-hour film about the ups and downs of two young women. (2014)

Blue Jasmine 2013 Woody Allen 3.5 Kate Blanchett in powerful role as Jasmine, highly neurotic socialite who moves to San Francisco to escape her past; Alec Baldwin in uninteresting role as Jasmine’s husband, hyper-rich financial manipulator Hal; Sally Hawkins as Jasmine’s insecure sister, Ginger, trying to find a husband in San Francisco; Andrew Dice Clay in notable performance as Ginger’s divorced husband, a decent man despite his rough-hewn appearance; Bobby Cannavale as the hot-tempered Chili, Jasmine’s prospective second husband; Peter Sarsgaard as the upper-class State Department boyfriend of Jasmine, who falls in love with her image; Louis C.K. as sincere-acting alternative boyfriend of Ginger – he neglects to tell her that he is married. Powerful, mostly non-comedic and non-philosophical Allen drama that studies the emotional decomposition of Blanchett in the context of upper-crust New York society and lower middle-class San Francisco. Allen (thankfully) does not appear in the film; nary a reference to Ingmar Bergman or existentialism. The narrative follows Blanchett’s arrival in her sister’s apartment in San Francisco and her subsequent, unsuccessful attempts to get back on her feet after losing her wealth and her husband, who is imprisoned by the feds for fraud and then commits suicide. Allen artfully cuts from the San Francisco scenes back to New York illustrating how Jasmine got to where she is; the script gradually reveals the extent of her trauma, since out of jealousy at her husband’s extra-marital affairs she had reported him to the FBI, thus leading to his prison

suicide. Most of the characters are well realized – sometimes funny (Cannavale and the friend he brings as a “blind date” for Jasmine) and always convincing. New York is lovingly depicted as cool and luxurious; San Francisco is perhaps more realistic divided between upper crust seaside receptions and the working class environment surrounding Ginger. Blanchett’s performance stands out: severely disturbed by her bad conscience and her fall from grace, she constantly talks to herself and pops Xanax pills; she makes a brave attempt to maintain the persona she had created for her husband, constantly astonishing the people around her with her lies and pretenses; after the dramatic failure of her impending marriage with Sarsgaard, she ends up talking to herself on a park bench, causing another woman on the bench to leave in embarrassment – credits roll. From an emotionally damaged woman struggling to keep herself together, she emerges at the end as close to psychotic –her internal life has little relationship with reality. The characters, especially the female ones, are as obsessed by sex as ever (Hal beds woman after woman without Jasmine bothering to notice; Ginger reveals proudly to her sister that her boyfriend is “no gentleman” in bed), but the romantic heroine (Mia Farrow and Diane Keaton) plays little role in this film; even Ginger, who ends up happily coupled with Cannavale, is consciously settling for a non-romantic partner. Some scenes are damaged by Allen’s inappropriate reliance on loud, New Orleans-style blues on the soundtrack. One wonders if Allen is channeling Mia Farrow in his portrait of Jasmine. In my opinion, the best Allen film since ‘Match Point’ (2005). (2014)

Blue Ruin 2013 Jeremy Saulnier 3.5 Macon Blair as nerdy, often clumsy, but determined and resourceful guy bent on revenge against the Cleland family that killed his mother and father; Devin Ratray as undeveloped character that knows a lot about guns and helps the neophyte Blair in his vengeance campaign; Kevin Kolack as member of the Cleland family that gets locked in Macon’s trunk and then fills the viewer in on some of the story background once the trunk is opened. Neo-noir style revenge fantasy playing on a Hatfield-McCoy family feud story. Scenario is designed to give little information, and keep the viewer hooked on the right-now action and release the back story bit by bit. Film begins with back shot of Blair in a bathtub; when his bath is interrupted by the return of the house’s owners, the viewer finds out that the scraggly, bearded Blair is a street person living in his car and cadging baths in vacation houses when the owners are absent. The narrative is completely linear: Blair follows the man that killed his parents to a bar; he kills him, and spends the rest of the film defending himself and his sister against the revenge efforts of his enemies; no subplots, no flashbacks. Blair’s flight is punctuated by sudden, shockingly violent sequences, all of which are vivid and gripping in their shooting and editing: when he stabs his parents’ killer in the neck and the temple, blood spurts all over the bathroom floor and Blair escapes with his hand severely slashed by the knife; in a highly suspenseful sequence, Blair barricades himself in his sister’s condo; when he rushes outside, he is hit in the leg by a metal hunting arrow, which he has to saw off (painfully!) with a hack saw and then go to the hospital for treatment of the “accident”; when he is attacked by Kolack in an open field, half of the latter’s head is blown off (CGI!) by Ratray’s shot with a high-powered rifle; at the end Blair has a bloody, gory shoot-out with three of the Clelands (including two of the most vicious screen women ever seen) – Blair dies along with three of his adversaries, but he indicates his weariness with the mutual blood-letting when he lets the teenage Cleland go and instructs him to escape in Blair’s car (even telling him where to find the keys). The film owes a lot to the Coens (‘Blood Simple’) and Quentin Tarantino, but its tight structure (only 1 hour, 30 minutes) and original protagonist – inexperienced, awkward, and yet ruthless – show an original sensibility. (2014)

Blue Valentine 2010 Derek Cianfrance 3.5 Ryan Gosling ukulele wielding, impulsively romantic, ambitionless, childlike, harboring violent secret anger; Michelle Williams plainly pretty as lost child looking desperately for love; Faith Wladyka as their little daughter; John Doman as Michelle’s angry father; Mike Vogel as the jerk Michelle is dating when she meets Gosling. Moving and effective Indie film about the failure of a marriage and punctured romantic dreams. The film begins about five years after the wedding when the principals are living exhausted separate lives and have virtually given up hope. Williams is exhausted from her daily routine as a medical worker (nurse?) and Gosling is floating in his marriage, saying that he is happy and all he cares about is his family, but working in menial jobs and lacking ambition. The couple deposits their daughter with Michelle’s father, and Gosling

induces his wife to go to a sex motel in a rather pathetic attempt to rekindle their sexual passion that leads only to Williams' disgust and rejection of her husband. Then begins the flashbacks that detail their meeting and courtship, which is sometimes silly (Gosling playing the ukulele in front of a store while Williams dances a jig), romantic (he buys a cd for Michelle with a song that he says will be their theme song), and passionate (making love with the wary Williams enjoying oral sex). Very moving is the scene in the abortion clinic when an emotional Williams stops the procedure halfway through when she realizes that she can't abort the child; the two then decide to marry, which they do with tears of joy. The film cuts back and forth between the unhappy present and the idealistic past as if searching for an interpretation for what happened. After Williams (in the present) abandons her husband at the motel, Gosling pursues her to her workplace, where he has a monstrous temper tantrum representing the despair coming from his dashed romantic hopes. The film ends with Gosling walking resignedly and broken-heartedly away from Williams and the child toward a fireworks celebration in the suburban street. The film style is informal and realistic: gritty urban Pennsylvania locations give it authenticity and immediacy; cinema vérité camera style with handheld camera walking jerkily behind characters, oppressive close-ups of parts of faces and parts of body when having sex; natural conversational acting in which principals search for words speaking plainly, imprecisely, and repetitively. The film focuses largely on Gosling, who seems honestly to love his wife, but he remains a child (with a violent temper) who is happy with just being Williams' husband without focusing on his spouse's needs or being willing to listen to her and understand what she is saying. The film focuses on the questions of where does love come from and why does it die. Both characters had unhappy childhoods – Gosling abandoned by his mother and Williams having to live with his bickering parents and abusive father. They fall in love and marry in their desperate search for meaning and happiness to escape their past (Williams admits that she first had sex when she was 13 and she had 20-25 sex partners by the time she had her near abortion). Gosling and Williams both have a touching devotion to elderly people – he first meets Williams when he is tenderly helping an old man move into an old folks home. Touching, honest film that sometimes drags. (2012)

Bluebeard's Eighth Wife 1938 Ernst Lubitsch (Paramount) 3.0 Gary Cooper deadpan, miscast as American millionaire married already seven times and wooing Colbert; Claudette Colbert sporting perfect prominent teeth as an impoverished French noblewoman; David Niven in subordinate role; Edward Everett Horton sometimes amusing as Colbert's penniless father, desperate for a cash infusion. Screenplay by Brackett and Wilder. Contrived Lubitsch comedy that has its amusing moments, but perhaps because of the Hays Code lacks the Lubitsch sparkle. Cooper's lame attempts at sophisticated humor doesn't help and the romantic connection between Cooper and Colbert doesn't come to life (compare to Cary Grant and Katherine Hepburn in 'Bringing up Baby' in the same year). The reference to Bluebeard is misplaced, since Cooper never murdered anyone. The film is supposed to be an elegant comedy about rich people in France. Cooper woos Colbert; they get married; but then she finds out he has had seven previous wives, and refuses to consummate their marriage, but he refuses a divorce because she is asking too much in alimony; Cooper of course persists, and they fall back into one another's arms at the end -- Cooper is so pumped up that he breaks out of a straightjacket to embrace her. Backgrounds are obvious studio versions of Paris with an excessive reliance on back screen projection (swimming in the Mediterranean on the Cote d'Azur). The best scene is the initial one in a fancy men's Paris haberdashery, where Cooper insists on purchasing only the top part of a pair of pyjamas; not knowing what to do, the clerk rushes to his supervisor for instructions, who then consults the manager, who then consults the owner at home, all to the accompaniment of classic Lubitsch mickey mousing; overhearing Cooper's request, Colbert agrees to buy the bottom half; having "met cute", the two then separate leaving the viewer to imagine Colbert wearing only the pyjama bottoms or to wonder if she has a lover that she is buying them for; it turns out to be her father (Horton). Clever scene. Most of the other Lubitschean scenes seem forced – spelling the word 'Czechoslovakia' (perhaps backwards) to get yourself to sleep, the extended joke about the Louis XIV bathtub, Colbert's attempt to make Cooper jealous by having a prize fighter in her room, confining Cooper in a straight jacket so that he is very frustrated when Colbert finally makes her amorous declaration at the end of the film. A lot of combat between the two principals. Still worth watching. (2015)

A Blueprint for Murder 1953 Andrew Stone (writer and director) 3.5 Joseph Cotten in one of his later roles as fond uncle of the two children of...; Jean Peters beautiful and charming but also icy and cool as the stepmother of the two children; Gary Merrill and Catherine McLeod as friends supportive of Cotten. Excellent, little known thriller with an extremely tense ending. Cotten's niece, who is being raised by her stepmother after the death of her father (Cotten's brother), dies in the hospital from mysterious causes, and after a personal investigation by Cotten, Merrill, and McLeod looking up facts about poisoning in reference books, it turns out that the girl's stepmother probably tried to murder her. The script, which has excellent dialogue, expertly builds suspense and tension: it turns out that the deceased husband's will leaves his considerable estate to his widow only if both of the children should predecease her; the police are not able to build a convincing case against Peters, and she announces her plans to take the surviving brother to Europe with her for a one-year break! Unable to stop her, Cotton accompanies her on the ship making her believe that he has fallen in love with her. He decides that he must bluff her with the poison he has found in her ship's bathroom to extract an admission of guilt. He dissolves one of the apparently strychnine pills in her cocktail, and after she drinks it, he confronts her telling her that if she will admit the pill is poison (and thus admit her guilt) they can call the ship's doctor and still save her life; otherwise she will die (and Cotten will be guilty of murder!). She refuses and Cotten walks out doubting himself to the ship's railing, only to be called to the ship's doctor's office to find out that Peters has turned herself in; her life has been saved, but of course she has admitted her guilt! She is later condemned to life imprisonment. Elegantly filmed in beautifully textured black and white. With its flat, matter-of-fact manner, the police investigation that occurs in the middle of the film seems to be an imitation of 'Dragnet'.

Bob and Carol and Ted and Alice 1969 Paul Mazursky 3.0 Robert Culp as documentary filmmaker that takes big-time to the new morality of emotional openness and sexual freedom; Natalie Wood fetching in her nightgown as Culp's wife, who rhapsodizes about being "honest" in her emotional expression; Elliott Gould pretty hulky and hirsute as family friend that at first resists the new values; Dyan Cannon memorable as sometimes hysterical, initially uptight wife of Gould. Entertaining and sometimes incisive satire of two California couples' reaction to the new "liberal" values of the late 1960s. The film begins with music from Handel's "Messiah" accompanying Culp's and Wood's visit to "the Institute" in the California hills, where they are taught to identify their feelings, express them freely, and live honestly by them; it soon is apparent that this means mainly having sex with whomever and when you feel like it, provided that it is "only physical" and does not include an emotional commitment that might endanger your primary relationship. Culp and Wood are enthusiastic initial converts; much of the comedy of the film comes from Gould's and Cannon's resistance and then their gradual conversion to the new idea. Culp is the first to have an affair with a woman in San Francisco; after some initial uncertainty, Wood decides she doesn't mind, and she praises her husband for his exemplary honesty. When Culp surprises Wood having sex with a tennis instructor in her bedroom (!), Culp is at first furiously jealous, but then forces himself to calm down, eventually inviting the lover (a nice German kid) downstairs for a drink. Gould is turned on by the idea, but in a long, amusing scene in his bedroom he fails to get Cannon even to make love with him – she is shocked, emotionally traumatized, by the rising tide of recreational infidelity. Gould eventually admits that he has had sex with a young woman in Miami ("It was terrific"). The film ends with the four friends deciding to have a foursome in a Las Vegas hotel, seemingly a dangerous experiment that might undermine their friendship. In the famous cop-out ending, the four change their minds, get dressed, go downstairs to the casino, where to the accompaniment of a corny Burt Bacharach song they mix amiably with the crowd and look soulfully into the eyes of their own partners. They have backed away from the precipice? Mazursky's first film illustrates well the end of the Hays Code and the "cool" values of the late 1960s – nudity at the spa in the first scene, frank discussion of sexuality, partial indulging of the "free love" code. The film's point of view seems to fall in a middle ground – perhaps this idea of no-strings-attached sex with strangers might work for some people, but the code calls for caution (the movie's ending) since it has a potential emotional cost. The tone is lightly satirical – the initial pomposity of Handel's music, the hysterical reactions of Cannon, Gould's detailed toilet preparations when he thinks the four are going to have group sex, etc. A document of its time and an intermittently entertaining satire. (2015)

Bob le Flambeur 1955 Jean-Pierre Melville (France) 3.5 Roger Duchesne as the cool, dapper, white-haired, imperturbable compulsive gambler who decides to rob the Deauville casino, Isabel Corey sexy and convincing as lost street urchin who will hook up with any guy to keep body and soul together, Daniel Cauchy as Bob's protégé, Guy Decomble (familiar from New Wave movies) as police commissaire who feels close to Bob. (One supposes) an early New Wave movie about a failed casino heist; obviously based on Melville's fond and intensive viewing of American gangster (bank heist) films. Shot in elegant, beautiful, understated, clear black and white that evokes the ambience of 50s Paris, the countryside of France, Deauville by the ocean; in interior scenes (e.g., the dry run on cracking the safe) many intense close-ups of the actors (always impassive and underacting, the safe scene including a German shepherd that seems much more relaxed than the humans); scenes are connected with nervous wipe cuts rather than the usual fade ins and fade outs. Melville usually lets the camera tell the story, but occasionally adds a voice-over with himself speaking. Bob is the center of the story: tall, elegant, white-haired, impassive, realizing that his best years as a gangster are behind him (that was back in the 30s, when gangster knew what they were doing), he lives in a nice apartment with a magnificent view of Sacré Coeur (Anne suggests at one point that his family must have money); he is an inveterate gambler -- that is about all he ever does, and when he is down to his last few hundred (old) francs, he organizes the casino heist; he is paternal and honorable, maintaining friendships and loyalty to his protégés, Paulo and of course Anne, whom he protects despite her wayward ways – when he slaps her for having spilled the beans to one of her lovers, he doesn't leave the building before leaving the key to his apartment for her, since he knows that now she is in trouble with her primary boyfriend. Ending of movie is pretty exciting. Bob starts playing roulette and then chemin de fer and forgets to do the preparatory work for his confederates who are waiting outside. Ironically he wins big, this of course making the robbery senseless and unnecessary. He realizes at the last minute that he is behind schedule, and he rushes outside in the deserted morning as his men arrive in cars, witnessing the death of some of them, including Paulo, in a gun battle with the police. He then surrenders, and before he is led off by the police, his winnings are loaded into the trunk of the police car. Bob and his friend remark that this large amount of money can be used not only to get an acquittal from a French jury, but to enable them to sue the casino for damages! A movie with a clean, understated style that makes one appreciate French film-making in the 1950s. (2006)

Bob Roberts 1990 Tim Robbins 3.0 Tim Robbins, Gore Vidal, Alan Hickman, John Cusack, Bob Balaban, Peter Gallagher, Joe Black, Susan Sarandon, Giancarlo Esposito. Staged documentary about the senatorial campaign of right-wing folk singer in Pennsylvania in the age of Iran Contra and the lead up to the first Gulf War. Shot à la *cinéma vérité* with shaky, nosy, moving camera, interviews with principals like Gore Vidal and Giancarlo Esposito (always annoying) toward the end interspersed in the action, etc. Kind of liberal, radical paranoid film (like 'The Parallax View' of Warren Beatty) that has evil people lurking under the surface of normal-looking populist candidates, who claim they speak for the common people; Roberts et al. seem like clean-living old-fashioned people but with evil campaign manager (Alan Rickman who was involved in illegally funding Contras and now excuses himself from interviews to "go pray"), chaos always on the verge of breaking out in the campaign, and – surprise at the end – an apparent assassination plot to fake Roberts' injury designed to push him over the top to victory; they were successful. Lots of now famous young actors who appear in cameo roles, especially as anchor people and reporters on TV news. Vidal is old-fashioned liberal, who harks back to the 'New Frontier' of Kennedy and will probably vote against the Gulf War (what happened to true liberals in the Democratic Party?), but he now appears outmoded – too patrician and soft spoken, and sensible. Some nice folk music written by Tim Robbins. Film perhaps dated, since refers to particular political situation of 1990.

Body and Soul 1947 Robert Rossen (Abraham Polonsky writer) Republic 4.0 John Garfield as Charlie Davis, Lilly Palmer strong (though perhaps miscast) as good girlfriend who quotes Blake's "Tyger, Tyger, burning bright" when she explains her attraction to pug Charlie, Hazel Brooks as lowlife girlfriend, William Conrad as his manager (decent guy though caught up in the dirty boxing business), Anne Revere as strong, decent, long-suffering mother, Lloyd Gough (Gough) as heavy mobster style promoter who thinks he owns Charlie, ex-prizefighter Canada Lee as Ben. Outstanding atmospheric and

expressive film noir style photography by James Wong Howe. Classic 1947 boxing movie. Begins with Charlie just before final fight (it has been fixed); he then has long dream flashback (he goes to sleep to rest up before the fight); and then brings us at the end back to the present with the hyper-exciting fight sequence. Environment is the tough streets of New York where Jewish immigrant kids grow up, and the boxing business where most everything is controlled by the boss (not made clear that Gough is a mafia member). Script by radicals Polonsky and Rossen emphasize how the little guys, fundamentally decent, are manipulated by the big shots, who take much of their money and call the fix when they want. A major theme is what do the immigrant kids do – continue their modest lifestyles in their ghettos tending the candy shop owned by their fathers, or break out into the big world and make it big; often to do the latter, they get in trouble and fall into the hands of exploiters. Great performance by Garfield, who is a great boxer, decent kid attached to his mother and to the good girl, Peg, but who naively allows himself to be captured by underworld figures, gets caught up in compulsive high-living life style, and finds it difficult to escape. Drama of movie is contest between Peg, who urges him to quit the ring before it is too late, and Roberts, who heartlessly sneers “everybody dies.” Before fight, Garfield is softened up by meeting with Peg and by the death of his trainer Ben (Canada Lee), who has a dangerous blood clot because of Roberts’ prior refusal to let him quit. Final fight sequence very gripping and suspenseful – will Garfield follow through with the fix? Things go according to plan in first listless twelve rounds (the crowd is booing; the two boxers are instructed to box through to a decision with no one getting hurt), but Charlie gets mad when his opponent inexplicably starts to hit hard in the 13th; Charlie then loses his temper and knocks the kid out! Roberts threatens him as he returns to the locker room, but Charlie shoots back, “What ya gonna do, kill me? Everybody dies!” Peg takes his arm, music comes up, and we have an unrealistic but satisfying happy ending with Charlie restored to his basic decent self! Good soundtrack with famous song, ‘Body and Soul.’ (2009)

Body Double 1984 Brian DePalma 4.0 Craig Wasson as clueless-acting victim of string-pulling manipulator; Melanie Griffith speaking in baby voice as porn stgar; Deborah Shelton pretty as the objet of Wasson’s obsession. Great example of effective, over-the-top DePalma. Wasson is set up to witness a murder (hook being an erotic, masturbatory dance by Griffith/Shelton) from window in very weird, fancy L.A. apartment that he is house-sitting. Plot is excellent Hitchcock-style audience manipulation; we are led along on a perfect pace in which we discover what is going on just on time – not too slow, not too fast, not too confusing: for a long time Wasson thinks Shelton is the dancer he has been watching; but while watching a TV program about the porn industry, he recognizes that Griffith dances exactly the same sexy dance as Shelton, thus leading to the discovery that she was actually the dancer (wearing a wig) and that Shelton’s husband wanted Wasson to be a witness to Shelton’s murder supposedly by another man; later on when Wasson is trapped in a deep grave with Griffith, he has to overcome his claustrophobia in order to save them; afterwards he is able to go back to work. Wasson is mostly effective and low-key; Melanie (Holly Body) has sensuous, somewhat ditzzy personality (she appears apparently topless and buttocks exposed). Hitchcock elements abound: the voyeur theme as Wasson peers into another house spying on a naked woman (the voyeur theme helps explain why he has to keep his own search secret); ‘Vertigo’ when in a long sequence Wasson pursues Shelton through a ritzy shopping center and to the beach (editing, etc.), accompanied by Herrmann-like lush romantic music, and then the long, romantic kiss with the camera rotating several times around the two; the wrong man theme itself, as innocent suspect conducts his own investigation; ‘Vertigo’-like flawed hero, who suffers from claustrophobia and has to overcome it in lurid grave sequence so that he can save his life. Does not come across as derivative, but as an imaginative adaptation. Movie is lurid, excessive and operatic. Lush, shocking music. Instead of sharp cutting in crisis used by Hitchcock, crises (the murder of Shelton with a large drill (!), the grave scene at the end) are depicted in long, fluidly edited sequences accompanied by shocking music and large amounts of bright, viscous blood; gives a kind of nightmarish quality where things seem to move in slow motion. Also theme of pretense and acting, since Wasson is looking for work (he has recently been fired because of his claustrophobia), and what a role he finds! The film is marvelously well framed: it opens with garishly filmed vampire sequence where Wasson freaks out because he can’t stand to be hemmed in; and ends with him back at work (he has overcome his problem in the course of the film adventures) playing in a vampire movie: action stops, “body double” comes in, and

then he “murders” double with the bright blood flowing down her flawless breasts. Immersed in the violence and sex-obsession of popular culture with a somewhat exploitative attitude toward the porno industry, but also acerbic comments. Marvelous over-the-top excessive thriller; a powerful guilty pleasure. (2008; 2014)

Body of Lies 2008 Ridley Scott 3.0 Leonard DiCaprio as Arabic-speaking CIA operative active fighting Islamic terrorists in the Middle East; Russell Crowe up about 50 pounds as DiCaprio’s baby- handler operating out of Langley, Virginia – usually baby-sitting his two children he controls his subordinate from home by (magically connected) telephone; Mark Strong, charismatic, good-looking British actor as ruthless head of Jordanian intelligence. Entertaining, hard-hitting action adventure about the struggle of a lone wolf CIA operative against Al Qaeda-like terrorist group in the Middle East. Compelling scenes of firefights in the marketplaces of Amman, Jordan, and to hand fighting and explosions at a terrorist base in the desert, torture and potential execution scene of DiCaprio that is recorded by the terrorists on video, etc. DiCaprio does a convincing job projecting an expert counter-espionage operative speaking Arabic and displaying outstanding combat skills; the viewer is impressed by the ability of the CIA to observe everything in Jordan by high-res video and to dispatch rockets into any target. DiCaprio falls in love with an Iranian nurse, Aisha, working in Jordan, although – untypically for Hollywood – the love affair gets no further than conversation and shaking hands. The narrative sometimes defies the improbable: midway through the film DiCaprio invents a fictitious terrorist whose job is to blow up an unpopulated American base in Turkey and thus make the terrorist leader – known for his thin ego – jealous and thus prone to revealing himself to the counter-insurgency people. The latter were divided into a number of competing groups: Crowe, who back in Virginia often conducts operations that he doesn’t tell DiCaprio about, DiCaprio, who conducts his own operations (such as the second terrorist caper) without telling Crowe; and especially Hani (Strong), the head of Jordanian intelligence, who carries on his own terrorist operations cooperating with but independent of the Americans. Most of the characters are constantly telling lies to their allies. DiCaprio becomes increasingly disillusioned with the espionage business – the constant lies, the deaths of the men he works with—and in an impactful interview with Crowe at the end he decides to quit the business; he then goes into the open air market to buy vegetables; the assumption is that he will get together with Aisha, but there is always the possibility that he will be assassinated. Much grimacing from DiCaprio, droll repartee with Crowe, menacing dialogue with Hani in darkened rooms, high-octane action.... (2014)

The Body Snatcher 1945 Robert Wise (Lewton written and produced, RKO) 3.0 Boris Karloff without monster make-up in one of his best performances as criminal-seeming cabby who robs graves to support the Doctor’s dissections; Henry Daniell as doctor with a shady past, he will break the law, condone murder and even stoop to murder to get his specimens; Bela Lugosi in fairly humiliating role as Daniell’s assistant, he is murdered by Karloff toward the end. Dark, studio, fairly low budget RKO double feature product that is very well done with interesting characters and moody photography that, however, fails to mesmerize like ‘I Walked with a Zombie.’ A fair number of scares and shocks although film strives to remain inside the bounds of decency by never having the camera look at a cadaver (we always see the face of the person looking at it), much less a decomposing one (what would be the condition of cadavers dug up from the city graveyard?). Toward the end, Karloff murders Lugosi (he is able to suffocate him with one hand!), and the beautiful girl street singer (he follows her through a shadowed archway stealthily in his black, funereal carriage and we know that he has killed her when her song is suddenly stifled) to provide more cadavers for the doctor. Finale has Daniell murdering Karloff, but then as he and his assistant later drive from a country cemetery with a fresh body, Daniell imagines (one supposes) that the body is Karloff, who is pictured in ghoulish white, Daniell goes crazy, and the carriage careens off the road and Daniell is killed. Mood is depressing and pretty low life with detailed sets, immaculate costumes, and very dark street scenes. Subplot is spine operation Daniell must perform on paralyzed little girl – effectively done but fairly sappy and boring. Perhaps most interesting part of movie is the relationship between Daniell and Karloff: they have had some previous criminal association, Karloff will not leave the doctor alone, and he appears to harbor a class resentment of him – Karloff often

snears sarcastically about his status and position. More horror elements than 'Zombie,' but not as eerie and affecting. (2007)

The Bombing of Germany 2010 Zvi Dor-Ner 3.0 Fairly standard 'American Experience' treatment of the strategic bombing of Germany by the Allies in World War II. It begins with the German bombings of Warsaw, Rotterdam and then London, where the Luftwaffe bombed civilian targets allegedly by mistake. Sir Arthur Harris, commander of the British Air Force, believed in night time carpet bombing of German cities (one suspects that he was looking to avoid as many casualties as possible); he claims to have sincerely believed that terror bombing (never called that of course) would bring the German war effort to its knees; the program gives a lucid description of the murderous (45,000 dead) attack against easy target Hamburg (relatively close to England) in 1943. The Americans arrived with their pinpoint strategic bombing concept: with superior planes, munitions and bombsights, they would target industrial and transportation key points, thereby strangling the German war economy; Roosevelt and generals like Doolittle (who was given command in December 1943) decried indiscriminate bombing of civilian targets, although they recognized that there would be collateral damage from bombs that went astray (and many of them did because of overcast weather conditions in Germany). The Americans tested their strategy with the raids on the Schweinfurt ball bearing factories in August and October 1943: some damage was done, but the losses to the unescorted American planes were unsustainable (about 25% per mission!). When Doolittle was put in charge, he continued the same strategy, but with more success because of the additional of the long-range P-51 escort fighters that severely surprised and matched the German fighter attacks. The Americans however changed their coat with the decision to attack the center of Berlin in the massive bombing raid of February 1945 (in which only 3000 civilians were killed) and their participation in the deadly raids on Dresden and Leipzig in the following month; since American planners were worried about the continuation of the war beyond the summer (they had also to finish off the Japanese and American public opinion was getting tired), they broke their taboo against bombing of civilian targets. The film claims that the attacks against Berlin aided the Russians in their taking of the city in April and May, although the assertion is not backed up. Film is well put together and generally well argued, although a lot of subjects are left out (e.g., focus on the successful sir superiority campaign preceding the D-Day invasion) and questions are left unanswered. In sum, a blot on the moral record of the Anglo-American allies.

Bonfire of the Vanities 1991 Brian DePalma 2.5 Melanie Griffith, Tom Hanks, Brice Willis, Murray Abraham, Morgan Freeman, etc. Blockbuster treatment of Tom Wolfe novel. DePalma signature camera work – overhead shots, long steadicam to open film (homage to Orson Welles), etc. Best scenes are operatic and overheated, e.g., the Don Giovanni scene at the opera with followup of red bars, Tom Hanks being booked in jail, and Beth Bennett photocopying her twat. Terrific second unit shots – especially Chrysler Building eagle gargoyle in the credits, and the very short Concorde landing scene with the red sun behind it! Hanks ok, but just too sympathetic; should have been a cad. Griffith too mannered in doing Southern Belle thing, and her malapropisms should have been funnier. One gets sick of Bruce Willis' drunken stupors, and Morgan Freeman is a bit cartoonish in telling everyone to “shut up” in court, and then lecturing everyone on virtue. Brave enough to be critical of wasps, Blacks, Jews, etc., but not brave enough to carry it through, or for that matter even to keep the judge as a Jew, but casts African-American Freeman as cantankerous judge in order not to offend the Black activist community that might protest the movie. Movie gets mushy at end with most everyone learning his lesson, except for Maria (Melanie), who ends up being the heavy in the final trial scene until Tom Hanks springs the telltale tape recording in unrealistic and silly fashion in courtroom. This should not have been a Hollywood movie and certainly should not have gotten the blockbuster treatment; perhaps a smaller, hard-hitting, sarcastic satire done by independent filmmaker using non-star actors in main roles. (2005)

Les bonnes femmes 1960 Claude Chabrol (France) 3.5 Rather meandering, but ultimately affecting film about the dull realities and desperate dreams of four Parisian shopgirls: Stephan Audran (future wife of Chabrol) who sings (badly) in a music hall; Bernadette Lafont, who has a soldier boyfriend but who prowls at night getting picked up by guys; Clothilde Joano whose head is turned by a mysterious guy on a motorcycle (Mario David) stalking her; Lucile Saint-Simon who finds an escape in being engaged to a guy (Claude Berri) belonging to a typically unattractive Chabrolian bourgeois family – the

boyfriend thinks his parents will be shocked if she doesn't know something about Michelangelo and French cuisine. The film is shot in long scenes in which nothing much seems to happen, but this impression often expresses something important or masks a coming surprise event. The longest scene is the electrical appliance shop where the four girls work: nothing happens since there are no customers, and the boredom and staticness is broken only by absurdly baroque lectures given to the prettiest girl by an apparently lecherous boss, and by a trip to the zoo during a lunch break, where again nothing much happens. The swimming pool scene is long and anarchic involving a lot of incredibly stupid high jinx from two guys who had picked up Lafont the previous night and culminating in a sort of dunking assault by the two against Joano, who is rescued at the last minute by the providential arrival of her stalker, David. The following long scene of Joano and David together – first at a restaurant and then in a natural setting in a forest – becomes increasingly more disturbing: David plays a lot of practical jokes of bad taste, then implies that he hasn't been following her out of love, and then in a disturbing scene strangles her to death when they lie down to make love. The film ends in a compelling scene in a dance hall where a very pretty brunette new girl is waiting to be asked to dance; she begins dancing with a man whose face has not been shown to the camera, and then she looks for a long time at the camera – seemingly smiling and relaxed – until 'Fin'. Hard to determine whether the filmmaker is telling us there is still hope for these single young women, or whether he is setting us up for another depressing story based on the naiveté of the girl. The film sometimes drags uncomfortably, but it ends as a convincing and probing commentary on the vacant – and dangerous – lives of young single women in Paris in 1960. The viewer feels the emptiness of the girls' lives, their desperate desire for an alternative (most of them will probably get married, and will that make it any better?), and then the dangers that confront them. What, for example, is going to happen to Lafont and her random encounters? (2010)

Bonnie and Clyde 1967 Arthur Penn (wr. Robert Benton) 4.0 Warren Beatty; Faye Dunaway; Gene Hackman; Gene Wilder; Estelle Parsons; Denver Pyle. As indicated in the chapter 'The Decline of Hollywood', the American film industry was at a low ebb in the late 1960s: profits continued to fall and most critics detected a marked decline in the quality of American movies. 1967 marked a first turnaround in the industry. American movies in the late 1960s were influenced by European films, particularly the French "New Wave," which introduced new techniques that departed from the classical model of filmmaking: examples are jump cuts (non-standard editing when the relationship between two juxtaposed shots ends not being clear), franker treatment of sexuality and character psychology, etc. Already in 1967 American filmmakers had more freedom to deal with sex and violence, since the Hayes Code had been abolished in the previous year and replaced with the Rating System (both films below received an 'R' rating). The social and political background of the 1960s was also important. The Civil Rights Movement occupied most of the 1960s, and the movement against the War in Vietnam was already in full swing by 1967. The radicalized youth movement opened up a generation gap between young and old, a resentment among college students and others against the 'Establishment' that had created racism and aimless materialism and allowed the prosecution of the Vietnam War. The film, that was based in part on the old (excellent) film noir 'B' movie 'Gun Crazy,' received bad reviews when first released (Bosley Crowther of the New York Times called it "a cheap piece of bald-faced slapstick" and Newsweek called it "a squalid shoot-'em-up"), but it went on to be a big critical and box office success. The director hired several theater actors – Faye Dunaway, Gene Hackman, Michael J. Pollard – who made their mark in this film and who went on to have successful careers in Hollywood. The final scene in the movie is very famous. Expertly constructed, it generates a lot of suspense and excitement. The actual shooting of the two protagonists is done in a rapidly edited sequence that mixes startled facial expressions, one character diving under the car, a quick look at the bushes where the lawmen are hiding, birds flying away, and finally a lengthy burst of automatic weapons fire that riddle the car and the bodies of Bonnie and Clyde with bullets (apparent debts to Alfred Hitchcock and Sergei Eisenstein, including the close-up of Beatty's face with the broken glasses). Remarkable elements in the scene are the dragging out of the killing sequence in slow motion, making the act of mortal violence a kind of cinematic subject in itself, and the way in which the bodies are not just killed, but torn to pieces and pulverized by the machine gun fire; such is what you would expect from a corrupt, violent Establishment. The movie has us identify with a lawless couple that lives a life of adventure, where robbery and murder are fun and anyhow

excusable because of oppression of the people by banks and the police; they learn to love one another in the course of the movie, and they are brought down in an excessive broadside of bullets. The film rather made its own genre, mixing explicitly gory violence, incongruous bursts of humor, and a touching and tragic love story – all commented on by ironic bluegrass music.

Boogie Nights 1997 Paul Thomas Anderson 3.5 Burt Reynolds in excellent performance as avuncular pornographer, who takes care of his family of crewmen and porno actors; Mark Wahlberg in excellent performance as Dirk Diggler, a porno star with a huge penis; Julianne Moore as pornstar Amber Waves, a gentle mother figure for a couple of the characters; Heather Graham as Rollergirl, a pretty minor pornstar who *never* takes off her roller skates; John C. Reilly as Wahlberg's best friend; Luis Guzman; Don Cheadle; William H. Macy as the assistant director whose wife is always screwing somebody else – usually in public (he shoots her and then commits suicide). Excellent film about the transition of the Hollywood porn industry from film (1970s) to video and home distribution. Setting is Los Angeles. Reynolds is avuncular porn director: he stands outside of sex (he does seem to live with Julianne Moore), and although he does make a buck, he seems more concerned about the well-being of his brood. Moore is also maternal – she falls in love with Wahlberg and tries to take care of him, and in a touching moment assures Rollergirl that she is her mom. Film follows Wahlberg from his entry into the company, to his success as a porn guy; he does however develop an outrageous ego (in an interview he compares himself to Napoleon and Alexander the Great), leaves the company for abortive other careers, and then returns to Reynolds. Film doesn't dwell much on sex: about the only real sex scene is Dirk's first scene with Amber, where she falls in love with him during the act and tells him to come inside of her. The viewer almost never sees the member in question, but you get humorous face reactions from other characters who are allowed to take a look; it is not until the last scene that it is shown in reflection in a mirror – about a foot long flaccid. Film is reminiscent of Altman ensemble movies, where you establish a venue, get to know several characters, and then follow them in their lives and experiences. Although the tone of the film is accepting and non-judgmental, there can be doubt that many characters have difficulty (can't get that loan for the stereo store), there is a lot of death and violence (Reynolds and Rollergirl beat up a guy who insists on having rough sex with her; Wahlberg gets beaten up by fag haters, Macy kills his wife, her lover, and then splatters himself in the mouth). Very amusing scene toward the end where Alfred Molina plays a drug crazed drug dealer, who terrorizes the (incompetent, almost as drugged up) heroes trying to make a score. Final scene has Wahlberg looking at himself in a dressing room mirror, pumping himself up for his re-entry into porn performance, and then after looking at his dick in the mirror, exits the room to the shooting scene; the scene of course recalls Brando's monologue, and especially DeNiro's monologue to himself in the mirror before he goes out to do his final stand-up comedy act. The film begins with a long steady cam shot starting in the street and then proceeding into a nightclub – of course a homage to 'Goodfellas'. (2007)

Borat 2006 Larry Charles 2.0 Sacha Baron Cohen as the imitable Borat, the newspaper reporter from Kazakhstan making an informational video on America for the benefit of his countrymen; Ken Davitian as his Kazakh speaking (?) producer – most of the humor on him comes from his fabulous corpulence. For viewers who have seen the HBO series, a rather tired rip-off of what Cohen has done before. He journeys through America approaching locals in provincial areas who still don't know who he is (people in California and on the East Coast probably have all heard of him and wouldn't fall for his routines). Funniest bits is in the South – etiquette lessons and eating a polite dinner with tolerant Southern guests (when he goes to the bathroom, he brings the product back to the table in a plastic sack); the outrage when stopped by the Dallas police – he expects to have to have anal sex with them to keep from being brutalized; his severe rejection by New Yorkers whom he tries to kiss in the street. Virtually no plot except for a silly pursuit of Pamela Anderson (the best American culture has to offer?) that he has to drop after he tries to snag her with the Kazakh marriage sack at an autograph session in LA. His humor comes from: his own stupidity and mangling of the English language and watching his interlocutors reacting with puzzlement; his mocking of the cultural backwardness of Kazakhstan, where according to Borat, you keep your wife in a cage, you regularly have sex with your sister (who is perhaps the cleanest prostitute in the country), you carry on a feud with your obnoxious neighbor; and the cultural

benightedness of many of the provincial Americans he meets – the homophobia and ignorant patriotism of the rodeo spectators, the drunken women hatred of the frat boys he meets on the RV, etc. The nude wrestling scene between Borat and the terminally fat Davitian was disturbingly surrealistic: at one point they are doing a virtual 69 with Borat’s face square in Davitian’s crotch, scrota showing. Lots of masturbation and bathroom humor. Some of the outtakes included on the disc were funnier than the episodes included in the short movie. Cohen needs a new shtick. (2007)

Borderline 1950 William Seiter 2.5 Fred MacMurray awfully suave and low-key as a drug smuggler; Claire Trevor as LA policewoman undercover in Mexico; Raymond Burr as a stock heavy dressed in white suit and broad brimmed hat cocked on the side of his head; Roy Roberts as the boss of the (amateurish seeming) drug organization. Claire Trevor is a policewoman who goes undercover to smoke out an American-run drug smuggling ring in Mexico. Trevor and MacMurray travel together on the road toward the US border. She wants him to know that their association is only for business; a bit of comedy based on the ambiguity in their relationship, e.g. when he sits on the same bed as her after she has smeared cold cream on her face! Trevor is impossibly jumpy. Jokes based on Mexicans’ fondness for sleeping – no difference between sleeping Mexicans and dead ones – and general subservience and helpfulness to the Americans. Several road adventures – encounters with stupid Mexican policemen; almost caught by Burr and henchmen. Eventually the two make it to the US border, each discovering that the other is also a police agent, and they bag their men in a shoot-out in LA. Pretty dull film – some light humor (this is a safe police thriller), a lot of travel down obviously California landscapes. No relation with film noir – the femme is not fatale (although Trevor knows how to play a good one), no one is doomed, the cinematography is generally high-key, etc. Some snappy light dialogue.

Born to Kill 1947 Robert Wise 3.0 Claire Trevor as double-crossing, tough, amorous broad who just got a divorce in Reno (“Biggest little city in the world”); Lawrence Tierney as rage-filled sociopath who is very attractive to women and looking to move up through marriage to someone rich; Audrey Long as Claire Trevor’s foster sister (?) Georgia – she is the wealthy one about whom penniless Trevor is jealous; Walter Slezak as arch corrupt private detective who often makes biblical and literary references to the corruption raging around him (e.g., the classic “snares and nets” of the woman who will lead a man to perdition); Esther Howard as boozy, disheveled, cackle-laughed landlady Mrs. Kraft, who is so concerned about the murder of her tenant that she hires a private detective; Elisha Cook Jr. as a psychopathic assistant to Tierney. Film noir in full stride but with too many characterization and plot inconsistencies to make it a classic. Tierney murders two people toward the beginning, and then sets his aim on marrying money; his mark is Georgia, who is the proprietress of a big San Francisco newspaper, who also falls for Tierney and marries him in a rush. Trevor is a tough lady from the beginning; her main characteristic is an inexplicable, unreasoning passion for Tierney, even after he marries her sister, but she sometimes shows also resentment against the wealth of her sister. The sociopathic tendencies of three of the principle drives the plot inexorably toward a bloody conclusion in which both Tierney and Trevor are killed – such is the necessary end of nasty people under the Hayes Code. A high quality film with good locations (Reno and San Francisco), contrast between wealthy socialites and the common folk, generally good acting, especially from Trevor who makes the most of her confused character. Too many plot developments and characters strain credibility: Is Tierney really so “born to kill” that he knocks people off who get on his nerves? Is Howard really so chagrined by the death of one of her tenants as to spend her limited funds to hire a private detective? Georgia, who is supposedly the head of San Francisco’s largest newspaper, is so clueless that she doesn’t even do a background check on the pushy, suspicious-looking guy who wants to marry her. Trevor is not a classic example of the *femme fatale* since she is really the victim of Tierney – she is so hot for him that she will do anything for him. Many classic noir moments, but the film’s faults are often distracting. (2010)

Born Yesterday 1950 George Cukor (wr. Kanin-Gordon) 3.5 Judy Holliday (Cohn calls her “that fat Jewish broad” and “fat ass”) amusing, baby-voiced, wise, beautiful, as Crawford’s low-class mistress who shouts loud and hoarse enough to talk back to Crawford; Broderick Crawford money-grubbing, rough, motor-mouthed, intently ill-tempered, profane, and insecure as Holliday’s rich junk-

dealer boyfriend; William Holden handsome, glib, well-intentioned, preachy as the newspaper reporter that Crawford hires to put some culture and learning into the rough-around-the-edges Holliday – the two end up falling in love. Charming small movie focusing on Crawford’s visit to Washington to bribe a Congressman; his girlfriend is in tow; he hires Holden to educate her; but the two fall in love, and turn the tables on him. Strong point of the movie is the clever script especially the mutual insults in the many hostile exchanges between Crawford and Holliday. Holliday is a delight: she begins as the classic dumb acquisitive blonde with the nasal baby voice; but as soon as Holden brings her true love (she says – enough words, “you want some action?”), her good side surfaces; her intelligence that was previously restricted to insulting Crawford, now shows in her ability to learn about American civics and to read, if not digest, Tom Paine’s books; her ethical integrity is also activated – she reestablishes contact with her alienated father, she studies diligently, and she expresses distaste for Crawford’s illegal, Mafioso-like activities. The film is a Washington-based take on the Pygmalion myth – except in this case the teacher has no effect on the student’s accent! A perhaps weak point of the film is the ongoing civics lessons: Holden gives us several speeches on democracy, the virtues of the common people, and the wonder of the US constitution, and the couple tours reverently the main monuments of Washington DC – the Capitol, the National Gallery, and at least twice to the Jefferson Memorial, the third president being the subject of special veneration. The combination of reverence for the constitution and faith in the common folk of the land recalls the 30s films of Frank Capra. An ongoing joke is Holliday’s tendency to look up words – mainly about politics – in the dictionary when she doesn’t understand them; she is great at gloating over Crawford’s discomfiture. The film ends in Hollywood fashion with the couple making off with proof (stolen!) of Crawford’s illegal activities, getting married, and keeping enough leverage over Crawford to make sure he behaves in the future. The film makes it apparent that faith in Washington has been restored: the Congressman who was going to take payoffs from Crawford is only an exception that proves the virtue of America’s constitutional system. The film shines in the interchange between the inimitable Crawford and Holliday.

Bottle Rocket 1996 Wes Anderson 3.0 Luke Wilson as Arthur, sincere, romantic Texan, who begins the film “resting” in a mental hospital; Owen Wilson as quirky, immature, off-the-wall, perhaps mentally unstable brother of Arthur, Dignan; Robert Musgrave as Bob, clueless, hapless friend from a wealthy family – his parents seem to be on a permanent vacation leaving him alone in a big house with access to the local country club, where he takes his friends to dinner; Lumi Cavazos as Inez, cute Paraguayan room cleaner at a local motel – she and Arthur steal the scene when the latter falls hopelessly in love with her; James Caan in hilarious, too short role as local criminal who sets the boys up for a robbery heist in a factory so he can cart away all the furniture from Bob’s house. Very quirky early Anderson film about two brothers with no place in the world; they wander aimlessly from place to place just waiting for something to happen, which most often are hilariously incompetent crime capers. Although the action takes place in contemporary Texas, there is an almost eerie feeling of social emptiness – the roads they drive down, the motel where they meet Inez, Bob’s house, the factory being robbed are all almost deserted; the boys do not interact with their social and cultural environment in a realistic way. Events in the film are quirky, incongruous, unpredictable, and often very funny. In the beginning Arthur is waiting to leave a mental hospital, while Dignan lurks outside abetting what he thinks is an escape but is really an exit from the hospital tolerated by a doctor; when in a robbery the guys harshly demand money from a bookstore owner, he looks at them indignantly and tells them to speak to him with respect; when the brothers steal a car and it runs out of gas along the highway, an inert Dignan loses his cool and slashes his brothers’ face with a screwdriver (more unpredictable than cool); all the would-be criminals for the factory heist visit Bob’s country club and have dinner – when Bob’s mocking brother makes fun of him, Caan intervenes to make him slink away; the robbery of the factory is an end-to-end farce, where everything goes wrong (Bob gets scared playing lookout alone, the safecracker doesn’t know how to open safes, it turns out that workers are there eating lunch after all, etc.) and Dignan is arrested by the police and condemned to prison; the camera cuts to Caan standing outside Bob’s house while workers load his furniture into a big truck – the whole caper was a trick to burglarize Bob’s house!; and in the end, when Arthur and Bob visit Dignan in prison, he has no hard feelings, and can’t wait to get

out again and relaunch their adventures! Imaginative and original film, which can be very enjoyable if you don't insist on a coherent plot.

Le Boucher 1970 Claude Chabrol (France) 3.5 Stéphane Audran, Jean Yonne. Character and societal study of small town life in Perigueux as affected by a series of sex murders. Town very picturesque and pretty, and townspeople are normal and average Frenchmen and women, who go to traditional weddings, buy and sell in the small shops in the main street, walk pass the 'monument aux morts' in front of Audran's school where she is directrice, and gossip about the bodies of dead women being found in the surrounding woods. Audran, who is dressed impeccably and smokes gauloises in public, is way too sophisticated for the small town. Film is more psychological than a thriller. It pays relatively little attention to the murders, although there is a police inspector resembling Columbo who is snooping around, but it focuses on the developing relationship between Helene and Popaul. She is reserved because of a bad love affair ten years ago, and he is uncertain about what he wants and too shy to move forward too fast; they spend a lot of time and develop a friendship expressed through his bringing her a gigot (he is a butcher), she inviting him to a movie and dinner and to a champignon hunt in the woods, and she including him in a school play where they dance a kind of formal gavotte/minuet. He has spent 15 years as a butcher in the army and speaks of the human butchery he has seen. It turns out he is the murderer. His motivation for two murders seems to be his "training" in the army, and the frustration he experiences with Helene. Would the violence have been avoided if she had initiated a romantic relationship with him? Some dramatic scenes seem a bit artificial – dancing the minuet in the schoolyard, the blood dropping on the schoolgirl's sandwich after a trip to the grottes de Lescaux. Climax and dénouement, however, are gripping: she racing around the schoolhouse trying to lock the doors, he slipping into the building and threatening Helene, the edited blackout followed by his stabbing...himself, in the stretcher in the elevator after she leaves him at the hospital, and he dies when the lit up button on the control panel no longer says "occupé," her staring at the river (did she commit suicide?) afterwards, bringing the end of the film. She is asking herself if she could have done something to "save" him.

Bounce 2000 Don Roos 3.0 Gwynneth Paltrow as yuppie LA widow with two kids who must decide whether to commit herself to Affleck; Ben Affleck as recovering alcoholic advertising executive who unwittingly falls in love with the widow of an acquaintance who died in a plane crash -- the husband was on the plane because Affleck had given him his ticket in O'Hare (he wanted to spend the night with a pretty blond businesswoman); Johnny Galecki as humorous gay assistant who does not mince words. A romantic comedy with more serious overtones. The two principals fall for one another, but there are unusually heavy obstacles -- Paltrow does not yet admit that her husband died in a plane crash (why?), and Affleck of course has to bide his time for the right moment to reveal his part of responsibility in the death of her husband. The social environment is convincing: the harried passengers in the big airport just before it is to be closed for bad weather; the high pressure ad agency that has to invent ad campaigns to excuse the airline from responsibility; high-pressure real estate negotiations (although Paltrow seems pretty expert for someone who insists she is not experienced); the atmosphere in Paltrow's single-parent home. Strongest point of the movie is the performance of the two leads: Paltrow is totally convincing and engaging in her hoping for love (she usually takes the initiative in dating), but pulling back presumably because of guilt; Affleck is sensitive, low-key and patient with tears sometimes in his eyes. Sometimes one wishes that they would be a little more passionate and less reserved. The last 15 minutes of the film are a bit confusing -- what exactly does the agency boss want Affleck to say on the witness stand? Hollywood romantic comedy that is more enjoyable than most because of the attractive, skilled principals, and because it deals with real issues in our society.

Bound 1996 Wachowski Brothers 4.0 Gina Gershon as masculine leaning lesbian with a prison record – she is tough, direct and drives a '62 Chevy pickup; Jennifer Tilly as her feminine partner, who as the film progresses, shows that she is also tough as nails, even tougher than Gina since she learns to bluff the mob and then murder in cold blood; Joe Pantoliano as mid rank Chicago mobster who is Tilly's boyfriend – great performance as intense, violent, even crazy when he is cornered. Terrific *sui generis* noir-style thriller that keeps viewer on the edge of his seat throughout. Focuses on hot lesbian

sexuality with blistering seductions, intense lesbian sex, and a fierce mutual devotedness coming from it. Both women are sexy and fetching, Gershon in her wiry masculine way (she wears men's underpants), and Tilly in her red-lipped, tight-skirted girly way. We wonder whether they will be faithful to the larcenous plan as it unfolds, but they are firmly attached. Story, which unwinds something like a 'Mission Impossible' episode, is full of surprises: the women hatch a complex and contingent plan to rip off Pantoliano, and we are on tenterhooks as things go wrong (e.g., Pantoliano doesn't flee like he is supposed to) and as the women improvise to keep moving ahead. Film ends with a satisfying bang, when Pantoliano mocks Tilly who is holding a gun on him and tells her condescendingly that she cannot pull the trigger – she looks him square in the fact and then calmly pumps five or six bullets into his body, and the two women make off with the dough. Most of the film is set in an old fashioned apartment building with large rooms and decors that remind you of 'Rosemary's Baby'. Film style is quite artificial and imaginative, recalling the early Cohn Brothers: extreme close-ups of the blue steely textures of revolvers; when Pantoliano tells Tilly that he has hung the money up to dry, we cut to a longitudinal close-up of a dollar bill, and then the camera tilts 90 degrees and draws back to show a room full of dollar bills attached to clothesline with paper clips; when Tilly, direly threatened by Pantoliano, tries to phone Gershon next door, the camera moves down the outgoing phone cord, through the wall, and up the incoming cord, making a loop to match the cord before Gershon answers (of course, reminiscent of the moving camera in the bar scene of 'Blood Simple'). Hard to imagine a more entertaining movie. A touch of salvation since the women seem genuinely happy to be together as they drive off with all that money. (2007)

The Bounty 1984 Roger Donaldson 3.0 Anthony Hopkins, Mel Gibson, Liam Neeson, L. Olivier, etc. Beautiful telling of the story, based on a book published probably in the 1970s. Historically closer to the truth than the 1935 version, which presented Capt. Bligh as tyrannical monster, but this version also takes considerable liberties with the truth: Bligh and Christian as old friends? Bligh wants to circumnavigate the globe? Also invented several unhistorical confrontations between Bligh and Christian. Focuses on the two's relationship. Photography is beautiful, with a wonderful ship shot a la 'Master and Commander,' Tahiti is beautiful and seems to be on location; very pleasing to look at the beautiful and sexy nut brown beauties with bare breasts (historical?). Important focus on love affair between Christian and Tahitian beauty daughter of king; works to give reason for mutiny. Hopkins chews up the scenery in Bligh's imperiousness and ungovernable fits of rage; adds to his bad temper being part of the explanation. Movie framed around the inquiry into Bligh's loss of ship: flashbacks. Ends with *Bounty* burning at Pitcairn Island and Bligh's cutter making it into the Dutch harbor in Timor. (2006)

The Bourne Identity 2002 Doug Liman 3.0 Matt Damon as trained spy with amnesia found in the Mediterranean Sea; Franke Potenta fairly cute but not very pretty as innocent bystander caught up in his adventure – she eventually becomes his girlfriend; Chris Cooper not up to his usual standards as one of the heavies working at CIA headquarters in Langley, Virginia. Strictly a spy action/adventure movie with a lot of Kung Fu confrontations (one in Damon's apartment, at the end of which the robot assassin hurls himself over the balcony into the street; another with another, sympathetic would-be assassin in the frozen fields of France) and a fabulous lengthy car chase in the streets of Paris (driving down pedestrian stairways and the wrong way on the *rive* freeways!). Damon helps lend credence to the film with his sincere, low-key performance; he also gives the appearance of being a first class martial arts fighter. Plot does not give us any significant theme or in-depth characters or character development, but it is good enough to keep the viewer involved in the suspense: just who is Damon? How did he learn to fight like that? What is his relationship with the Treadstone Project in CIA headquarters? Was he one of the robotic assassins like the two guys who try to kill him? We finally learn that Damon is a failed assassin against an exiled African politician, and now the CIA must eliminate him for fear that he will blow the cover of the whole program. Film takes a matter-of-fact attitude toward the CIA and assassination – everybody is just doing their job, and Chris Cooper comes across as a bureaucratic manager, who in the end is betrayed by the CIA head. In one of the final scenes the boss is bull-shitting a congressional committee about the patriotic contributions of his programs. At the end Damon traces Potenta to a Greek island, where they are joyfully reunited and kiss; the stage is set for the sequel. (2007)

The Bourne Supremacy 2004 Doug Liman 2.5 Matt Damon as a former CIA assassin who has serious issues with guilt resulting in amnesia, Joan Allen as CIA higher up who sets out to eliminate Bourne but who has hesitations, Franka Potente as Jason's girlfriend killed by Russian (?) assassins at the beginning of the movie. A well-made thriller/chase movie that specializes in hand-to-hand combat, violence, and long chase sequences, the last of which – through the streets of Moscow – is the longest and most complex. The film rumbles through lots of locations – Langley, Virginia, India, Moscow and especially Berlin. There is almost no plot and aside from oblique references to what Jason is going through, no character development. Damon is a pretty good action hero, violent, ruthless, efficient (when he is not tortured by memories of the assassination) and competent. He is bent on clearing himself of accusations that he committed a number of spy murders at the beginning of the film (Bourne was framed by a shadowy Russian organization). The film definitely has action, momentum, good production values; but you can't help but miss real characters and a plot that makes any difference (are you sure you know how the Russians fit in?). The editing style is dizzyingly flashy, glitzy and hyper-active; it would be nice to have a few minutes of quiet with an opportunity to savor the moment. (2006)

Boys Don't Cry 1999 Kimberley Peirce 3.0 Hillary Swank as petty thief, Teena Brandon, in trouble with the law in Lincoln, NE; she assumes boy's identity – Brandon – to bed girls, Chloe Sévigny as Lana, the girlfriend she decides on – she does not notice that Brandon is really a girl, Peter Sarsgaard as Lana's brother (?), a drug addict, ex-convict, who is impulsive and dangerous, Alison Folland ('To Die For') as friend of Brandon and Lana – she puts up Brandon for a while in her little house and then is murdered by Sarsgaard. Very disturbing, depressing, brutally violent and realistic film about homophobic violence in the heart of prairie America. Swank is pitiful loser from Lincoln; she strikes up friendship with group of friends in Falls City, NE, where she seduces insecure, affection-starved Lana (her mother is over-the-top unpredictable alcoholic and she works in a canning factory) to strike up a relationship with her/him, and Lana is so desperate for affection and escape that she avoids all indications that Hillary is a girl. Sarsgaard and buddy go ballistic when they discover Brandon is really female; they are particularly outraged when they discover in her bedroom her dildo and illustrated booklet on sex-change operations. They brutalize her with the encouragement of outraged Lana's mother, kidnap and brutally rape her, and then kill her and one of her friends (one of *their* friends!). All performances are real and brutally honest; Swank, who received AA, makes the audience feel her desperation (who wouldn't be desperate in that trailer-trash society, where fun is swigging beer and doing "tailgate skiing?") and her tragic suffering, especially at the end as she tries to survive and run off with her true love. Much of film is shot at night, with shadows and bright spotlights illuminating the scene. The film is effective in evoking the featureless, dead-end landscape (the roads don't seem to go anywhere). On several occasions the camera looks up at power lines and the clouds skating by, presumably going places that are inaccessible to the principals. Effective and moving film about homophobia and the potential violence of intolerance; emotional impact perhaps limited by the extreme graphicness of the violence. (2005)

The Boys from Brazil 1978 Franklin Schaffner 3.0 Gregory Peck impossibly miscast but effective as a scowling and emoting Dr. Josef Mengele, the dressed-in-white mastermind behind a postwar Nazi experiment; Laurence Olivier fragile, endearing and persistent as Vienna-based Nazi hunter, Ezra Lieberman (on the opposite side of his Angel of Death in 'Marathon Man' a few years before); James Mason suave as usual as Peck's superior, who wants to call the experiment off; Steve Guttenberg as also a young, impulsive Nazi hunter from a radical Jewish organization – he is murdered toward the beginning of the film; Bruno Ganz and Denholm Elliott have small parts. Fairly interesting and suspenseful 70s-style international blockbuster that chronicles a diabolical postwar Nazi plot by the infamous Mengele to clone several copies of Adolf Hitler to enable a renewed Nazi push for world power (!). The film has the topic (Nazis), the all-star cast, the multiple international locations (Vienna, New England, Amish country in Pennsylvania, London, and principally the semi-tropical Paraguay, where most of the Nazi plotters reside [but why 'Boys from Brazil']), the expansive mise-en-scène, the impressive camera cranes – all appropriate for the international blockbuster. The first part of the film poses intriguing questions to the audience that are eventually answered: what is Mengele plotting – he eventually find out the cloning of Hitler; why has he ordered his henchmen to murder 94 65-year-old men

in various parts of the West – because Hitler’s father died at that age and he wants the environmental influences to be as faithful as the genetic material to the original. The other part of the film involves the campaign of Lieberman to stop the insanity: in often slow-moving sequences he gradually deduces what is going on, and then arrives at the Pennsylvania home of one of the clones at the same time as Mengele, who by this time has become mentally unbalanced by the insistence of his Nazi superiors (represented by Mason) to call off the experiment. The final sequence involves a lengthy confrontation between Peck and Olivier mediated by the clone son, who eventually refutes the assumptions behind Mengele’s experiments by siccing his vicious Dobermans on Mengele rather than the wounded Jew Lieberman. In the postscript, a bedridden Olivier further negates genetic determinism by refusing to turn the list of the other clones over to a young Jewish justiciar who wants to have them all killed (Lieberman obviously believes that different environmental influences will render the clone offspring harmless). The well-structured plot and the interesting issues are often undermined by bad German accents and the clichéd ravings standard for Nazi maniacs. Nevertheless, very entertaining.

Boys on the Run 2010 Daisuke Miura (Japan) 1.5 Kazunobu Mineta as Tanishi, a bubble-toy salesman dying to get laid; Mei Krokawa as Chiharu, very cute, angelic girl who works in Tanishi’s store, who also wants to get laid. Generally annoying, over-long teenage movie about a fellow who masturbates constantly, but has never had a girlfriend or had sex with a girl; he and Chiharu fall for one another, but things don’t go well – they break up, Chiharu gets pregnant from another guy, she gets an abortion; Tanishi then decides to learn how to box so he can beat up the other guy; it doesn’t work – he is pummeled and humiliated; he then meets up with Chiharu, but the two separate histrionically and the last scene has Tanishi running down a Tokyo street. The main problem with the film is the principal actor, Mineta, who is excessively unattractive with his protruding mouth and his black Prince Valiant haircut (makes him look like a child) and whose acting is usually over-the-top with bowing down deeply to the ground in his grief, shouting when he is upset, losing his temper inconsolably, etc. His performance in a karaoke bar just before the fight requires the viewer to turn down the volume, and his acting in the penultimate scene when he pushes Chiharu into a subway train sets a new standard for thespian histrionics. The filming is also slow and boring: scenes of Tanishi singing, of Chiharu confessing on the beach that she is pregnant, the long sequences of Tanishi preparing himself for the fight are hard to take without hitting the fast forward button. The cultural scene is fairly interesting – young, unattached people working in small businesses, circulating in economically modest parts of the city characterized by small, square building and lots of power poles. The kids get together a lot to drink and laugh; their behavior is a mix of informal, self-serving behavior (the seduction of Chiharu by Tanishi’s friend) and formal distance – a lot of bowing and averting of eyes. The main story is curiously devoid of romantic feeling – the stakes in the relationship is really sex rather than love, and when the principals express their feelings, they are usually shouting or sobbing. Probably best to stay away from this one unless you have a lot of time to spare. (2010)

Brad’s Status 2017 Mike White 3.5 Heartfelt drama about middle-aged man afflicted with a midlife crisis when he takes his son to visit elite eastern colleges. Ben Stiller as CEO of small not-for-profit who looking back on his life at the age of 47 feels that he is a failure, going nowhere with no future, just a mediocrity living in Sacramento, a town full of mediocrities; Austin Abrams as his sensible, loving son, a gifted musician who is poised to attend college; Jenna White (from ‘The Office’) as Stiller’s wife, sensible, unambitious, happy with the smaller things in life; Luke Wilson makes brief appearance on the telephone as highly successful hedge fund manager on Wall Street; Michael Sheen in delicious role as pompous, smug pundit who also makes Stiller feel inadequate; Shazi Raja as pretty, intelligent Harvard student who in a conversation in a bar challenges Stiller as entitled and self-centered. Film has Stiller and Abrams fly together to Boston, visit Harvard, walk around Cambridge, and never make it to Tufts, the other college they intend to visit. Even considering outstanding performances by the other actors, the film belongs to Stiller, who nails every aspect of the insecurity, Angst, and obsessiveness of his character; even his attitude toward his son is ambiguous – proud (e.g., the phone call he makes to White to marvel at the gifts of Austin), affectionate, horseplay, and even jealous that his own son might outshine him in his career. Although the tone of the film is quietly serious, there are endearing comic moments – Austin’s

complaints about his dad's nervousness and pushiness, their spontaneous horseplay in the hotel room, the ironic reply of the woman in the interview waiting room to Stiller's assertion that Harvard is in the running for Austin's college choice. In the course of the film Stiller has experiences that lead him closer to the realization that his life is as worthy as the next guy's – the conversation with Raja, the nasty obnoxiousness of Sheen, the levelheaded and yet affectionate attitude of his son, and finally a lovely symphonic performance of Dvorak's "Humoresque" by violin and flute soloists. Something about the music takes Stiller back to the idealism of his college days and makes him think that money, success, and power may not be all they are cracked up to be; perhaps beauty, love, passion, family, and just having enough to be able to enjoy them. No crashing cymbals at the end, but the beginning of an evolution. The viewer is genuinely happy for both father and son. Sensitive screenplay and direction by Mike White; first-rate cast. (February 2018)

Breach 2007 Billy Ray 3.5 Chris Cooper stellar as indecipherable spy Robert Hanssen (caught in 2001); Ryan Philippe solid as FBI operative assigned to Hanssen; Laura Linney as no-nonsense boss of Philippe. Entertaining and engrossing depiction of the last few weeks before Hanssen was arrested. He has been spying for many years, and Philippe is assigned to be his office assistant without at first being told that he is suspected of espionage. Film is engrossing, not because of fast-moving espionage and counter-espionage action, but because of Hanssen's mysterious and contradictory personality and the cat and mouse psychological game that ensues between the ever suspicious and sarcastic Cooper and the blank-faced and elusive Philippe. Philippe's more human side comes out however in his momentarily tentative relationship with his pretty wife and the frustration that he expresses with Linney, who finally tells him the whole story about the purpose of his investigation. Cooper is riveting as the elusive and obnoxious Cooper; he is extremely intelligent and one of the Bureau's foremost computer experts. The viewer concludes in the course of the film that he has a strong sense of pride and he feels that he has not been justly appreciated and rewarded in his 25 years of service to the FBI. The Bureau is depicted as a large bureaucratic organization not sufficiently concerned with security within; according to Hanssen, it promotes and lionizes people who are good at playing the political game, but ignores the truly gifted; he gets great deal of pleasure out of outwitting the ham-fisted Bureau. Cooper is a highly contradictory character. He is interested in pornography (he secretly films and markets the sex he has with his wife). He is also a very strong right-wing Catholic, who apparently belongs to Opus Dei, prays the rosary every day, and becomes attached to Philippe when he learns that he is an indifferent Catholic and thus a candidate for reconversion. (We of course do not expect an extreme Catholic to be a pornographer nor to sell secrets to the bastion of godless Communism.) Cooper's uncharacteristic and surprising trust in Philippe is probably explained by the religious connection between them, but perhaps also by his desire to establish a parental connection with him. The cat and mouse between the two characters is quite suspenseful, although it becomes a bit repetitive toward the end. Cooper's resigned attitude when he is arrested is striking. Philippe decides to quit the Bureau in a final effective scene with Linney. Low-key film that creates a realistic picture of the FBI and an engrossing portrait of a destructive spy; hard to find a better performance than Cooper's. (2009)

Breakfast at Tiffany's 1961 Blake Edwards (Paramount) 3.0 Iconic drama-romantic comedy featuring Audrey Hepburn in a trendy New York at the beginning of the 1960s. Audrey Hepburn as superficially happy-go-lucky party girl Holly Golightly dating older guys for bits of money when she goes to the powder room (Okay, she is not technically a prostitute); George Peppard appearing always perfectly coiffed in suit and tie (he's Patricia Neal's gigolo) while he pursues Holly; Patricia Neal eternally smiling and dressed in self-consciously eye-catching clothes as Peppard's mistress; Buddy Ebsen in ill-conceived role as Holly's former farmer husband, who loves her dearly, folks, but fails to convince her to return with him to Texas; Martin Balsam as Hollywood producer; Mickey Rooney resurrected as absurd racist Japanese apartment neighbor (sputtering rage, eyes wide open with protruding buck teeth); "Cat", Hepburn's cat with no name, whose heart-warming recovery out of the rain at the end signifies that all will be well. The film is entertaining, filled with iconic moments (Hepburn's minimalist clothes, her initial stop with a breakfast roll in front of Tiffany's early Sunday morning, the wild party), but often hollow and too eager to please, ending with a happy turn as Hepburn is finally persuaded by

Peppard to give up her lordly independent ways and commit herself in the final Hollywood kiss to true love. The film is obviously calculated to appeal to young people (mainly women), who would like to live perfectly dressed and coiffed in the coolest city in the world, although without any visible means to pay for it all: the clothes, the cool, little apartment, the amusing (although long) party toward the beginning of the film in which everyone is drunk, funny, and even your hat may catch on fire (to be put out by Hepburn's cocktail). One has to wonder about the meaning of worshipping at the altar of Tiffany's on 5th Avenue – the fascination with precious jewels takes us back to Lubitsch in 'Trouble in Paradise'; the good life means having the tangible luxuries of life; or if you aren't rich, to surround yourself with them. The film even intones paeans to the American value of cussed independence, which Hepburn and Peppard pay obeisance to in their tour of Manhattan – getting the best of the salesman in Tiffany's by having a Cracker Jack ring engraved, defying the prissy librarian to make lots of noise in the New York Public Library, and finally stealing two pop culture masks from a five and dime store (outwitting the store detective; Peppard takes the Huckleberry Hound mask to make a weak connection to the Mancini song's line, "my huckleberry friend"). The real saving grace of the film is the performance of Hepburn: no mean actor, she projects convincingly her fragile veneer of arm's length independence, only to break through to true love in the midst of a downpour as Cat looks on. Not a great film perhaps, but a classic. (2016)

Brick 2006 Rian Johnson 2.0 Joseph Gordon-Levitt as cool high school gumshoe playing a relentless Sam Spade as he tries to find out who murdered his former girlfriend; Meagan Good as the supposedly seductive femme fatale Lara; Nora Zehetner as another more obvious femme fatale who tries hard to appear dangerous. Stylish crime thriller based on old hard-boiled Hollywood private eye flics (Dashiell Hammett, James M. Cain, etc.) but shot in the brightly lit suburbs of San Clemente with a 70s-style high school as the base of operations. Strong point and character anchor of the film is Gordon-Levitt, who portrays in his low-key way a true passion to ferret out and punish the people who were responsible for murdering his girlfriend Emily. He follows the p. i.-style investigation, running around a lot, making phone calls from phone booths (what happened to the cell phone?), beating up stoners hanging out behind the gym, getting beat up himself - mostly by a callow tough guy in a wife beater and white band around his head (he works for a drug lord who is pale and wears a Dracula cape), asking a lot of questions which never seem to be answered, manifesting his contempt for the guys in the drug organization where Emily was implicated. For some reason, the director has his characters speak in an indecipherable slang that has little to do with teenage talk, Valley talk, or film noir lingo. There do not appear to be any in-depth characters, just cookie-cutter types that invite our comparison with types from the old movies. Perhaps as a result, the viewer does not care much how the exercise turns out, he is not motivated to plumb the implications of attempted twists and turns, and he finds the conclusion, which is supposed to be satisfying and revelatory, baffling. No doubt that the film is stylishly shot and edited, especially in some action sequences. An interesting exercise in style and a homage to old films, but with a major disconnect at its heart. Worthwhile to see what the director comes up with next.

Bride of Frankenstein 1935 James Whale 3.5 Boris Karloff, Colin Clive, Ernest Thesiger, Valerie Hobson, Elsa Lanchester. Pretty over the top sequel to the original, much inferior 'Frankenstein.' Film in much cleaner condition. Sets are still expressionist: outdoor twisted trees and laboratory scene appear to be the same. Karloff continues role as sensitive monster, driven to violence by rejection by humans: he finds some solace in the hermit's hut (hermit's performance is haunting) – he is moved by violin music--, but he is driven to further destruction and apparent suicide (again!) by the bride's rejection of him. Monster is lonely and looking for companionship. Too bad that he is so ugly; he even quails at the sight of himself reflected in the water! Thesiger is truly over the top as Pretorius, who is even crazier and more fanatic than Frankenstein. He creates little homunculi (shades of Faust, Part II?), but then continues with the bride – he wants to create a race of creatures. One suspects that James Whale, the sensitive artist homosexual, is depicting outsiders in his own image; there appears to be a sexual attraction between Frankenstein and Pretorius. Elsa Lanchester a surrealist dream as the bride with the streak in her hair and her bird-like behavior and little squeals – presumably of displeasure – when she sees the ugly monster. Lanchester plays both Mary Shelley in introduction and the bride at the very end, perhaps suggesting that the monster is lurking in even the most charming and innocent of us (and Elsa's

décolletage is very fetching). One gets a little tired of Monster's grunting, but then he begins to learn language ("good"), following Shelley's novel. Movie ends very abruptly with the monster pulling the destruction "lever," apparently because Elsa has rejected her proposed mate. The special effects of destruction are more convincing than the first movie. (2005)

Bridesmaids 2011 Paul Feig 3.5 Kristen Wiig inspirationally funny as Annie, an insecure, self-loathing 30s woman looking despairingly for a mate and constantly bemused that things don't turn out for her; Michael Hitchcock as Annie's "hot", insensitive fuck buddy; Maya Rudolph not pretty but sincere as her best friend who is finally asked by her boyfriend to marry him; Jill Clayburgh as Wiig's more or less straight mother; Melissa McCarthy portly and hilariously plain-spoken as a friend; Rose Byrne pretty, rich and uptight as another friend bent on demonstrating Annie's inferiority; Chris O'Dowd sporting his Irish accent as improbably sensitive police patrolman who pays a lot of attention to Annie; Mitch Silpa hilarious as straight man airline flight attendant to Annie's drunken revels; Wendi McClendon-Covey; Ellie Kemper. Hilarious raunchy, satirical, fabulously well-written film about the American wedding phenomenon and female relationships that however loses steam in the last 20 minutes. The film focuses on Rudolph's marriage preparations, the side-splitting adventures of the wedding party, and Annie's rampant insecurities; Annie does meet the potential man of her dreams, and after experiencing the usual obstacles inherent in romantic comedy, they get together at the end (we think). Film entertainingly targets the absurdities of the culture of American weddings – the enormous expenditure, the competition among members of the wedding party, the excessiveness and ugliness of the wedding dress, the superficiality of the wedding celebrations, etc. Several set scenes easy to remember. Film opens with Wiig and Hitchcock having acrobatic sex that seems embarrassing to them both. At the engagement party Annie and Byrne take turns trying to one-up one another in their expressions of friendship to Rudolph; after eating suspicious food at a Brazilian restaurant, the girls visit an extremely snobby bridesmaids' shop, where they have various digestive emergencies including throwing up on one another's heads, defecating in the sink and Rudolph plopping herself down in the middle of the street doing the same thing; when the girls take a plane for a celebration in Vegas, Annie gets drunk, takes some drugs to calm her nerves (McCarthy's lust-laden conversation with her seat mate who turns out to be an air marshal should not be ignored), and she ends up causing the plane to land in Casper, Wyoming where the perpetrators are taken into custody by federal marshals; toward the end of the film Annie tries to trick O'Dowd into taking her into custody by driving back and forth in front of his patrol car alternately talking on her cell phone, drinking (supposedly) alcohol out of a bottle, speeding, etc. The only criticism of the film is the soft ending, where Byrne the bitch turns into a sweetheart good friend of Annie, Rudolph's wedding finally comes off (with the excesses designed in by Byrne), and O'Dowd shows up in his patrol car to carry off Annie presumably to a life of wedded bliss. The producers obviously calculated that their target audience – young women – wants a happy ending where more or less everyone including the villains are smiling. Very funny film that also makes a point. (2011)

Bridge of Spies 2015 Steven Spielberg (Coen Brothers pump up to script) 3.5 Liberal patriotic treatment of the trial of Rudolph Abel's for espionage and the negotiations for his exchange with Gary Powers in 1957-60. Tom Hanks as avuncular, but idealistic and savvy Brooklyn lawyer, James Donovan, called for service to his country during the Cold War; Mark Rylance outstanding (AA) as meek, soft-spoken, dutiful, but intelligent and ironic Soviet spy arrested by FBI in New York in 1957; Amy Ryan in standard role as Donovan's wife; Alan Alda in cameo role as Donovan's Realpolitik boss in law firm; Dakin Matthews as federal judge that heeds Donovan's plea not to execute Abel; Austin Stowell as colorless Gary Powers; Sebastian Koch as East German agent, who campaigns to make East Germany as a recognized party to the Powers agreement; as Soviet agent that establishes a trust with Donovan in the Soviet Embassy in East Berlin. The film's compelling plot (what else would you expect from Spielberg) follows Donovan's involvement with Abel from his arraignment as a spy and then focusing on the difficult negotiations leading to Abel's exchange for Gary Powers, in the meantime shot down in his U-2 over the Soviet Union and then (contrary to his instructions) captured by the Soviets. Hanks carries most of the weight on his broad back (how can the American viewer be skeptical of him?), ably assisted by Rylance, with whom he develops a kind of friendship buttressed by his admiration for Abel's quiet

courage and fidelity to his duty (he expresses admiration for a “standing man”). The two halves of the narrative are bound together by the relationship of the two principals, and by Hanks’ liberal patriotism: he undertakes an aggressive defense of Abel despite the cynical condemnation of most of his associates, agreeing whole-heartedly that his client deserves every protection of American law; he then goes to great lengths in a very inhospitable East Berlin to broker a peace-saving deal that is complicated by the desire of the East Germans to use the affair to secure tacit recognition from the United States. Since the good-hearted Hanks is an unofficial and opportunistic negotiator, he is able get two for one – not just Powers but also an American student arrested by the East Germans. The film is essentially two – the trial and the successful negotiation bound together by the pragmatic, common-sense idealism of Donovan. Rylance at times steals the show from Hanks -- his good humor when he is arrested by the FBI in his underwear and he asks them if he can go back and get his teeth; his perfectly delivered "Would it do any good?" when Hanks asks him if he is nervous; his growing lo-key, but genuine attachment to Hanks, even at the end when he holds up his own exchange on the bridge to make sure Hanks gets his other man. A few of the presumed Coen additions to the text increase the film’s quirkiness but jar somewhat with the overall solemn tone of the film: Donovan’s annoying cold in Berlin; the extremely eccentric behavior of the fake (?) family of Abel dreamed up by the Soviets; the unspoken confidence established between Donovan and his Soviet negotiator, etc. The John Williams-like score by Thomas Newman is ubiquitous and often intrusive. Interesting, intelligent, and uplifting film appearing about the same time as the positive ‘The Martian’, where the audience cheers to “bring him home”. Americans are men of good will, who also know how to get things done. (2016)

Bridge on the River Kwai 1957 David Lean (Britain) 4.0 Alec Guinness in one of his most famous roles as the unbending, obsessive-compulsive commander of a British detachment in a Japanese prisoner of war camp in Thailand; Sessue Hayakawa as the equally proud, unbending and honorable commandant of the prison camp; William Holden as lady-loving, rather cynical American caught up in the mess; Jack Hawkins as stiff-upper-lip, can-do British officer who returns to the camp with Holden to destroy the famous bridge. Fabulous epic film by the epic king David Lean; its historical basis is the Japanese need for a rail connection between ally Thailand and Burma, where they are fighting the British. The film has all the trappings of the Hollywood epic – set in an exotic land (Thailand although filmed in Sri Lanka), in exotic landscapes with forests, mountains, and waterfalls, in the midst of war with all the overtones of duty and honor, an exciting conclusion expertly choreographed for maximum tension, a real train plunging through a destroyed bridge into the river, pretty Thai girls who take care of the saboteurs, a symbolic object (the bridge as McGuffin?) that absorbs the attention of all the characters in the film. It is also an outstanding drama focused on the psychology of Alec Guinness. In the first half of the film he is unbendingly stiff as he faces off with an equally stubborn Hayakawa to refuse to allow his officers to do ‘manual labor’ – completely secure in his British upper class biases he constantly refers to his copy of the Geneva Convention to refute Hayakawa’s every request; in a bit of self-humiliation Hayakawa eventually gives in; then Guinness switches his obsessiveness to the bridge, and to the puzzlement of some of his officers (Is this treason?) he insists on good design and efficiency in building the best bridge imaginable, a far better bridge than the Japanese engineers were able to come up with. The finale is smashingly exciting. The saboteurs sent by the British command to destroy Guinness’ beloved bridge set explosive charges and then wait for the train to appear so that the explosives can be detonated; the river has receded possibly revealing the charges to the Japanese, but more importantly to the protective Guinness who is stalking proudly on the bridge; he discovers the revealed wires and takes Hayakawa to investigate as the chug chug and whistle of the train is heard in the background; when saboteurs react, Hayakawa is killed by one of the demolition team; wonderful confusion in Guinness’ face as he is torn between his obsession and his duty; he does not appear to make a decision, since he is killed by an explosion (fired off by Hawkins) and then falls (apparently by?) chance on the explosives plunger; fabulous real explosion under the bridge, it collapses and the train plunges into the river in slow motion, the boiler hisses in the river (the scene is reminiscent of the finale of Keaton’s ‘The General’), the camera cranes up showing the yawning gap in the bridge span and then the credits roll to the accompaniment of foot-tapping British martial music. The film has very few weaknesses; snappily edited with always something happening, the story always moving forward, or some amusing or interesting sidebar.

Holden's role seems a little gratuitous, as if they wrote him in because they needed an American star for the production; and you wonder what the black clad, pretty Thai girls are doing on a top secret commando mission, and what do they do at night? Excellent score featuring British martial music, and in particular the famous 'Colonel Bogey's March' (?), which is often whistled by the soldiers when marching to or from work. The picture of the Japanese is revisionist. Hayakawa is essentially an honorable man with a real problem – he has to get the bridge built or else; British prisoners are treated humanely perhaps because they are needed; the Japanese appear to follow the Geneva Convention. Hard to imagine a more intelligent, dramatic, and well made epic film.

Brief Encounter 1945 (Britain) David Lean (play by Noel Coward) 3.5 Celia Johnston as Laura, middle class English housewife who travels weekly to a nearby city for shopping and a movie, Trevor Howard as Eric, a doctor who meets her in a railroad tea room (he gets a piece of grit out of her eye), Stanley Holloway and Joyce Carey as amusing working class couple who bicker and court (in their own blue collar way) in the station tea room. Play by Coward made into a model modest film by Lean. Extremely well directed: flawless selection of shots and editing in elegant classic tradition (cf. the mixing of Johnston's thoughts with the conversation of her gossipy friend as they return from the first scene; or twice showing Howard's understated gesture of placing his hand on Johnston's shoulder -- held for perhaps two seconds -- before he leaves her forever). Film has wonderful beginning with two dramatic trains streaking through the train station before a word is spoken, beginning the plot of the movie with the final parting scene between Howard and Johnston (the viewer doesn't know what is going on), then Johnston in an imaginary (?) confession to her husband tells us how it started and developed in flashback, and then ending with the same parting scene, this time heart-breaking since we now know what the stakes are. All the principals are convincing and moving. Johnston is an extremely up-tight, proper middle class wife, who is taken by surprise when she falls in love with a man other than her husband and who struggles against the possibility of an affair throughout; pretty face and eyes, but not a classic smile; we empathize with her predicament, although modern audiences might get impatient with her restraint. Howard is a forthright, rather idealistic general practitioner, whose fervency causes Laura to fall in love with him and who pursues her fairly aggressively including an invitation to spend the night with him in a friend's apartment (she turns him down, but when she returns in a change of mind, fate (return of the apartment owner) saves her from betraying her husband). English middle classes come off as extremely repressed and fearful of what neighbors/friends might have to say about them; but on the other hand we have to like them for being sincerely concerned not to betray their spouses. Action centers on the train station and the arrival and departure of trains (usually indicated by voices over the loud speaker and sound effects and shadows through the tea room's window); one can imagine Coward's play taking place entirely in the tea room, but Lean expands it to include scenes in the city, on the train, and in Laura's home with her kind, understanding, but decidedly unromantic husband. The use of all three movements of Rachmaninoff's Second Piano Concerto is effective (if somewhat hackneyed by its frequent use since): the movie begins with the opening bars of the first movement and ends with the final bars of the third movement. The viewer gets a little impatient for the lack of something important happening; but the film commands admiration for its sincerity, honest emotion, and beautiful direction. (2006)

Bright Future 2003 Kiyoshi Kurosawa (Japan) 2.5 Jo Odagiri as young, disaffected youth working in a napkin factory in Tokyo; Tadanobu Asano as his older co-worker who has a thing about his poisonous jellyfish; Tatsuya Fuji ('Realm of the Senses') as the father of Asano – he later befriends Odagiri. Dull and indecipherable film about disaffected youth in contemporary Tokyo. The two guys drift from job to bowling alley to video game parlor; they appear to have no aim in life; Asano murders his boss for no good reason (he was fired!), and Odagiri would have done it if his buddy had not got there first. When Asano lands in jail for the murder, he gives his beloved jellyfish to his friend, who promptly loses it in the sewers and canals of Tokyo; eventually the jellyfish multiplies and the canals are filled with beautiful rose-glowing creatures before they drift down the canals and out to sea. The story of the guys' fate is banal, although the parallel story of the jellyfish makes it sometimes intriguing and a little creepy. The moral meaning of the creature is ambiguous: on the one hand, it seems a source of hope; on the other, it is venomous, it causes conflict between Asano and his boss, and it apparently kills Fuji at the end of the

film. The term 'bright future' seems to deal with whether the guys have any goals in life or a purpose for living; at first, Odagiri talks about his dreams in which he can see his future; even after Asano lands in jail, the jellyfish seems to represent hope since both guys are obsessed with it; but then it leaves. Meanwhile, Asano commits suicide and Odagiri becomes increasingly anti-social, latching on to a gang of teenage vandals in Che Guevara tee-shirts (reminiscence of Stanley Kubrick?). The last shot of the film tracks down a Tokyo street as the boys wander around looking for some excitement. The aimlessness and alienation of Japanese youth seem confirmed. Jump-cuts and avoidance of psychological analysis make ones think of a disjointed *Nouvelle vague* film, perhaps Godard.

Bright Star 2008 Jane Campion (Britain) 3.0 Ben Whishaw as callow, sickly, thin, poetically inspired, although emotionally rather bloodless poet John Keats, 1818-21; Abbie Cornish with hair piled on head, high cylindrical bonnets, thoroughly shrouded in high-waisted Regency costumes as Fanny, the rather ignorant, emotional, and large-faced girl-next-door who loves Keats; Paul Schneider as Keats' irascible, sometimes witty Scottish amanuensis friend who tries to protect Keats' inspiration from the romantic intrusion. Dedicated period piece about John Keats' three-year, non-sexual, kissing-only relationship with Fanny Brawne, the teenager next door who is a good seamstress and proclaims herself the creator of all the sack-looking frocks she wears to her meetings with Keats (a new one, it seems for every day). Film is gloriously shot in a manor park in the London vicinity – the brick manor house is worn around the edges, but the park is shot with colorful fields of flowers, flowering fruit trees with Keats climbing gaily through the blossoms, seas of reeds next to the wooden walkway in the lake, etc.; one imagines that this exuberant explosion of nature is meant to parallel the passion of Keats and Fanny. Film has Keats composing poetry under the influence of Brown, but the emphasis is on the progress of the relationship between the two principals. Fanny begins as callow, curious, and intrusive, and she rapidly becomes obsessed with Keats, returning unannounced to his apartment to try to attract his attention. Keats responds more hesitantly – after all he has poetry to write and Brown whisks him off to the Isle of Wight to be free of distractions. When separated, the lovers' thoughts are expressed through quoting their letters, the ones from Keats being particularly eloquent and poetic. Fanny's main note however is pain, since Keats is tormented by not having enough money to marry his beloved, and then he catches tuberculosis – apparently from his brother, who dies before him. While Keats travels to London and to Naples in the film finale, Fanny stays at home – alas as a respectable woman she may not accompany him and she must stay put and just lie in her bed and suffer. The slow pace of the film is hard not to notice – succeeding scenes seem often nigh interchangeable; some of the couple's love scenes might have been cut or shortened, and Fanny's pain and suffering last too long. When news comes that Keats has died in Italy, she has a hysterical breakdown and calls out for 'Momma'. Keats' character sometimes seems immature and superficial and Fanny's girlish enthusiasm and suffering wear thin. The relationship strikes this viewer as typically adolescent, not worthy of the depth and polish of Keats' poetry. Nevertheless, beautifully shot and appreciative of Keats' inspiration. (2010)

Broadway Danny Rose 1984 Woody Allen (writer and director) 4.0 Woody Allen as good hearted but comically unsuccessful talent agent for Jewish venues; Mia Farrow virtually unrecognizable in mafia wife clothes, bouffant hair style, and tough New Jersey accent as the angry girlfriend of...; Nick Apollo Forte as overweight crooner and client of Allen (he never made another movie) -- good crooning voice and comic sense; Milton Berle playing himself as possibly interested in using Forte on his TV show; a dozen real New York performers sitting around a table telling stories about the legendary Danny Rose. Hilarious mixture of slapstick and romantic comedy that has Allen playing a kind-hearted talent agent willing to sacrifice himself for his clients, and not the usual neurotic, self-absorbed, anxious, lovelorn, and psychoanalysis-feeding protagonist of many of his best films. His environment is hilarious: his championing of struggling blind xylophonists, piano-playing birds, Puerto Rican ventriloquists is legendary in the New York entertainer community, and the film is essentially narrated in flashback by a bunch of has-been comics sitting in a Midtown deli. Allen, delivering his usual portion of amusing one-liners, gets caught in a series of delicate situations when he agrees to "beard" (escort) girlfriend Farrow to a performance: when he walks into her apartment, she is shrieking hilarious in-your-face insults to boyfriend Forte on the telephone; when the two visit the mafia mansion of another of her potential boyfriends, they are cursed by the guy's mother, Gina DeAngelis, who says Allen has the "malocchio"; blaming Allen for taking Farrow away from the mafia guy, they send hoods to pursue the couple through

the reeds of the Jersey shores (where they meet an actor dressed in a sort of Superman costume), and into a Manhattan warehouse where Macy Thanksgiving floats are stored and the characters shout insults at one another in squeaky voices caused by escaped helium. Very vivid and believable depiction of Manhattan/New Jersey scene and of the entertainers on the borscht circuit. Although not apparent at first, the film turns out to be a romantic comedy. In the course of her adventures with Allen, Farrow begins to show her softer side toward him (in keeping with her familiar screen persona) realizing that he is basically a sweet guy. She moves in for a while with Nick, finds him maddening, and then briefly dates the guy in the Superman costume, whom she finds also woefully lacking. She finally arrives unannounced at Allen's apartment and finds him thoughtfully serving Thanksgiving TV turkey dinners to his motley crew of entertainers; Allen at first rejects her, and she leaves, but he soon changes his mind and we see him in a long shot pursuing and retrieving her; we assume that they will live happily ever after. Allen scores big with this film at the beginning of his line of 80s masterpieces. (2010)

Broadway Melody (1929) 1929 Harry Beaumont (MGM AA) with songs by Arthur Freed 2.5 Charles King dorky looking, stiff acting Broadway performer with a pretty good screen voice; Anita Page tall, blond, cute sexy, and often awkward as impressionable teenage sister of...; Bessie Love diminutive, pretty, brunette, sensitive older and more mature sister. One of very first Hollywood musicals after the switch to sound; won Academy Award for best film 1929! Rather typical plot for backstage musical: the two sisters come to town looking for a chance in musical comedy; Love is engaged to the sincere King; complications set in – Love gets a part in Zanfield's musical only because the director is taken with Page, King gradually falls for Page thus potentially breaking the heart of his "regular" fiancée, and – most dramatically – Page begins to yield to the blandishments of a playboy who showers her with gifts and expects her "to be nice to him" in return. All of course turns out ok with Page seeing the error of her ways before it is too late and then hooking up with King (little preparation for the viewer!), while Love looks on apparently happy for her sister and getting ready to take to the road for more performances in the provinces. As one expects in early sound film, the great majority of the acting is stiff, stilted; the scenes are shot straight on with little editing; the camera rarely moves. Some good musical numbers: a "realistic" short "You Were Meant for Me" sung by King to the surprised Page (reprised in the famous ballet sequence in 'Singin' in the Rain'); several performances of "Broadway Melody", by far the best of which is a peppy show version sung by the large company on stage; "The Wedding of the Painted Doll" is a big production number with lines of chorus girls trying to stay in time together and acrobats doing flips and cartwheels in front of the camera. The film obviously owes a great debt to the Broadway musical; the large production numbers lack the imaginative choreography and the precision of movement of the Busby Berkeley numbers of the 1930s. The film is fun to watch primarily as an example of a very early Hollywood musical, when the studios were casting about for a formula to engage early talkie audiences. Receiving the Academy Award for best film indicates how modest the Academy's standards were at the beginning of the sound era. (2011)

Broadway Melody of 1940 1940 Norman Taurog 4.0 Fred Astaire, Eleanor Powell, George Murphy, Frank Morgan. Pretty thin backstage, realistic musical (centered on the preparation of a show) plot, but inspired numbers by Cole Porter, and absolutely first-rate dancing by the principals including Murphy. Plot is Fred's romance for Eleanor, and the partnerships between Fred and George that is thereby put to the test, but of course they emerge the best of buddies; George is a bit alcoholic and irresponsible, but Fred is faithful, honorable, and until there is no choice, he plays second fiddle to George, and then presumably emerges with the girl. Background is Broadway musicals and the glitterati lifestyle of New York; everyone loves to "go out" on the town; Frank Morgan has a white ermine coat that he only loans to his starlet dates, and then he has to retrieve it at the goodnight kiss. Focus of course is on the singing and dancing. MGM pulls out all the stops, especially with the unbeatable finale with its very large, black glass floor, the reflecting panels in back, and the stars (light bulbs) in the skies. Principals dance all styles: acrobatic and thematic (Powell in "I am the captain of this boat"), ballet (Powell), hyped up romantic ballroom (Murphy and Powell), flamenco (Powell and Astaire in first part of finale), swing tap in the juke box number (delightful), and of course the immortal tap number in the last part of the 'Begin the Beguine' finale, where the two dancers are perfectly in sync and seem to be

enjoying themselves. Good songs by Cole Porter – ‘Begin the Beguine’ and ‘I’ve Got My Eye on You,’ etc. Wonderful dancing, an aesthetic experience, and good comic acting. For some reason, the action is sprinkled with little vaudeville moments – juggling act, comic opera song, a guy on a unicycle....

Brokeback Mountain 2005 Ang Lee 3.0 Jake Gyllenhaal as young cowboy who falls for Heath Ledger herding sheep one summer in Brokeback Mountain (supposedly in Wyoming), Heath Ledger as the more tortured of the two, Randy Quaid massive as the forbidding rancher who hires them, Michelle Williams as Ledger's wife, Anne Hathaway as the hotshot rodeo rider that Jake falls for and marries. Ground-breaking film about homosexual love between two cowboys; not much sex in the movie (although they couple with considerable violence), the film is about a deep, undying passion between the two men that cannot be overcome by the passage of 20 years or their marriages and children. Shot in crummy western locations (Ledger's rental house is especially depressing and the showy upper middle class Texas home of Gyllenhaal is almost as bad) and in the almost smotheringly beautiful mountains of Wyoming (actually, as one can tell, shot in the Canadian Rockies in Alberta); perhaps there is a connection between the inherent loneliness of the wilds and the loneliness of the men, but the grandeur and celebration of the beauty of the mountains always lurking in the background does not match the quiet sadness and desperation of the story; the beauty of the scenery distracts from the drama. The performances of the two principals are excellent: Gyllenhaal is quietly sad, more accepting of his sexual preference, he seeks out Ledger and visits male prostitutes in Mexico; Ledger is more repressed, stoic, gruff, pained, remorseful about having gay sex (he refers at least once to a childhood incident in which his father had insisted that he look at the cadaver of a gay man tortured to death by cowboys), protesting that he is not gay, seeking to make a successful marriage. Ledger is perhaps a heterosexual man who falls in love with a man when they meet in the beginning. They meet their appropriate ends, Gyllenhaal dead from being beaten to death by bigots, Ledger alone and despairing of ever finding happiness and satisfactions with a partner of either sex. The first part of the film in the mountains appears to be based on Annie Proulx's story; the longer follow-up that seems to have been added by the screenwriters chronicles the long agony of both marriages and their intermittent attempts to get together, ending in the death of Gyllenhaal and Ledger's realization of the utter failure of his life. This follow-up to an incident from a short story source reminds one of the 'Killers' (1947) that extends a Hemingway short story and 'The Crying Game' (1992) where most of Neil Jordan's movie is a follow-up to the original story 'Friend of the Nations'. The film engenders sadness and regret; but it has manufactured Hollywood moments and seems too drawn out. Perhaps its ecstatic reception was due to political correctness. Proulx and Lee elucidate the theme of homoerotic male bonding in American culture -- buddy movies, 'Huck Finn', its appearance in war movies, etc. (2006)

Broken Blossoms 1922 D. W. Griffith 3.0 Lillian Gish as strong actress who rolls eyes a lot, but to good effect with emotional impact on viewer; Richard Barthelmess as ‘Yellow Man’ who falls in love with her – understated, boring acting, pure love except for one moment of temptation (accompanied by hyper close-up showing him leering at Gish); Donald Crisp (!) as her brutal pugilist father, who beats her constantly and ends up beating her to death at the end. Very sentimental movie, as we moon over the fate of the pure, “little” girl abused by her father and environment; the purity of the love of the Chinese man, and the abusive brutality of the father. Ends in Romeo and Juliet – style hecatomb with everyone dead (Chinaman apparently commits suicide). Griffith uses all editing and shooting techniques: fairly aggressive cutting, sometimes parallel action; a few hyper close-ups when things get dangerous and violent; lots of medium shots. Uses three or four colors in prints with emphasis on grey/white. Background is slums of London and the brutality of life there, which presumably breeds violence; very realistic unattractive, poverty decors. Treats inter-racial relations with no prejudice against foreigners; love of Chinaman for poor English girl treated as acceptable. (c. 1990)

Broken Flowers 2005 Jim Jarmusch 4.0 Bill Murray present in every scene as taciturn, impassive, non-expressive retired businessman, who is “an over-the-hill Don Juan” and at the beginning of the film spends most of his time lounging on his sofa; Julie Delpy as his most recent girlfriend – she leaves him in the first scene; Jeffrey Wright as Winston, a compulsive amateur sleuth and well-meaning

friend that sets Murray on a quest for his putative lost son; Sharon Stone over-the-top charming, pretty, and sexy as one of Murray's ex-girlfriends – she has him spend the night with her when he drops by; Alexis Dziena as eye-catching, delectable daughter of Stone – she prances about hyper-cute and naked in front of Murray; Frances Conroy as hesitant, insecure ex-girlfriend that seems to be harboring a secret when Murray comes calling; Christopher McDonald as Conroy's hilariously stiff husband as upscale real estate developer; Jessica Lange as an unfathomable, arm's-length ex-girlfriend, who is an “animal communicator”; Chloë Sevigny as ambiguously sexy assistant in Jessica Lange's office; Tilda Swinton as histrionic ex-girlfriend living with two toothless, poor white guys that can't talk without fighting. Jarmusch's film takes the form of a mystery – a search by confirmed bachelor and ladies' man (!) Murray for a supposed son whose existence is suggested to him in an anonymous letter: the viewer wants to know who wrote the letter and whether Murray will find his son (and perhaps be converted to a life of feeling). The mystery and the search turn out to be only a hook to get the viewer involved; the pleasure of the film is what happens along the way. Most every time Murray meets a woman, he takes sexual notice of her body (e.g., Dziena's short bathrobe, Sevigny's legs), indicating that he was never interested in personal relationships but primarily in sex. The appearance of four ex-lovers (the fifth who might be the mother is dead) provides humor, surprise, and satire. Stone, who is the only one glad to see Murray, is wonderfully rapacious playing off her film persona. Conroy is impenetrably ambiguous, but seems to be sharing a secret with Murray (her husband doesn't know that his favorite photography of her was taken by her ex-boyfriend); the couple's discussion of their real estate careers is penetrated through and through with shop jargon; the hesitant, deadpan dinner includes many shots of the unappetizing food and Murray's final effort to eat it by spearing four discs of carrots. The scene with Lange, the animal communicator, is quietly hilarious: she has to explain carefully to Murray that she is not reading the animals' minds, but is actually conversing with them silently; the cat, who enters the room during their conversation, has a humorous give-and-take with Lange and Murray, who is curious about what she is saying. The final scene has Swinton run hysterically back into her house when Murray mentions why he is present; the men then complain bitterly about Murray's rudeness in upsetting Penny, and then punch him out; the shot of a pink typewriter in the tall grass makes one speculate that Penny is the author of the note. The mystery however is never resolved. Murray's final conversation with Winston makes it clear that he considers the whole exercise a waste of his time. In the last scene, Murray initiates a conversation with a young man apparently following him, but then scares him off when he becomes direct. The film ends with a young guy in a jalopy Volkswagen staring at an isolated Murray in the middle of the street (is he looking for his father?). The last shot has the camera doing a complete 360 around Murray's head, as if searching for an answer or some kind of change in the protagonist; when the screen goes black, we know that there is nothing. (2014)

Brooklyn 2015 John Crowley (Nick Hornby writer) 4.0 Superior sensitive women's-style film about the psychological and emotional impact of emigration. Saoirse Ronan as Eilis; Fiona Glascott as Eilis selfless sister, Rose; Julie Waters as very amusing Irish landlady as the head of the table of the rooming house – a witty, good-hearted gossiper; Nora-Jane Noone as one of the girls in the rooming house – she delivers hilarious monologue about the ambiguities of marriage in 50s New York – of course she wants to remarry, but when it happens it won't be any better than the rooming house; Jim Broadbent as the avuncular Father Flood, Eilis' sponsor in Brooklyn; Emory Cohen a bit mannered as Eilis' sincere, ardent Italian-American boyfriend, Tony; Domhnall Gleeson as the gentle, willowy kind-of boyfriend that Eilis cultivates upon her return to Ireland. Narrative begins with Eilis' hilarious trip to Ireland in the bowels of a passenger ship; she suffers grievously from homesickness for her mother and sister, but is mostly healed when she finds boyfriend Cohen (Italian American); her life is shaken severely by the unexpected (and unexplained) death of Rose; after marrying Cohen (something this viewer was resisting), she returns to Ireland to visit her mother and clarify her feelings about staying in New York; she keeps her marriage secret; although sorely tempted to remain in Ireland (the loneliness of her mother; she finds a good job bookkeeping as well as male friend Gleeson who turns her head despite her marriage), she decides she has cast her lot, and in the moving final scene in which she matter-of-factly gives a freshman emigrant the same advice about the USA that she received at the beginning of the film, she embarks again for America and her anxious husband. The plot takes place in the early 1950s, when conditions of Irish

immigration were not nearly as severe 75-100 years before. The film's narrative is of the simplest variety, but the poetry of the acting, the mise-en-scène, and the simple, soothing soundtrack music make the film a moving experience. With the exception of the colorful shrew that owns the Irish grocery shop (Emma Lowe), all the characters are good-hearted and helpful to Eilis. The kindly Broadbent gives the Catholic clergy a much needed boost after the abusive priests of 'Spotlight'. The face of Ronan is featured constantly in close-up – calm, reserved, thoughtful, beautiful in a plain Irish way, and yet manifesting real emotion and character. The décor and locations evoke expertly the appearance of Brooklyn in the 1950s (Manhattan is never glimpsed) without the self-conscious artiness of 'Carol', where the characters and narrative took almost a back seat to the evocation of the city. Poetic realistic, credible, while remaining poetic and always hopeful. The viewer knows that Eilis will make the right decision. (2016)

The Browning Version 1951 Anthony Asquith (Britain: play by Terrence Rattigan) 3.5
Michael Redgrave as Crocker-Harris in one of his most famous roles as public school teacher on the verge of retirement; Jean Kent convincing as his bitchy, insufferable younger wife; Nigel Patrick as popular science teacher who is having an affair with Kent; Wilfred Hyde-Whyte as affected headmaster of the school; Brian Smith attention-capturing as Taplow, the only student who likes Crocker-Redgrave. Superior low-key film about the last day of Redgrave as the classics teacher at the British boys' public school; he is leaving apparently because of ill health. We find out that the precise and stilted Redgrave was a brilliant student at Oxford, but that he has never developed as a teacher – none of the students except for Taplow like him; he controls his classroom through terror and sarcasm (the students call him 'Himmler') and he lacks the ability to connect that Patrick wields in his science classes. He is leaving the school as a failure. We also discover that his wife despises him and is carrying on an affair with Patrick, although the latter is thoroughly sick of her. Redgrave suffers a series of humiliations: we find out that he has known about his wife's infidelity for a long time; he is refused a pension by the school's board since he is a little short of the statutory time served (he is mocked mercilessly by his wife); he is asked to speak first at the farewell banquet, since the Headmaster knows that he is a boring speaker and the boys will be indifferent or hostile to him. Events at the end point subtly toward a sort of redemption. Taplow befriends him and defends him, and he reads Crocker-Harris' verse translation of 'Agamemnon' and praises it; when Crocker-Harris stands up for his farewell speech, he throws out his stuffy prepared remarks and delivers a confession of his regret at having been such a failure (then somehow this elicits a standing ovation from the kids); and the audience is delighted when he makes the decision to leave his wife. At the end of the day there is no redemption à la 'Mr. Chips', but he looks upon himself with more honesty, and there is some hope that he will find some satisfaction in his future. Film works primarily because of its outstanding black-and-white rendition of the exterior and interior of the school and the moving performance of Redgrave, who is in virtually every frame. He entertains with his precise, gently sarcastic, and vaguely humorous manner of speaking; we sympathize with him from the beginning despite his faults, and we are delighted when he moves toward enlightenment at the end of the film. (2009)

Bruno 2009 Larry Charles 2.5 Sacha Baron Cohen up to his usual foolishness this time posing as gay German fashionista taking his act to the USA; Gustaf Hamnersten as his faithful assistant, who is in love/lust with him. Very uneven continuation of 'Borat' format, by which an outrageously disguised Cohen approaches unsuspecting subjects and the camera records their amusement, bafflement, and outrage. Cohen decides that since the world of European fashion is not giving him his due, he will go to Los Angeles to become an international star. He tries getting into movies and television, then adopting an African child to get publicity, then traveling to the American South primarily to tease and insult evangelical ministers specializing in gay reconversion; the last part of the show often seem very dangerous, particularly the gay-bashing wrestling match where Cohen and Hamnerstan work the yokel crowd into a violent lather. Cohen unpredictably goes over the edge with gay nudity, buttocks revealed by thong underwear; and barely concealed raunchy gay sex. It is sometimes difficult to determine which of the participants are true "victims" and which are co-conspirators recruited and paid for by the Cohen troupe. Some of the most amusing bits: Cohen organizes a television focus group, all of whom are repulsed by Cohen's hilariously disgusting antics (doing a sort of penis dance with the camera focused only on the midriff); a funny phone conversation between a serious-acting movie agent on one end and

Bruno on the other getting a wax of his buttock; when Bruno corners a hyper-straight Ron Paul in a bedroom with the intention of seducing him, he is rejected with indignation; Bruno induces Paula Abdul for an interview to a house with no furniture, and when hors d'oeuvres are served on a naked kneeling Mexican gardener, she runs – and drives – off in a panic; when Bruno presents his adopted African child, OJ, to a Jerry-Springer-style talk show in Tennessee, he is passionately denounced by the Black Women in the audience; having been told by the second gay convert that he should let himself be seduced by a woman, he goes to an Alabama swingers scene where he induces the ugly macho guy to show him all the sex positions; and finally the Straight Dave gay bashing wrestling match in which a crowd whose atavistic violent instincts are oiled by lots of beer come within a hair's breadth of murdering the two stars (they started off by wrestling and ended up kissing, stripping, and making out). Uneven hilarity for people that are not offended by extreme raunchiness. (2011)

Brute Force 1947 Jules Dassin 4.0 Grim but gripping drama about a desperate attempt to escape prison. Burt Lancaster charismatic, charming with tousled hair as intense, bitter con determined to escape; Hume Cronyn as short-statured, hard-nosed, low key sadist who glories in the exercise of superior authority; Charles Bickford as prisoner who cooperates with the warden; Roman Bohnen as warden who empathizes with the prisoners but is a weak man subject to Cronyn; Howard Duff as intense ex-soldier hankering to return to his girl in Italy; Yvonne De Carlo as Duff's passionate Italian girlfriend; John Hoyt as ladies' man with a great body; Art Smith as smart, philosophic alcoholic doctor who sympathizes with the prisoners; Ann Blyth as Lancaster's saccharine, ill wife; Sir Lancelot doing his calypso bit. Extremely well-made prison film. It first lays out the lives of the men in prison with emphasis on the Nazi-like reign of Cronyn, the chief of the guards and power-hungry psychopath who really runs the prison. The screenplay develops several characters, all of them more or less sympathetic men in prison for different reasons. The counterpoint to Cronyn is played by the doctor, who sympathizes with the prisoners and even helps them in their escape attempt. The state Corrections Department decides to bypass the warden and endorse Cronyn's harsh policy, eventually goading the prisoners to a desperate escape attempt when their parole hearings are canceled and several of the prisoners are sent to work in the dangerous "Drainpipe". The film's drama is dominated by the confrontation between the bitter Lancaster and the sadistic Cronyn. The latter is depicted as a Nazi-like, Nietzschean character, who enjoys inflicting pain on the prisoners, decorates his office with a portrait of himself in uniform, plays records of Wagner's 'Tannhäuser' while he tortures a prisoner (not aware that 'Tannhäuser' is about erotic love), and seizes the machine gun in the final scene to mow down prisoners. The set pieces in the film are violent and disturbing: the execution of a stool pigeon crushed by a stamping machine in the machine shop; the verbal confrontation between the doctor and Cronyn, in which the former unmasks the sadistic megalomania of the latter. The finale is particularly exciting: the prisoners unleash a military-style attack on the prison personnel with Molotov cocktails and firearms; many casualties on both sides; it ends with the mortally wounded Lancaster attacking Cronyn in a guard tower and eventually throwing him over the railing to his death. Excellent screenplay and direction, especially in Dassin's use of close-ups, which are effective in photographing Lancaster's penetrating gaze. The extraneous flashbacks to the girlfriends and wives of certain prisoners should have been excised from the final cut. A Hays Code statement by Doc at the end explains to us that every escape attempt is doomed to failure. Exciting, grimly dramatic film. (May 2017)

Bubble 2005 Steven Soderbergh 3.5 Debbie Doebereiner as Martha, an overweight middle-aged Ohio woman that takes care of her elderly dad in their mobile home and works air brushing dolls' heads in a doll factory; Dustin James Ashley as Kyle, a withdrawn, emotionally challenged young guy that works with Martha; Misty Williams, the only attractive character in the movie as Rose, a happy-acting but slippery young woman called in by the factory manager to help out; Decker Moody as the low-key detective investigating the murder of Rose. Rather dull, slice-of-life picture of industrial workers in small-town Ohio who are just making it usually by working two jobs, but the observations are rudely interrupted by the murder of Rose in the last third of the film, turning it into a police procedural. Since all the actors are non-professionals recruited in the neighborhood, the acting is flat and hesitant with the principals sometimes misspeaking their lines; the impact is sometimes realistic, sometimes boring and irritating; Rose and Martha are the most expressive of the bunch. The first part of the film spends most of

its time tracking the everyday activities of the principals, who drive from job to job, eat junk food, and chat about banal things; the numerous shots of the dolls' heads and bodies convey a creepy feeling with a possible premonition of bad things to come. Rose's arrival stirs things up: she talks a lot, seems manipulative, and appears interested in Kyle; in factory scenes where Rose goes into a separate room to smoke with Kyle and in the baby-sitting scene in which Rose treats Martha with some disdain, one suspects that Martha is secretly jealous of Rose because she has romantic feelings for Kyle. When Rose is found strangled on her living room floor, the first suspect is her angry, disaffected boyfriend, but after a persistent, low-key investigation, the detective – surprise! – incriminates Martha and charges her with the murder; she was the last person seen exiting Rose's apartment and she matches some incriminating fingerprints. Even Martha has a hard time admitting that she did it, although at the end in jail she imagines (dreams?) her standing over Rose's body in her living room. Film unexpectedly packs a big surprise: the viewer is misled into thinking that the film is an Indie nothing-happening, slice-of life, low-budget look at the Heartland; little hints such as the glimmer of jealousy in the impassive features of Martha however disturb the potential boredom, and then the film turns into a reflection on the potential for evil even in the most mundane of settings. Model of impactful minor film.

Buena Vista Social Club 1998 Wim Wenders (Germany) 2.5 Essentially a concert film featuring very old Cuban musicians (most seem to be at least 70) who, forgotten and selling cigars and polishing shoes, were gathered together by American music producer and guitarist Ry Cooder to produce a cd in Havana. Performers who stand out are singer Ibrahim Ferrer (who made another cd after the release of the movie), Ruben Gonzalez who has a polished distinctively Cuban jazz style on the piano, the emotional "Edith Piaf of Cuba" Omara Portuondo (a bit over the top), and many others, including the outstanding trumpeter whose name I cannot remember. The music ranges from cha-cha to mambo to traditional Cuban folk songs. Shots of the songs performed in the Cuban studio, in a couple of performances in Amsterdam, and in the climactic concert in Carnegie Hall in July 1998, are often cut to allow the artists – set like props in empty halls, streets and railroad yards – to describe in very simple terms their experiences growing up in music and trying to make a living as musicians in Cuba. The viewer becomes attached to the noble old musicians, who have given their lives for their music and who seem poised to live forever because of it, but we yearn for a bit more information about Cuban music, the cultural environment, and perhaps the contribution – or lack of it – of the Cuban state. The film is resolutely apolitical, never mentioning politics and using the grand, crumbling streets of Havana (with the famous restored 50s American cars) to good effect to establish environment. A lot of steady cam shots circling the musicians as they tell their stories. The film kowtows excessively to the producer, who plays steel guitar accompaniment in the concerts (to rather weird effect in some pieces); the camera cuts to him constantly as he smiles benevolently from the back row. His son plays percussion in the pieces and makes little sense when he is interviewed. Some great music in a film that could have been more moving. (2007)

Bulldog Drummond Escapes 1937 James Hogan (Paramount) 2.5 Ray Milland as Bulldog Drummond, retired army captain who is solving crimes, Heather Angel as charming and self-reliant (the "swim the Channel" type) damsel in distress (B.D. regular), Sir Guy Standing as Inspector Colonel Nielsen (died that year in Hollywood of rattlesnake bite!), Reginald Denny as Drummond's bluff English sidekick. Pretty routine "B" murder mystery set in the fog of rural England, most action taking place in old manor houses. All of it shot on a sound stage or two. Angel is held captive by bad people (although not too smart) trying to steal her inheritance. Drummond is 30s British answer to hard-boiled American private eye – flies airplane, drives open sports car, flippant attitude (e.g., doesn't care if friend Algy is not present for the birth of his own baby), quick (figures things out pretty fast), and not immune to the charms of the opposite sex, since he falls for Phyllis and carries her off in his arms at the end; he operates with two sidekicks, Algy and his deferent although sometimes helpful butler (played by E.E. Clive). Nielsen gets in the way of the investigation by unwittingly supporting the perpetrators, and actually imprisons Drummond for a while. Quite a bit of verbal sparring and humorous motifs – the Colonel obsessed with his golf, Algy trying repeatedly to call the hospital to see if his baby was born. Decent show. (2008)

Bullets Over Broadway 1994 Woody Allen 3.5 John Cusack, Jennifer Tilly, Mary Louise Parker, Chazz Palmentieri, Jim Broadbent, Jack Warden, Diane Wiest, Tracey Ullman, Rob Reiner. Comic movie by Woody Allen without him. Impression is that movie loses some comic momentum without Allen in it. Comic premise is struggling Broadway writer needs mob money to put on his play. One of the prices he has to pay is dingbat Jennifer Tilly plays one of the lead roles; another is that mobster bodyguard, formerly interested only in craps games, suddenly discovers that he has a writer's knack, and he begins to tell author Cusack how to improve his play; and it works! Chazz acquires such ownership in the success of the play that he starts to refer to it as "his" play, and he offs the terrible Tilly (his boss' girlfriend!) in gangland style hit. His dying words to Cusack is advice on how to improve the play yet a little more. Some good comic moments, especially the discussion of sex and love outside in the final big scene. Wiest quite amusing (sometimes a bit over top?) in role as man-eating, posing, "darling," *grande dame* actress, who starts up affair with writer Cusack. Romantic tension leads him eventually back to long-time faithful girlfriend Parker, who has struck up affair with Reiner (!). Message seems to be is that love counts – over sex (Reiner is fabulous lover) and over art, which leads to all sorts of airs and pretensions (discussing art and existentialism in Greenwich Village cafes) that have to be surrendered if you are going to have a real relationship. Sometimes strains credibility, as when mobster is first-rate writer. Certainly one of the best of the Allen oeuvres of the 90s. (1994, 2005)

Bullhead 2011 Michael Roskam (Belgium) 2.0 Matthias Schoenaerts as Jacky, a high-strung, body-building, usually raging Flemish meat farmer addicted to testosterone. Violent, confused, generally depressing, sometimes moving film about a highly damaged man operating his cattle farm on the edge of the law. The film has two narratives that are more or less independent of one another. The one is Jacky's relationship with the meat mafia in Flanders (he lives near the linguistic frontier) and his inadvertent involvement in the murder of a police investigator; this thread turns into a thriller about halfway through the film, as the police (played by two actors who don't resemble policemen at all) begin to close in on Jacky and others. The other thread develops Jacky's personal issues. The viewer learns through flashbacks that Jacky was required to take testosterone as a teenager, because his testicles were crushed by delinquents when he was a child. The film also makes a connection between Jacky's predicament and the condition of his bulls, which are forever inactive in their pens and injected with growth hormones to prepare them for the market. Jacky is bitter that he does not have a girlfriend or a family to take care; when he meets a young woman who seems vaguely interested in him (Jeanne Dandoy), he pursues her in his desultory fashion. The climax of the film has him breaking into her apartment as the police close in on him; when he resists arrest in his brutal, head-butting way (his hands are cuffed behind his back), the bloodied police shoot him; cut to a weepy slow-motion shot of him as a boy looking into the camera, a manipulative way of emphasizing the tragedy. Something of a puzzle how the film made it to the Academy Award final five for Best Foreign Language Film. The narrative suffers from incoherence on different levels: the failure to integrate the personal tragedy with the crime thriller is combined with the unintelligibility of the thriller itself – it is difficult to distinguish the different actors, who is police and who not, who was the man who was killed, what do the BMW tires have to do with anything, etc. The viewer soon loses interest out of confusion. Psychological motivation can also be unconvincing, e.g., why does Jacky's friend (Jeroen Perceval) drive him to Dandoy's apartment when he must realize that Jacky's unstable condition must be putting the woman in danger. One must admit that Schoenaerts delivers a powerful portrayal of the angst of a highly unpleasant character. The movie however is hard to watch to the end. (2012)

Bunny Lake is Missing 1965 Otto Preminger 3.0 Carol Lynley in artificial, wooden performance as highly emotional American woman, whose four-year-old child has allegedly been abducted in London; Keir Dullea almost as wooden as her short-tempered brother; Laurence Olivier more or less saves the film as sensitive, observant open-minded police superintendent in charge of investigating the case; Anna Massey fun to watch as eccentric elderly lady that collects narratives of strange children's dreams; Noel Coward quirky and often revolting as Lynley's lecherous landlord. Bizarre, unpredictable, awkward detective mystery that turns into a sort of psychological study of mental illness. The screenplay early casts doubt on Lynley's story about the kidnapping of her child, suggesting that the child, Bunny,

never existed but is a figment of Lynley's disturbed imagination. Olivier's persistent questioning of Lynley and Dullea about details of their personal lives (Dullea appears as more of a husband than a brother) furthers the impression that the kidnapping has been invented. The viewer is led to believe that Dullea is part of the caper, but a pair of private scenes between brother and sister makes it clear that they are not in collusion. The biggest revelation occurs when Dullea opens the trunk of the sports car that he has been driving around town, and....the camera reveals the little girl lying neatly on the floor of the trunk. The wrap-up is delayed by long sequences, one of which shows Lynley escaping from a hospital through nightmarish shots in the basement, and the other a very long final sequence in which Lynley distracts Dullea from his murderous intentions toward the child by play childhood games with him (hide and seek, blind man's bluff, etc.). It becomes apparent that Dullea is in incestuous love with his sister, and is jealous of anything that comes between them, including the guy she conceived Bunny with, and Bunny herself, whom he has decided to murder. The *mise-en-scène* becomes increasingly dramatic and shadowed in the last part of the film. At the end he is led off by the police, even though the only crime he has apparently committed is the kidnapping of his niece. The film is entertaining in the way it teases with the viewer and deals with subject matter not normally acceptable in mid-1960s films – illegitimacy, incest, etc. The narrative is however often awkward and artificial, and the acting is drastically inconsistent: sensitive or colorful performances from the English actors, but stilted, overly or inexpressive performances from the two Americans: Dullea's anger and Lynley's emotionalism are hard to stomach. A mixed bag with entertaining bits. (2015)

Burn After Reading 2008 Joel and Ethan Coen 2.5 George Clooney as completely goofy, randy US marshal who has never fired his gun; John Malkovich as angry and frustrated CIA analyst who gets fired from his job and can't stop saying "fuck" for the rest of the film; Tilda Swinton as prissy, organized, uptight, often angry wife of Malkovich, who is having an affair with Clooney; Frances McDormand as clueless gym employee obsessed with making her body over so she can appeal to men (she needs four surgical procedures); Brad Pitt hilarious and over-the-top as dense and foolish colleague of McDormand – tall hair with a bad bleached streak, often chewing gum and bopping to the music he is listening to through his earphones; J.K. Simmons and David Rasche very funny as equally clueless CIA supervisors. Intermittently amusing Coen comedy about two gym employees trying to cash in on a cd containing supposedly secret information that they find on the floor of the locker room. The film is really about nothing in particular: it is set in CIA community but not about spying; everybody is horny and either sleeping with everybody in sight or wanting to; almost everybody is dumb or at least blank – their behavior is unpredictable. The funniest bits come from Pitt's pre-adolescent behavior, the mugging cluelessness of the CIA supervisors, and perhaps occasionally a charming throwaway line from Clooney; the puzzlement of the "Russians" when McDormand and Pitt try to sell some meaningless information to them is mildly amusing. A mugging McDormand looks like she is not having much fun; Malkovich seethes with anger and throws the f... word at everyone; Clooney's female masturbation machine (intended for his wife, but McDormand is intrigued) is off-the-wall; and what are we supposed to do when Clooney in a panic shoots Pitt in the face (remember, he had never before discharged his weapon). The film reflects the smartass attitude of the Coens invoking often sophomoric jokes about any target of opportunity. The extremely complicated plot makes little sense, and there are no characters that we care about; as a result we chuckle at the good jokes, but never become emotionally involved with the film, much of which seems to be improvised. (2010)

C'est la vie 1990 Diane Kurys (France) 3.5 Nathalie Baye shines as pretty dark-haired mom, collected, calm and determined while breaking up with her husband and deciding what to do with her two daughters; Richard Berry as her violent-tempered, estranged husband; Jean-Pierre Bacri the most amusing adult in the film as the often bemused but loving uncle of the two girls; Julie Bataille pretty and expressive as Baye's 13-year-old daughter Frédérique; Candice Lefrance cute as Bataille's younger sister. Heart-tugging autobiographical film by Kurys that focuses on the disintegration of her parents' marriage during a vivid summer vacation spent by the family in sunny, upscale La Baule in 1958. The film focuses partly on the amusing, fun-filled, and devilish activities of the children during their August vacation – the two sisters and four cousins. They fall disgusted all over the beach when they smoke their first cigarettes;

they disappear in the rain for most of a day to visit a mythical “maison de torture”, causing their parents great anxiety; the girls cause the goldfish in their rental house to turn white when they throw all their laxative suppositories (French children were expected to take them every night?) in the pond; Bacri has to pay for damage when some of the children apparently set fire to some of the play equipment in a private beach club where they are excluded, etc. Floating over all the fun is the story of the break-up of the parent’s marriage and its impact on the children. Since Baye has already in the beginning decided to split with Perry, she spends the first part of the film in Paris preparing her move, while the children are watched by a nanny. When Perry shows up toward the end, the drama gets intense. Perry does not want to separate, and the two get into a dramatic physical fight in the living room while Frédérique threatens to cut her own throat with a shard from a broken mirror. The film ends quietly with Perry making a last unsuccessful plea to Baye (he says he has changed), the children weeping inconsolably when they have to leave their beloved stray dog behind, and a later voice-over of Frederique writing to her dad as the camera pans over the picturesque beach. The film is not really a coming-of-age film, since the kids do not change or learn anything important. It deftly mixes drama and sadness with an optimistic sense that life is rewarding and the kids will turn out alright. (2013)

Caballos salvajes 1995 Marcelo Pineyro (Argentina) 2.5 Hector Alterio as plucky septuagenarian who enters a bank determined to take back the money the bank "stole" from a relative; Leonardo Sbaraglia is a pretty boy with a pony tale and a big smile who takes off with Alterio on the road; Cecilia Dopazo as mod chick with multi colored hair that meets the men halfway and continues on the run with them. A road movie from Buenos Aires through Bahia Blanca and farther south into Chubut (Andes) with coming of age (Sbaraglia) and a chase, as reporters try to make a romantic story out of their flight and bad guys show up trying to get back the extra money taken from the bank (not too clear what the money was doing there). A surprising, gripping beginning, but rest of movie is strictly linear with the principals fleeing for almost two more hours. Elements of 'Charlie Varrick' (bank robbers end up with more money and more trouble than they bargained for) and perhaps 'Butch Cassidy'. Sbaraglia of course gradually falls in love with Dopazo and they bore us with a long kiss toward the end. Some Argentine Robin Hood. Alterio is an anarchist, and when he discovers that he has the extra money, he gives it away to the good workers (who are on strike against the evil capitalists) by shooting it into the air and letting it float to the ground. When they finally arrive in western Chubut, Alterio releases some horses to the wilderness (hence the title), the lovers ride off with the horses, and Alterio dies with a bullet in his back. A lot of protest against the established Argentine order, but the film suggests that the anarchists may not be the answer. (2007)

Cabaret 1972 Bob Fosse (also choreography) 3.0 Liza Minnelli emoting and singing loudly as Sally Bowles, an expatriate déracinée in early 30s Berlin; Michael York perhaps too stiff upper lip and distinguished as the English graduate from Cambridge who becomes enmeshed with her; Helmut Griem as charming gap-toothed Berlin aristocrat who seduces both York and Minnelli; Joel Gray, thin, face painted thickly with make-up, leering, insistent, morally sneering master of ceremonies in nightclub where Sally works. Well mounted, well danced and choreographed moral drama taking place in (very) decadent Berlin on the eve of the Nazi takeover. One’s enjoyment of the film depends largely on one’s reaction to Liza Minnelli – her bigger-than-life song belting and her aggressive acting style make it difficult for some of us to appreciate the film. Bowles is ambitious to become an actress and not just a singer in the nightclub; she is morally anarchic with (apparently) her many lovers and her willingness to make serious moral concessions for money (becoming the lover of Griem while remaining in her relationship with York); at her heart she is insecure and needs the comfort that she will never accept. The main characters in the film seek life’s meaning in pleasure. The musical numbers as emceed by the leering Grey are a bit like a Greek chorus commenting on the plot goings-on: “Willkommen” is rousing; “Money Makes the World Go Round” comments on Minnelli’s exploitation of Griem; a song about infidelity; another about a man’s love for an ape; and of course the film ends with show-stopping performance of “Cabaret” by the high decibeled Minnelli. The subject is moral/sexual decadence depicted in several musical numbers where degenerate looking female characters grimace with make-up covered faces, make fun of romantic love (Grey’s number with the ape), cross-dress, and the women

constantly show us their (happily clothed) crotches and buttocks. Nazi brownshirts appear periodically in the film collecting donations in tin cups and (more often) beating up objectionables and killing the dog of a beautiful young Jewish woman. It is not clear whether the thesis is that the Nazis were a culmination of the decadence or whether they rode to power on top of a groundswell of opinion against it. The life of Berlin as revealed in the cabaret yields in a dissolve at the end to the room filled with brownshirts, an apparent reference to Hitler having come to power. A musical that has the courage to be pessimistic. (2009)

Cabin In the Woods 2012 Drew Goddard (writer Goddard and Josh Whedon) 3.5 Kristen Connolly as the good, sensible girl (the Virgin) among the five who make the trip to the cabin; Jesse Williams as similarly cautious and sensible guy who falls in love with Connolly before being eliminated; Anna Hutchison as pretty, blond, slutty-seductive wench that is the first to be dispatched by the forces of evil; Chris Hemsworth as the jock who turns into a target alpha male under the influence of the puppeteers; Fran Kranz as nerdy weed-smoking, smart guy, who sort of figures out what is going on and lasts to the end in the company of Connolly; Richard Jenkins low-key amusing as the chief bureaucrat organizing the proceedings in the woods. Roller-coaster-ride of a horror film that never gives the viewer a moment's rest in trying to figure out what is happening. The film begins with the standard genre plot – the five kids with different personality characteristics – going to the cabin in the woods, where they are attacked by the usual assortment of zombie monsters – the most dangerous one is big, hulking, and dragging a huge bear trap to catch his victims. It soon becomes obvious that events are teleguided by a bunch of bureaucrats working in a modern, high-tech room, although it is not at first obvious what they are trying to do – perhaps a profit-making venture for spectators hooked on violence (like the viewers who watch horror movies)? After extensive dim-lit mayhem, Franz and Connolly escape through a labyrinth of elevators and little boxes ending up in the command station of the exercise, where they inadvertently unleash a swarm of vicious monsters on the perpetrators (ah, sweet revenge!) and then discover that what is really going on is an attempt by (apparently) a governmental body to perform a sacrifice ritual that will placate powerful, evil gods living deep in the bowels of the earth; when the sacrifice is not completed (Franz escapes death – a no-no – as does the Virgin), then the two sit disconsolately on the steps of their underground chamber, reflect ruefully on the hopeless evil of humanity, and wait for the end of the world, which is brought by a devastating earthquake from primordial forces. There is plenty of blood and gore for horror fans: the zombie's attack on the lovers toward the beginning is scariest, since the viewer is still in the dark about the film's direction, but the special effects guys have a field day in the end as an astonishing variety of mindlessly brutal monsters attack and mangle the bodies of the bureaucrats who just a few minutes before were placing bets and celebrating with beer and lame jokes the completion of another successful ritual (so they thought). The film includes a lot of humor à la 'Evil Dead II' as they satirize the ritualized components of the horror film – the basement full of mysterious objects, the incantations in a foreign language that raise the zombie family from the dead, the killing off the kids one-by-one beginning with the sexually promiscuous, slamming shut the windows of the cabin in a vain attempt to keep out the monsters, etc. The film is very entertaining, especially since the numerous jerks of the narrative in different directions keep the viewer's head reeling, but aside from the very beginning, its scariness is undercut by the cross-cutting to the puppeteers and by the constant ambiguity of what the film is about. A lot of fun. (2012)

Caché 2005 Michael Haneke (France) 2.5 Daniel Auteuil as French literary talk show host with a not-so-good marriage; Juliette Binoche as his rather ill-tempered and resentful wife; Annie Girardot in small moving bit as Auteuil's mother speaking to him in bed. Sometimes interesting and intriguing, sometimes off-putting film about a man with a comfortable French bourgeois existence whose social and psychological equilibrium is challenged by a disquieting campaign of intimidation through mysteriously empty surveillance-like videos – often of him just leaving and returning to his house. The theme is clear enough: he committed a cruel act on an Algerian child when he was six years old; when the event is resurrected, he experiences much guilt and anxiety, including nightmares (one is which a chicken's head seems to be really cut off in front of the camera); the consequences include great pressure on his marriage, since Binoche emotes strongly in her anger and her resentment against him. The view of

some critics that the film is really about the guilty conscience of the French about their colonialist past is belied directly by the filmmaker in interviews; the film is not about what Auteuil did to the Algerian boy or what his motives were, but about Auteuil's *mauvaise conscience*. The film constantly makes us think about what is happening in the film, from whose point of view, etc. The inclusion of long-running video 'surveillance' footage provides surprising changes of perspective, and sometimes shocks, as when we realize that Auteuil's meeting with Majid (the Algerian boy grown up) has been taped by the stalker. The director intrudes a great deal in the film: he especially values the depiction of ambiguity. Even non-surveillance shots run a very long time, making us wonder whether the scene is surveillance or 'real' and what the point of the scene is; narrative suggestions are made in the film that are then dropped from the story, a good example being the 12-year-old son's conviction that the mother is having an affair with her best friend – it is then dropped. One scene between Auteuil and Binoche is then repeated, but with a coda added to the end of it. We are constantly teased with false leads and ambiguity in our genre-driven quest to find out who is sending the tapes and the bloody children's pictures. The most egregious scene is the concluding one in which the camera stands outside the son's school and just runs for a few minutes as the kids leave class: on the one hand, it looks like another surveillance shot, meaning that the surveillance continues; on the other, one thinks it might mean that the story is over – things have returned to normal; but then one learns from the director's interview that the director included a meeting between Auteuil's and Majid's sons in the picture (completely invisible on a TV screen), perhaps suggesting that the two had collaborated in some sort of revenge on their parents. Instead of the magic of ambiguity, one leaves with annoyance at the inability of the director to tell a straight story! Film is rather self-indulgent for being too personal and quirky. (2009)

Cafe Metropole 1937 Edward H. Griffith (20c Fox: wr. Gregory Ratoff) 3.0 Tyrone Power competent and glamorous but not particularly funny as American who owes a lot of money to the casino-restaurant at the beginning of the film; Loretta Young as sprightly, amusing, sharp deliverer of dialogue as she visits Paris with her parents; Adolphe Menjou suave, charming, and scheming as the owner of the restaurant where the action centers; Gregory Ratoff very funny as the irascible Russian noble emigre simultaneously venal and proud of his noble lineage; Charles Winninger befuddled as Young's adoring father; Helen Westley clever and sensible as Winninger's sister visiting Paris with him; Christian Rub as Menjou's accountant, periodically despairing at the parlous condition of the restaurant's books. Amusing screwball comedy about Power, who is forced to impersonate a Russian nobleman in order to pay back a gambling debt owed to Menjou; instead of fleecing his intended victim, Young, he falls in love with her; since Power has a conscience, he cannot go through with the masquerade, but Young steps in and pursues him relentlessly until they promise to marry and live happily ever after. The plot is topsy-turvy with a lot of sudden switches and surprises, most of them credible until the end when somehow everyone emerges happy and unscathed despite difficult situations. The film takes place in glamorous, upper-class settings in Paris – a fancy night club-restaurant where everyone is dressed in immaculate tuxedos and eating "special" caviar; and a luxury hotel with huge rooms furnished in Louis XVI style. The film is well written; screwball comedy dominates the best scenes. Ratoff is hilarious as the true Prince Penaev with a huge ego outraged at Power's masquerade; he introduces himself twice as descended from a womanizing family that was related 25 times to the tsar, five of them legitimately. Young pursues Power shamelessly and has loud and violent confrontations with her father over whether she will marry Power. Winninger and Westley perform an amusing routine as a gangster boss and his "moll" when the French police arrive on their boat train to arrest them for holding false passports (a further maneuver of Menjou to get his money back). The band in the restaurant intones the tsarist national anthem every time a Russian prince – Ratoff or Power (who is impersonating a prince of Ratoff's family) – enters. The fun is light and harmless; the condition of the film is nigh flawless; the performances are bright and sharp; the writing is honed and amusing; the behavior of the wealthy principals is zany and, while a bit irresponsible, harmless enough. Young and Ratoff are the life of the party. (2010)

Café Society 2016 Woody Allen 3.0 Familiar-seeming nostalgic Allen comedy contrasting Hollywood and New York in the 1930s. Steve Carell rather stiff as name-dropping Hollywood agent and true lover yearning for union with a younger woman; Jesse Eisenberg sincere in dual role as aspiring

Hollywood big shot and mob-employed New York big shot – he performs the self-deprecating, one-liner Allen role with occasional dexterity; Kristen Stewart charming, fresh-faced as Nebraska girl, who makes decision to marry the successful guy rather than the young swain that lives in a cheap motel; Jennie Berlin hilarious as nervous, hovering New York Jewish mom, expertly embodying Allen’s Jewish memories; Corey Stoll (Hemingway in ‘Paris’) as Eisenberg’s mobster brother, who in the end is executed for his crimes in the Sing-Sing electric chair; Stephen Kunken as another brother, left-wing and obsessed with morality and doing the right thing; Parker Posey as usual over-the-top bicoastal sophisticate. The strongest part of the film is the cinematography (Vittorio Storaro) and the art direction, creating a lovely picture of 1930s art modern Hollywood bathed in golden California light; the film opens with the camera gliding alongside a swimming pool with a striking mid-century mansion in the background. The narrative is a traditional love triangle that does not bring happiness to the principals: Carell, surprisingly romantic, convinces Stewart to marry him, leaving Eisenberg bereft, but not for too long, since he finds a beautiful blond substitute in the cheerful, trusting Blake Lively; Eisenberg and Stewart meet again after a few years, but they bravely accept reality and the film ends with separate shots of the two resigned to live without romantic fulfillment. Wry observations ensue from the tired-sounding narrator (Allen) that life is a comedy written by a sadistic author – perhaps the only reference to his existentialist preoccupations thoroughly covered in 2015’s ‘Irrational Man’. Some of the New York scenes – e.g., visiting jazz clubs, the arrest and execution of Stoll – seem extraneous to the plot. Allen continues his critique of superficial, celebrity-obsessed Hollywood (e.g., ‘Annie Hall’; listening to Carell talk will test your knowledge of 30s stars); his amusing treatment of his New York Jewish roots will recall ‘Radio Days’, ‘Crimes and Misdemeanors’, etc. One wonders what Allen’s wife thinks about his theme that life is filled with inevitable romantic disappointments. Film is pleasant and often entertaining, but since it operates in the author’s usual thematic territory, it sometimes feels repetitive and derivative. Perhaps it is too late to expect something fresh and original along the lines of his great 80s films. (2016)

The Caine Mutiny 1954 Edward Dmytryk now in typical Hollywood form 3.0 Humphrey Bogart as the twitching, intense, eyes darting, steel-ball rolling in right hand captain of the destroyer escort ‘Caine’; Van Johnson as the executive officer – a regular American guy (he didn’t get good grades in high school); Fred MacMurray as the communications officer, who is a snob (he is writing a novel when off duty) and out after his own advantage; Robert Francis crew cut, clean-cut would-be star as the most junior officer who goes along with everybody else; José Ferrer as Johnson’s defense lawyer when he is put on trial for mutiny; E.G Marshall effective in small role as prosecutor in the trial; May Wynn highly 50s (her hats!) as Francis’ love interest. Sometimes engrossing naval drama based on Herman Wouk’s novel; the cast is studded with 50s male stars; Harry Cohn insisted on the dorky, uninteresting, overwhelmed with Hollywood-style music romantic subplot between Francis and Wynn. Despite its 50s Hollywood faults, the film is fairly engrossing. The leading stars act their roles effectively: Johnson as the all-American guy who does what he has to – relieve his commanding officer of command during a dangerous typhoon – despite the risks; MacMurray as the cynic moral coward who encourages Johnson to relieve Captain Queeg, but then refuses to reveal his role in the court martial; José Ferrer as the sharp-tongued, morally holier-than-thou defense counsel who reluctantly agrees to defend Johnson despite his distaste (motivation unclear), and after he gets the not guilty verdict, feels free to get drunk and denounce the celebrating ‘Caine’ officers for being moral cowards (the concluding scene would appear to be a sop to the worried U.S. Navy). Star of the show was of course Bogart, who depicted Queeg’s neurotic, paranoid behavior (primarily with nervous tics, darting eyes, and of course rolling the steel balls in his hand) effectively but without overacting. A memorable sequence is of course the missing strawberries, when he turns the ship upside down to find the crewman who was responsible for the theft (he refuses to recognize that the strawberries were eaten by the mess boys). Film has gripping climax in the 20-minute courtroom scene, where Ferrer and prosecutor Marshall wage contrary campaigns to twist the evidence in their direction. The climax is Queeg on the witness stand – he is baited into a paranoid-like revelation of his feelings of inferiority and persecution – steel balls and all – in front of the astounded judges, who find Johnson not guilty. Movie is a bit over-polished, music alternates between patriotic and smarmy, credits are full of tributes to the U.S. Navy, and the romantic subplot needed to be left on the cutting room floor; still an engaging drama. (2006)

Call Northside 777 1948 Henry Hathaway; 20c Fox 3.0 James Stewart in his familiar persona as lanky, laconic, easy-going, and yet idealistic newspaper reporter with his customary fedora hat stubbornly and persistently pursuing the cause of justice; Richard Conte sincere, moving, and self-sacrificing as wrongly convicted cop killer falsely identified by only a single witness; Lee J. Cobb as nonsense, sympathetic city editor who often gives Stewart a nudge; Helen Walker as highly domestic, supportive wife who smokes in bed; Bette Garde as the boozy, disreputable woman who fingered Conte; E.G Marshall unbilled in small role. Excellent realist-style docudrama about a man who was condemned to life imprisonment for a cop killing he did not commit, and the investigation by a newspaper reporter to discover the truth – find the real culprit and get Conte out of prison; he is at first reluctant (Is anybody investigating what happened to the family of the cop?) but then becomes convinced of the subject's innocence. Shot in crisp black and white seemingly mostly on location; a solemn sounding narrator helps the plot along; lots of shots of the newsroom, the presses rolling, impressive shots of the interior of a massive penitentiary, and Stewart stalking through the streets pursuing his obsession; matter-of-fact, functional, quietly elegant cinematography that follows Stewart's dogged, methodical investigation step-by-step in the face of opposition from the Chicago Police Department and the state attorney's office. Despite some similarities, the realist, documentary style and mostly high-key lighting is in stark contrast with the pessimistic and fatalistic approach of film noir. In spite of the refusal of the corrupt witness to change her testimony, Stewart is finally successful, when he uses a recently invented technique of photo enlargement to prove that the witness had lied in the trial. Film goes out of its way not to be critical of the authorities: the prison warden is avuncular and helpful, and Conte shakes his hand heartily when he is finally freed; the police photography expert admits that he is no longer sure that Conte is guilty and he helps Stewart with the final evidence; Stewart comments to Conte that this is a great country, since few countries in the world would admit that it made a mistake and free a wrongly convicted prisoner. The narrative has the familiar Hollywood curve with Stewart standing modestly off the side at the end when Conte exits the prison to meet his family (he will not however be reunited to his wife, since she has remarried -- at Conte's insistence). Entertaining and sometimes gripping. (2009)

Calvary 2014 John Michael McDonagh (Ireland) 3.0 Brendan Gleeson in towering role as conflicted, wryly ironic pastor in a small town in the West of Ireland (County Sligo); Kelly Reilly has perhaps too much screen time as Gleeson's daughter (he was a widower before he became a priest); Aiden Gillen as sharp-tongued, extremely cynical atheist local doctor; Chris O'Dowd as seemingly mild-mannered local butcher with a wayward wife; Emmet Walsh looking ancient and clinging to life as writer and friend of Gleeson; David Wilmot as assistant pastor under Gleeson – Gleeson has contempt for his unimaginative and insensitive ways; Killion Scott as quirky young confidant of Gleeson who says he is contemplating suicide because he doesn't get enough sex. Serious film that treats the ills of the Catholic Church in Ireland as seen through the trials and tribulations of Gleeson – a big change from the light-hearted charm of 'The Guard' 1911, McDonagh's only previous film. Taking on the status of the Catholic faith in Ireland, the film has an obvious relation to Bernanos' 'Diary of a County Priest' (mentioned once in the film). The film starts off with a bang in the confessional when a penitent announces to Gleeson that he is going to kill him in a week's time, because he is a good man and is thus a perfect scapegoat for the ills of the church inflicted on children ("I first tasted semen at the age of seven"). The film then follows the struggles of Gleeson in the intervening time: confiding in his alienated daughter who has tried to commit suicide because of the death of her mother and the perceived abandonment by her father; advising Scott to use pornography or go to Dublin and find a girl with loose morals to satisfy his hunger for sex; antagonistic exchanges with the ironic Gillen, who thinks it is easier to play his own role as cynical atheist than Gleeson's role as the dedicated priest in an increasingly Godless land; the senseless death of a Frenchman in a car accident and Gleeson's moving contact with his wife, who has a deep faith that cannot be shaken by adversity. In no cases is Gleeson's activity conventionally spiritual or religious; he believes that his job is to love and to help. His confidence and dedication however is shaken as the date of the assassination approaches – he goes on a drunken rampage and alienates the priest he works with. The film's climax on the beach reveals O'Dowd as the unlikely perpetrator, who – seething with rage – kills Gleeson with two shots, one in the head that blows his brains out. Overall, the film

reflects the rage of alienated Catholics against their traditional church, particularly in regard to the child sex abuse scandals. The film has some sparkling Irish personalities and moving moments of spiritual anguish; it is however often dark and weighty. (2015)

Cama Adentro 2005 Jorge Gaggero (Argentina) 3.5 Norma Aleandro as upper middle class (at least she thinks so) woman, Beba, living in Buenos Aires during the 2001 financial crisis; Norma Argentina, an amateur actress, as her live-in maid who keeps her apartment in immaculate condition. Intimate film about the evolving relationships of a spoiled middle class woman, who is glamorous and isolated from society and her plain, quiet, faithful maid of 28 years. Aleandro has few friends or family – her daughter lives in Madrid, her ex-husband sees her occasionally, she plays bridge with her gossip woman friends who like to talk about the perennial subject – difficulties of getting on with their domestic help. Argentina has a man friend that she intends to live with (get married?), but he seems lazy and at the end of the film he appears to be unfaithful. In sum, despite lack of deeper communication, the two women are closer to one another than to anyone else. Their relationship is complicated: they are bound together mainly by the employer-employee relationship, and it fractures when Beba falls seven months behind in her salary; Dora leaves her, but finding life with her boyfriend unsatisfactory, she is drawn frequently back to Beba's apartment. In the end, Beba has to leave her grand apartment and move into a smaller one; having too much furniture including a large piano, she takes it to Dora's house; the two sit in her house, and the viewer is not certain what Beba's plans are. Aleandro is marvelous portraying the tensions between her 'grande dame' upper class social aspirations and her crumbling financial condition: we see her glamorously coiffed and dressed in pawn shops trying to pawn her silver, etc. The film plays often like a documentary – little dialogue, the relationship between the two women is depicted through silences and simple statements on surface matters that betray deeper issues. Quiet, insightful, sensitive film with realist texture. (2008)

Camille 1936 George Cukor (MGM: Thalberg) 4.0 Greta Garbo luminous, elusive, wistful as Marguerite Gautier, the beautiful Parisian courtesan; Robert Taylor as her serious, very good-looking, family-man suitor, Armand, who wants her all to himself; Laura Hope Crews very amusing as the nosy, interfering, hyperactive Prudence; Lionel Barrymore a little dull as the father of Armand, concerned about his son's future; Jessie Ralph very plain, emotionally attached and loyal personal servant to Marguerite; Henry Daniell leering, sometimes almost diabolical Baron de Varville, wealthy lover of Marguerite; Lenore Ulric pungently amusing as the shallow rival of Marguerite; Rex O'Malley forever positive and smiling as Marguerite's faithful friend. Radiant, memorable 30s tearjerker given the ultimate high-class treatment by MGM. Film is slightly titillating in its initial treatment of the Parisian demi-monde, where wealthy men are seeking beautiful mistresses, who are pursuing money and jewels from their boyfriends; but film soon segues into true love when Marguerite meets Armand, who woos her with all his heart until she finally yields and flees to the country with him; she then agrees tearfully to renounce him when Armand's father makes his fervent plea for the sake of the family; and then in the final scene Armand returns to be with her in her dying breath. Film is riveting throughout. Garbo delivers perhaps her best performance: elusive, a little mysterious, world-weary and a bit cynical ("Is such happiness even possible?" "The chickens and the cattle will make better friends than the people in Paris.") perhaps because she knows that she is sick and is going to die; radiant, resigned, trying to please her lover when on her deathbed. The rest of the cast is excellent – every character clearly delineated: Taylor is extremely handsome, convincingly fervent, coquettishly dressed as her lover; the Baron de Varville is pungently presented as the disquieting solution to Marguerite's financial problems; Ulric and Laura Hope Crews memorable and entertaining as Marguerite's fellow courtesans. The film is in optimal condition – the detail stands out with precision and in high contrast. Sets and décor are eye-catching throughout: the theater where the demi-monde pretends it is watching the show but is really looking for intrigue; the brilliantly lit salons where the characters drink too much and laugh heartily at off-color jokes; Marguerite's modest country cottage where she enjoys her brief moment of happiness; the sumptuous bedroom where she is comforted by the arrival of her friend Gaston and then overjoyed by the presence of Armand as she dies. The cinematography excels in sensitive close-ups of Garbo's face, particularly the last scene when her head falls back from an embrace with Armand, the camera tracking in on her face and

then fading out, perhaps a bit too fast to evince the maximum emotion from the audience. Perhaps this is a woman's movie efficiently yanking tears out of the female audience, but every element falls into place to heighten the intensity of the emotion. A masterpiece of the 1930s Hollywood film. (2011)

The Campaign 2012 Jay Roach 3.0 Will Ferrell as usual immature, off-the-wall, ill-tempered, potty-mouthed, horndog self as North Carolina Congressman that suddenly finds himself challenged in what he thought was a shoo-in fifth term; Zach Galifianikis very funny as childlike, wimpy city tour guide (no one shows up for his tours) that is suddenly tapped by the Motches to oppose Ferrell; John Lithgow (thin and elegant) and Dan Aykroyd (portly and jolly) as the Motches, obvious versions of the Koch Brothers that control politics in extreme southeastern North Carolina; Brian Cox as Galifianikis' father, also a political player; Dylan McDermott as sometimes amusing as Zach's cutthroat campaign manager; Katherine LaNasa and Sarah Baker as significant political wives. Better than average Will Ferrell vehicle that skewers American politics effectively for the first half of the film. Campaigns are moronic with candidates spouting senseless slogans – America, Jesus, the flag, etc.; big money such as the Motch brothers, who are planning to open a doll-making factory with no worker or environmental regulations, is behind the candidates – if one candidate doesn't work, then you just dump him and find another one; you of course rush to kiss babies, which leads to the premiere shot of the film – a nicely delivered one of Ferrell slugging a baby (by mistake) with slow-motion spittle and jaw distortion reminiscent of the best of boxing movies. The film however goes hyper soft after about midpoint: moronic Galifianikis suddenly gets some sense and a conscience, and begins to move away from his political bosses; favored again by the Motches, Ferrell wins the election by hook and crook, but then he nobly steps back, and hands the victory to Galifianikis (!), who in a postscript initiates an inquiry into the doings of the Motches. All the rough edges exposed in the first part of the film are suddenly filed off, and we are left with motherhood and apple pie. More amusing sequences than most Ferrell flicks: slugging the baby; having sex with groupie Shana in a rocking port-a-potty (“you get used to the stench”) while blue collar guys wait outside; the wrong-number phone call to a hyper-Christian (Jack McBrayer) family in which Ferrell talks dirty to what he thinks is his girlfriend; Ferrell's family's dinner conversation, in which his hyper-ambitious wife has her children put in their earphones while she talks expletive-laced turkey about the political career of her husband; Ferrell's visit to a congregation of snake-wielding Christians, in which he is bitten by several of them because, say the members of the church, he does not truly believe; perhaps the funniest laugh-out-loud scene in which a clueless Ferrell mangles the Lord's prayer (“Give us this day our daily pizza”) trying to respond to the cues of his campaign manager. A bit of political satire and a lot of heavy laughs. (2015)

The Candidate 1972 Michael Ritchie 3.5 Robert Redford, Peter Boyle, Don Porter (as the Senator), Allen Garfield, Melvyn Douglas. Classic study of politics from point of view of end of Nixon era; and therefore quite cynical about the political process. Redford looking a bit too glamorous, but overall film works since his acting is not bad and the Kennedyesque glamour appeal is part of the theme. He is a legal-aid type leader, who is recruited by Democratic Party campaign manager to defeat California senator Jarmon, an old Reaganesque fox, who knows his politics. Part of the deal is that he will not have to trim his message, but he can say what he wants. McKay powers through the primary, due largely to the notoriety of his name (his father, Douglas, had been governor of California). Campaign takes off, and in final weeks he gives in to his managers and delivers safe, mealy mouthed sound bites; he ends up winning due mainly to his vigorous youth and his good looks, which raises the blood pressure of the women voters. Toward end classic scene in the back of the car, where McKay parodies his own repeated sayings into nonsensical phrases (to the dismay of Boyle!), and then delivers his famous tongue raspberry. When he wins, his superficial wife is excited about finding a house in Georgetown, and McKay says to Boyle, “What do we do now?” which is drowned out by the din of victory celebration. Film concentrates on McKay and on the campaign without sappy side plots; makes for honest searching movie, but sometimes dull. Has a documentary-like quality – always following the candidate, handheld camera swaying in the crowd, swish pans, and overlapping dialogue. Movie seems to have inconsistent point of view at times: Doesn't it make a difference who is senator? Is it such a big price to pay to mouth generalities during the

campaign? Isn't it worth it? A good symbol – “You Lose” written on the inside of a matchbook is incentive to run in the beginning, but has become a message of moral failure by the end. (2006)

A Canterbury Tale 1944 Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (Britain) 3.5 An ambiguous, poetic film tying the modern visitor to Kent (England) to the traditions and culture of the province. Sheila Sims, pert, cute, inexperienced-acting young girl visiting Kent from London in World War II to work in agriculture; Eric Portman, handsome, reserved, traditional as rather mysterious justice of the peace in fictitious Kent town Chillingbourne; Dennis Price as outspoken soldier serving in the Kent countryside in 1943; John Sweet, actual sergeant in the US Army as naïve, outspoken, nasal-voiced American soldier that finds himself by accident in the company of the other principals. The three young people engage in a hunt for the perpetrator of the incident, in which someone pours glue in the hair of young women coming in from the outside (it is actually obvious from the beginning that Portman is responsible). The detective work however is only a side light to the attention given to the beauties and mysteries of the Kentish countryside. The film begins with a short depiction of a medieval pilgrimage to Canterbury, where people from all over England go to the cathedral city to seek blessings and to do penance (the words of Portman). A stylish edit, morphing a shot of a falcon on the wing into a warplane, takes the viewer to the modern day. The cinematography gives always a bucolic view of the countryside, which however is broken on occasion by military vehicles plowing through (the disruption caused by the war); Portman gives lectures attended mainly by soldiers on duty urging us all to be cognizant of the mysteries of the past and our bond with our ancestors, a point also emphasized by the time that Sims and Portman lie together in the high grass next to Pilgrim's Way listening to “the tread of pilgrims' feet”; Sweet has an engaging conversation with a local wheelwright about lumber and the manufacture of wagons, comparing work methods in Kent and Oregon. What happens to the main characters is ambiguous: Sims and Price become more attuned to the past, there is a suggestion that Sims and Portman might develop a romantic relationship; Price and Sims painstakingly demonstrate that the hair glue perpetrator is Portman, who as a traditionalist wants to remind young women to keep their distance from soldiers (the new and the modern) and to remain faithful to their families and old boyfriends. All four then take the train to nearby Canterbury, where the young people find “blessings” in the presence of the cathedral: Price, as a former organist (in a movie theater), finds fulfillment in playing the organ in Canterbury Cathedral; Sweet, who had not heard from his Oregon girlfriend in months, finds to his relief that the letters had been lost in the mail and that she is still his girl; and Sims, while visiting the old trailer where she had spent time with her fiancé, finds out that he is not dead after all but has been found alive. Only Portman, who seems on the verge of making a romantic declaration to Sims, remains on the side unsatisfied; perhaps he is the character doing penance. Proceedings end with a spirited rendition of “Onward Christian Soldiers”. The film is always poetic and engaging, although its impact is blunted by its ambiguity and inconsistent focus. Overall, it takes its place next to “I Know Where I'm Going” as a tribute to the old-fashioned traditional ethos of a British province, “the wisdom and the beauty of continuity and tradition”. No doubt however that the Scottish film is more eloquent for being more direct and romantic. A flawed masterpiece that charms and beguiles the viewer. (2016)

Cape Fear 1961 J. Lee Thompson 3.0 Robert Mitchum as Max Cady, low-key but menacing as a bare-chested, violent sexual predator back in town (North Carolina) to exact revenge from...; Gregory Peck noble and gentlemanly as Southern coastal lawyer Sam Bowden – he develops sharper edges as the film progresses; Polly Bergen effective but colorless as Sam's wife, Peggy, in traditional Southern role in need of protection; Lori Martin not very fetching (large head with perfectly coiffed hair, small body) as the couple's 15-year-old daughter (the director wanted Hayley Mills to play the part); Martin Balsam as the local police chief caught in successive professional quandaries; Telly Savalas as smooth, but rather ruthless private detective. The original of the film remade by Scorsese in 1991. The first half deals with Cady's harassing of Bowden and his family – taking the keys out of the latter's car as he leans through the window in front of the courthouse, killing the family dog, tracking the women in the family, threatening Nancy in the basement of her school, leering at her (dressed in very tight short shorts) in a marina in town. Not able to get effective police protection because Cady is careful not to commit any crime, Bowden then takes counter-measures, including hiring some toughs to beat Cady up. Sometimes

bare-chested and with hooded eyes, Mitchum is disquieting in his relaxed but persistent pursuit of Sam and his family; when he descends into the school locker room in pursuit of Nancy, the camera photographs his body at hip level, revealing his powerful arms (violence) and the outline of his penis in his pants (sexual danger). Despite the weight of the Hays Office, the film projects well the sexual danger that Sam's wife and daughter run at his hands. Sam, originally scrupulous about staying within the law, becomes more hard-nosed as the film progresses. With the connivance of the police department, he sets a trap for Cady by moving his wife and daughter to a houseboat on the Cape Fear River and then drawing Cady to it; meanwhile, he and a policeman (soon to be killed by Cady) wait in ambush for an excuse to kill him. Cady of course complies, and with his shirt off to show his good body build, he sets off to terrorize Peggy, who screams a lot but seems to be half-enjoying what is going on. Cady's real intention is to rape Nancy, but before he can carry it through, he is attacked by Sam, who after a lengthy struggle in the woods, shoots Cady in the shoulder (with a revolver that has been dragged underwater three times). Given the opportunity to finish him off, Sam says he would rather see him waste away slowly in a prison for the rest of his life; the viewer is surprised at Sam's relishing of his revenge. The film is particularly enjoyable in the first half; the second half drags out excessively the planning and the springing of the trap for Cady. The stony-faced menace of Mitchum is the center of the film. More attention to Sam's character transformation might have made the script more interesting. (2015)

Capote 2005 Bennett Miller 3.5 Philip Seymour Hoffmann in show-stopping portrayal of Truman Capote, Catherine Keener as Harper Lee, Capote's low key, sensible childhood friend and sidekick who is his alter ego and leads the audience in deciphering Capote's psychology, Bob Balaban in small role as Capote's editor at the *New Yorker*, Chris Cooper as Alvin Dewey, the stoic, determined chief investigator for the Kansas Bureau of Investigation on the case, Clifton Collins as the Robert Blake-look alike Perry Smith, the conflicted, sensitive psychopath with a sad background (in a scene Hoffmann draws the parallel between Perry and himself). Following *In Cold Blood's* visualization of Capote's book, this film details Capote's fascination with the case, his research, his friendship with Smith, and his publication of the book. Focus clearly on Capote: Hoffmann's portrayal of him is excellent impersonation and expert portrayal of his psychology in pursuing the case. Capote clearly seeks the limelight – there are several cocktail party scenes of him making outrageous wisecracks to make people laugh and to bask in the bright light of celebrity. His ego and vanity stand out at every turn; he always enjoys being the center of attention putting anyone else who happens to be in the room in his shadow. He becomes consumed by the Clutter murders – his obsession for six years after the grisly 1959 killings; Capote is clearly a hard worker, obsessively committed to his pursuit of literary fame. (The real subject of the book would seem to be how to turn a rather routine mass murder into a great drama that enables Truman to be even more famous.) Also his guile: he lies to his supposed friend Perry to manipulate him into telling him about what actually happened the night of the murder (as any viewer of the first film knows, Perry turned from the decent one of the pair into the man who slit the father's throat and then blasted the other three in the face with his shotgun). When it is in the writer's interest to have the men stay alive, he helps get lawyers to carry the delaying appeals to higher courts; when he needs them executed/dead in order to finish his book, he avoids having anything to do with their final appeals. He is in a kind of emotional crisis at the end, presumably because of his guilt from not doing everything he could to save his friend; he finally goes to prison to see Perry one more time before execution, and then he witnesses the rather grisly, explicit hanging (happily they put a black hood over the condemned man's head). So, at the end, the men are hanged as we always knew they would be, and Capote is a little shaken but with mission accomplished – his fame is assured. The film's script is reticent and presents both sides on Capote's character – it emphasizes that he is self-aggrandizing and manipulative, but also recalls his talent as a writer, his devotion to his craft, and his charm. (2006)

Captain Blood 1935 Michael Curtiz 2.5 Errol Flynn disappointingly benign in his first starring role; Olivia DeHavilland glamorous and always perfectly dressed and coiffed as his upper class love interest; Lionel Atwill rather weak villain as DeHavilland's uncle; Basil Rathbone with marginal French accent as pirate captain in league with Flynn. Rather disappointing big budget Warners feature as part of swashbuckler trend in the wake of the creation of the Production Code Administration. Flynn is

sold into slavery in Jamaica attracting the romantic attention of DeHavilland; he escapes with a whole crew of his men at the time of a pirate attack and has adventures as a pirate in the Caribbean, including a good fencing contest with Rathbone on Laguna Beach; he returns to Port Royal just in time to save the city from a French attack, he is appointed the governor of the island (!), and apparently lives happily ever after when finally united with DeHavilland (their long-awaited kiss does not melt many hearts). The film is mostly studio-bound with Flynn and others in the studio water tank and a lot of blank sky in the background when the men are aboard ship. Fight scenes are fairly exciting, especially the climactic ones with two French warships; they use large sized miniatures (15 feet) in the battle scenes, which have rigging falling and small boats blown out of the water with decent realism. Film is way too PG-13 for the pirate swashbuckler genre: all the men in Flynn's crew are decent, more-or-less all-American guys; Flynn looks way too innocent, his long, wavy hair is way too perfect, he is way too nice, and he smiles too much with his straight white teeth; DeHavilland's glamorous Hollywood star persona and voluminous satin dresses do not allow much fire or sexuality to shine through. Wall-to-wall symphonic score by Korngold. Curtiz does a decent job of directing with moving camera, shadows on the wall, and appropriate close-ups. Film is interesting for its depiction of Hollywood situation in 1935, but it is too watered-down for a true swashbuckler, and it does not have the suspense and romantic intrigue of 'The Prisoner of Zenda'. (2009)

Captain Fantastic 2016 Matt Ross 2.5 Sometimes interesting, sometimes irritating and manipulative comedy-drama about the relationship between American society and its non-conformists. Viggo Mortensen as heedless, inflexible, non-conformist fanatic, who drives his wife to insanity and rules his children like a little dictator; Trin Miller in dreams as Mortensen's deceased wife; George MacKay as bemused oldest son, who accepts his father but also realizes his ignorance and gets accepted to Ivy League colleges behind his dad's back; Nicholas Hamilton – perhaps 12 years old – as son that questions his father and eventually rebels against him; Kathryn Hahn as Mortensen's sister, who disagrees vehemently with her brother; Stephen Zahn as Hahn's more moderate husband; Frank Langella as children's steely but loving grandfather, determined to remove the children from their father to save their future; Ann Dowd as affectionate grandma trying to keep the family together. Mortensen raises his six children in cultural isolation in the Pacific Northwest: they learn to kill a deer with a knife, skin it and eviscerate it; climb a sheer rock wall in a driving rain; they are all delighted to receive hunting knives as presents from their father. Most of the film is a cross-country odyssey in the well-equipped family bus (no clue on where the money comes from) to attend the funeral of the mother somewhere in the Midwest. After the guys disrupt the funeral, Langella removes the kids from the custody of their father, but inexplicably they end up with him – joining him in digging up her body from the grave (she looks radiant – no sign of decomposition), cremating it next to a beautiful lake, flushing the ashes down a toilet (mom's request). They leave the grandparents, and then join their dad in a kind of compromise West Sonoma house: dad is now shaved, the kids now go to school (they are waiting for the school bus), and the oldest son has taken off for Namibia (we aren't told why), after which he will presumably go to Yale. The film is most entertaining when Mortensen is acting outrageous: arguing insensitively with his sister while visiting in her house, leading the children in a shoplifting venture to “liberate the food” in a super market, ridiculing and bamboozling a police officer by having his children act like religious fanatics, in a mobile home park displaying his genitals to the public in full frontal glory, bursting into his wife's funeral in a flaming red suit and then high jacking the mike from the priest. The film wants us to enjoy Mortensen's antics while we disapprove of most of what he is doing to his children, who glory in deadly weapons and hunting gore, speak in obscenities, and spout leftwing shibboleths like a bunch of Maoist puppets (actually it is mostly the girls who do that, while two of the boys develop rebellious ideas). The end of the film is pure hokum, as Mortensen shaves off his non-conformist beard, sobs for the camera, and then modifies his ways so he can keep the children. The film is entertaining with excellent acting, especially from the charismatic Mortensen; but the itch of irritation is persistent. (2016)

Captain Phillips 2013 (Paul Greengrass; writer Billy Ray) 3.5 Tom Hanks as the captain of the Maersk Alabama, the first American freighter to be hijacked since the Barbary pirates; Barkhad Abdi as the intense and “skinny” teenage commander of the four Somali pirates that attack Phillips' ship.

Superior adventure-thriller that covers the 2009 attempted hijacking of the Alabama, the kidnapping of Phillips, and the extended process of rescuing him. Film is perhaps a bit long, but the narrative is crisp, the characters are convincing, and the script is innovative in covering both sides and avoiding the typical Hollywood triumphalism -- a minimum of flag-waving and no rising symphonic celebrations when American military men go into action. Because the viewer is introduced to the Somali characters before the action begins, we sympathize in part with the pirates -- they are no terrorists, they are pressured and intimidated into piracy by local warlords, they are barely teenagers, they have internal divisions, one of them is a scared teenager with eyes of a frightened puppy, we connect to Muse (Abdi) who keeps telling everyone "everything is going to be ok". The solidarity of victim and kidnapper is emphasized when Abdi excuses himself to Phillips saying that he has a boss, and the Captain replies "we all have bosses." The long rescue sequence is interesting and restrained: the captain of the USS Bainbridge tries his level best to negotiate an agreement before the arrival of the Navy Seals; when the impressive array of US warships arrives on the scene, they rest in the water mostly immobile; once the Seals go into action, they use effective deceptive diversion tactics, and when they finally kill the three remaining kidnappers by firing simultaneously through the windows of the lifeboat, we are split between admiring the Seals' expertise and mourning the death of the "innocents" whose blood has been splattered all over the traumatized Phillips. Hanks is compelling -- from the reassuring calm and efficiency of his command on board before the kidnapping to his almost catatonic emotional meltdown during the final crisis (in reality he returned to service a year after his return home). The documentary-like details are always interesting and convincing -- from the structure of the Alabama, to the tactics used by the captain to ward off the pirates, to the rescue plans executed by the US military. A liberal use of intense hyper closeups with handheld cameras. The pirates are so few and so lightly armed and their skiffs are so small and vulnerable, one wonders why the shipowners did not hire armed guards to protect their ships. Interesting, fair, and often exciting action film. (2014)

Carancho 2010 Pablo Trapero (Argentina) 3.0 Gut-wrenching melodrama about doomed couple that meets on the nasty streets of Buenos Aires. Ricardo Darin, charismatic, hard-hitting and compelling as disbarred lawyer, Sosa, who operates a con game for a crooked organization cheating insurance companies and their clients out of their payoffs after accidents (he is called "carancho" -- vulture); Martina Gusman (actually the wife of director Trapero) as newly minted doctor, Lujan, working in an ambulance patrolling the Buenos Aires suburbs. Décor is cinema vérité realistic -- shaky camera shooting nighttime street traffic, bloody car accidents, and the grimy insides of a public hospital in available lighting. Darin and Gusman meet and begin to date, but from the beginning everything goes wrong, warning the viewer that the relationship is doomed. Moments of tenderness and happiness are overcome by conflict and violence -- Lujan is so overworked that she is too tired to make love; Sosa's plot intentionally to break the legs of a client (and split the insurance payout) goes awry resulting in the death of the subject; when it becomes known that Lujan is helping Sosa keep insurance money from his bosses, they beat her to a pulp; Sosa then takes his revenge murdering one of them (blood everywhere); and even when protected from the police by the big boss El Perro, Sosa devises a far-fetched plot to wreck the boss's car, steal the money, and run (to God knows where) with Lujan; the attempt of course misfires resulting in a crushing accident: with EMT dialogue delivered through a black screen the viewer learns that Lujan has survived, but that Sosa is dead. The film is reminiscent of the "doomed kid" movies of the late 40s -- 'Gun Crazy' and 'They Live by Night' -- in which a simpatico romantic couple gets on the wrong side of the law and is pursued to destruction by the implacable forces of order. Excellent acting by the two principals convinces the viewer that they are good people genuinely in love trying to escape the mean streets that surround them; it is easy to see that they will not succeed; while perhaps excessively violent, their destruction kindles a horrified sympathy. The film also shows the outrage of the director at the bloodbath on the roads of Argentina-- it is stated that 8000 people per year are killed in traffic accidents (over twice the death rate in the USA), and the Argentine system is so corrupt that opportunists take advantage of the situation to make money rather than do something about it. Film has a bitter tone. (2016)

The Card 1952 Ronald Neame (UK) 4.0 Alex Guinness in another genial, expressive performance as a good-hearted upwardly mobile fellow in a British working class provincial town; Glynis Johns very effective as husky-voiced dancing instructor wheedling and manipulating her way to riches – especially notable is her expressive use of eyes; Valerie Hobson beautiful as the local Countess always cheerful and indulgent of the foibles of her social underlings; Petula Clark as Nellie, the good girl competing with Johns for the attention of Guinness; Veronica Turleigh as Guinness' flinty mother, who wants nothing to do with social promotion. Delightful comedy about social mobility in a provincial English town. Guinness is an inventive operator, who rises into the middle class through good-humored ingenuity and much energy; his last schemes – a marketing ploy that encourages consumption in the town and his support of the local football team – make him very popular and eventually mayor of the town; in the meantime, he courts the venal Johns and – less energetically – the simple and patient Clark; the conclusion has the viewer on tenterhooks, but in an amusing final sequence, he sweeps Clark off her feet and leaves Johns in the lurch; however, she emerges unscathed, since she meets an unmarried lord – Wilfred Hyde-White masking a surprise appearance – who is obviously captivated by her. The film has the sprightly Ealing Studio feel all the way through: the good-humored face of Guinness; the scheming, witty Johns; the nimble (clarinet dominated), humorous musical score; amusing scenes such as the one in which Guinness and Hobson suffer a pratfall when the mule pulling their carriage runs through the town's marketplace. While lightly satirical, the film does not indulge in social criticism: working class (the mother), middle class (various stern-faced merchants in town) and aristocracy (Countess Hobson) all seem to get along; Guinness is able to rise to the top of the local social ladder without hurting anyone; the film ends in harmony with Guinness basking in his glory as mayor, the middle-class councilors accepting him although with some reluctance, the working classes cheering him wildly, and the Countess beaming on the dais; even the manipulative social climber Johns has what she wants. With no unemployment, no factory pollution, and no reference to the disappearing empire, the film presents an obviously idyllic picture of what provincial England was like in the 1950s. A less well-known but delightful film in the Ealing Studios tradition. (2011)

Carlito's Way 1993 Brian DePalma 3.0 Al Pacino, Sean Penn, Penelope Ann Miller, Luiz Guzman. Kind of crime drama about Pacino convict freed by efforts of Sean Penn after 5 yrs served of 30 year sentence; tries to go straight, but finds it next to impossible, and ends up dead double-crossed by people he is trying to work with. Fairly engrossing, especially at end set piece (compare with museum scene of 'Dressed to Kill' or the staircase sequence in 'The Untouchables') when DP uses steady cam to great effect in cross editing climax in Grand Central Station; keeps suspense up, although we know that he is going to get shot from intro (why did he give it away?). Pacino does ok job as Puerto Rican, although outshone by Sean Penn's sleazy, annoying, coke-snorting, greedy lawyer, who would basically sell anyone down the river. Miller as impossibly angelic girl representing salvation for Pacino; her scenes are out of place – how could a Puerto Rican hood have a WASP girlfriend like her? She has to go off with her baby in the end to make her own life; but morally Pacino (Carlito) is saved! Decors remind one of Miami Vice or Saturday night fever – too damn many night club scenes! Hood talk and behavior however are amusing. (2007)

Carlos 2010 Oscar Assayas (France) 3.0 Edgar Ramirez handsome, charismatic, Che-Guevara look-a-like, absolutely fanatic as infamous terrorist Carlos the Jackal; other European actors playing numerous Arab and European characters, both terrorists and policemen; German actress Julia Hummer is memorable as the extremely violent fanatic Nada (she never speaks but just screams). Abbreviated version of the Franco-German biopic about the master terrorist Carlos spanning the time from 1973, when he joins the IFLP, until 1994 when he is kidnapped from Sudan while he is recovering from an operation on his testicle. The film opens with a bombing and Carlos' ruthless execution of three French policemen in Paris when they are on the verge of arresting him; it then spends a great deal of time on the kidnapping of 11 OPEC ministers in 1975, their flight to Algiers in a DC-9 provided by the Austrian government, their stranding in North Africa since they neglected to demand a long-haul jet that would be able to reach Bagdad, and the ultimate failure of the mission when Carlos allows himself to be paid off by Saudi money; afterwards the film tracks multiple plots against targets that were not carried

out, Carlos' decline when the end of the Cold War (1989) makes him redundant, and then his rather pitiful decline (he gets fat and sick) until kidnapped from a Sudan hiding place by the French DST (and subsequently condemned to life imprisonment for the murder of the French policemen). Since this film is a heavily edited version of the original 5-6 hour miniseries, much of the action especially toward the end is difficult to follow – Russian KGB head Andropov appears in one scene never to be seen again, wives and girlfriends change places in confusing array, the viewer is never entirely sure of the political situation in Sudan, etc. The film focuses on visual action rather than the hard-to-understand dialogue and ideology (thank heavens the viewer is spared Marxist cant); the long sequence with the OPEC ministers is compelling and filled with suspense. Carlos is a fascinating and impressive character: he speaks five or six languages, he is absolutely fanatic and disciplined, willing to put his life on the line at the orders of his superior and to shoot friends who have betrayed him in the back of the head; he can also be independent and rebellious, such as the time he accepts the Saudi offer for money in exchange for releasing the OPEC hostages (Nada has a shrieking fit); he is sexually aggressive, always seems to be with an attractive woman, indulging one dynamite sex scene with one of his female recruits (Katharina Schüttler?); and he has a residual sense of honor – always keeps his word – since he considers himself a soldier at war with capitalism. Nice tour through some of the hot spots of the Middle East – Algeria, Tripoli, Aden, Yemen, Iraq, etc. Interesting and colorful look at terrorism when it was still on the political left. (2012)

Carnal Knowledge 1971 Mike Nichols (writer Jules Feiffer) 3.5 Jack Nicholson looking awfully young as the sexual player of the main pair, Art Garfunkel perhaps a bit out of his element as the more soul-searching of the pair, Candice Bergen as the initial girlfriend who shares herself with both men then marries Garfunkel, Ann-Margret as dynamic huge-breasted, “ball-busting” girlfriend then wife of Nicholson, Rita Moreno as prostitute at the end – her job is to get Nicholson an erection. Insightful, cynical film about the failure of romance, the inability of men to understand women, especially in the age of women's liberation when women are more assertive and expect more from men. Follows the lives of Nicholson and Garfunkel from college roommates to their early 40s. Both see women in idealized terms – represented by the ethereally beautiful ice skater who serves as transition from period to period: Nicholson wants a sexual playmate, someone with whom he can have fun (when he slows down, he complains that he is having sex with only a dozen women a year), whereas Garfunkel wants a sexual soul mate, who will teach him things about himself that he doesn't know. The latter marries Bergen, but at 30 he is dissatisfied telling Nicholson that they are too polite and ritualized (i.e., he is bored with the same woman), and he agrees that he wants to be laid; his next relationship is with a woman he is willing to share with Nicholson (she walks out furious at his arrogance), and at the end he is shackled up with a 17-year old, who he says is really older than he is. Nicholson is a player, and after a tempestuous shacking up with Ann-Margret (they have some terrifically violent fights), he marries her momentarily; he becomes progressively more impotent, and in the end he regularly visits prostitute Moreno, who has to progress through a prepared script stroking his male ego in order for him to get it up. Nicholson always complaining about women being “ball-busters,” i.e., they are not submissive and accepting; they have expectations. Last scene has him showing Garfunkel and his girlfriend slides of the women he has had sex with, and when they leave in some disgust, he is left alone. Insightful film about sexual politics – the plight of men in the age of female liberation. Combines with ‘Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf’ (1967) and ‘Closer’ (2004) to form an interesting trilogy on the subject. (2005)

Carne Tremula 1997 Pedro Almodóvar (Spain) 3.0 Javier Bardem as paraplegic, wheelchair basketball star in Madrid of the 1990s; Francesca Neri as his Italo-Spanish wife; Penelope Cruz in small role as prostitute who gives birth to a son Victor in a bus in the first scene of the film; Libertor Rabal as her son, an emotional young man desperately in love with Neri, another man's wife, 20 years later; Jose Sancho as Bardem's fellow policeman when the latter is shot and crippled; Angela Molina as Sancho's unhappy wife trying to get away from him. Very intense melodrama about love, jealousy, and guilt among five characters between 1970, when Cruz gives birth to Rabal during a police crackdown in Franco's Spain, and most of the narrative taking place in the mid-1990s. Perhaps the first of Almodovar's films that goes beyond the over-the-top melodramas of his early period. The cinematography emphasizes bright, saturated colors and arty, intensely decorated apartment interiors in Madrid. The principal theme

appears to be erotic love and its consequences: most of the characters have a deep hunger for union with the opposite sex; the consequences are emotional upheaval, intense jealousy, violence, and feelings of guilt – never a dull moment. The focus is Bardem’s powerful relationship with his wife, which is sexual although it is apparent that he cannot have an erection. Rabal spends several years in prison for (apparently) crippling Bardem, and when he emerges he hankers after Neri as much as her husband does. In a somewhat inexplicable move (perhaps she wanted to experience penetration by a penis?), Neri has a night of passionate sex with Rabal, even telling her husband right afterwards that she is very sore since she made love all night. In the meantime, Rabal has been having an affair with Molina, which he uses to learn how to make love in preparation for his encounter with Neri and which she uses to try to get away from her husband. Intensely jealous, Bardem sets up Sancho to kill Rabal, his wife’s lover, but his plan appears to backfire and both the revenge-obsessed Sancho and the despairing Molina die instead – they shoot one another with pistols! In the end, Bardem retires to Miami, guiltily leaving the way open for Rabal and Neri to get together, and they do; the film ends with Neri giving birth to their son in a traffic jam on the way to the hospital; thus both father and son are born in the street. The film makes the viewer’s head spin with non-stop action, narrative twists, and scandalous situations, and the ending remains rather arbitrary and confusing. Nevertheless, uniquely entertaining with its intensely pumped up style, lurid goings-on, and yet much emotional truth. (2009)

Carnival of Souls 1962 Herk Harvey 2.5 Candace Hilligoss as a stubbornly loner woman who apparently survives an automobile accident and goes to a Utah town to take a job as a church organist; Frances Feist as neutral landlady; Herk Harvey as apparition with darkly made up eyes; Sidney Berger as lecherous tenant living across the hall from Candace. Famous low budget horror film that does not frighten much. Filmed in black and white on an extremely low budget near Lawrence, Kansas and Salt Lake City. Hilligoss appears to survive an auto accident where two other young women are drowned; as she takes up job in Utah, she is pursued by Harvey's zombie-like figure, who stares at her from various perspectives; he is later joined by other ghouls, some of whom arise from water in subjective vision, others seeming to stalk the streets; Hilligoss is fascinated with a hulking old carnival building that she returns to several times (portal to the underworld?); it turns out that she is already dead and that she has not yet been collected for the journey to the underworld; after a death dance and Romero-like pursuit by a host of the dead, the film cuts to a crane on the bridge pulling the car out of the river -- all three women are dead in the front seat. The film has some decent jolts, as when Hilligoss boards a bus to get away from the apparitions haunting her and she encounters a bus full of Herk-like ghouls waiting for her; or when for some reason she becomes invisible to the live people around her and they cease to respond to her. On the other hand, the viewer has to watch a lot of close-up acting by the inexperienced Hilligoss; there are no special effects but just extras with rims painted around their eyes; you have to put up with the clumsy/cheesy attempts at seduction by Berger. One suspects that the prim and proper Hilligoss is sometimes tempted to break out and be bad (e., the morning she smilingly accepts coffee from Berger or the long scene when she goes in and out of trances playing the organ in church -- she plays the foot pedals with her bare feet), but she remains mostly indifferent and then scared at the end. The ghouls who move slowly and don't touch their prey seem to be precursors of Romero's zombies. A lot of “cheesy” moments with some atmospheric creepiness. Interesting mainly from historical point of view.

Casablanca 1942 Michael Curtiz (Warner Brothers) 4.0 Humphrey Bogart as the cynical Rick, who is redeemed by his love for Ingrid Bergman, Ingrid Bergman as the preternaturally beautiful, sincere and genuine woman who lives for love, Claude Rains as the cynical French police chief in Casablanca who is adept at playing a double game with a twinkle in his eye and staying true to his friendship with Rick, Paul Henreid plays it straight as Bergman’s resistance hero husband, Conrad Veidt as urbane, although ruthless Nazi trying to impose himself on Rains and capture Henreid, Peter Lorre in small role as man who steals the letters of transit, Sidney Greenstreet as the black market king of Casablanca with a fez. Terrific movie with excellent performances, a memorable script with unforgettable quotations (see below), precise and expressive cinematography, great local color and atmosphere (although all shot in the studio), and moving themes. Bogart and Bergman are unforgettable icons as star-crossed lovers; they build a terrific romantic chemistry. Bergman remains constant, but

Bogart's character develops from isolationist egotist who doesn't like women and couldn't care less about the struggle against the Nazis to a lover with rekindled attachment to Bergman; and then at the end he recognizes his duty and walks off the airport to join the Free French in Brazzaville (with, it appears, Claude Rains in tow); in the process he makes the ultimate sacrifice of giving up Bergman in the famous scene on the tarmac and sending her off to America with her husband (Bergman of course absolutely glowing as she accepts his sacrifice for the sake of the husband she does not really love). Movie has bittersweet ending – all parties go off to do their patriotic duty, but Bogart and Bergman make their terrific romantic sacrifice. Film is a patriotic war film, in which the two ambiguous characters – Rains and Bogart – end up getting off the fence and opting for the Allied side; the most memorable patriotic scene is Rick's café, where responding to the military songs sung by the German customers, Henreid and the band (with Rick's explicit consent) strike up a rousing version of the 'Marseillaise' drowning out the Germans. Humor plays well – Rains states his shock and surprise that there is gambling in Rick's café (he is supposed to repress it) and then pocketing his gambling winnings after he closes up Rick's for gambling; Rains referring to his heart as "his least vulnerable part" when Rick is pointing a gun at him. Direction is outstanding with classical editing and moving camera married in elegant style; the final sequence at the airport – enshrouded in fog, the "hill of beans" speech, the DC-3 engine starting up startlingly in a little surprise, etc., Rick and Louis striding off at the beginning of their "beautiful friendship" – is particularly beautiful. Some of the remembered lines: "Here's looking at you, kid", "Of all the gin joints in all the towns in all the world, she walks into mine", "Round up the usual suspects", "Louis, I think this is the beginning of a beautiful friendship", "We'll always have Paris", "The problems of three little people don't amount to a hill of beans in this crazy world;" "Play it, Sam" (Never "Play it again").

Casino Royale 2006 Martin Campbell (Britain) 3.5 Daniel Craig as the new, magnetic, more realistic Bond, Sebastien Foucan as the "free-running" fugitive in the fabulous Madagascar construction site chase sequence, Judy Dench as 'M' who tries to keep a leash on Bond but can't help admiring him, Mads Mikkelsen as the pungent Le Chiffre with the prominent upper lip who has a problem about the money he has lost for his terrorist clients in the Miami caper, Eva Green as black haired beauty that Bond falls for in a big way. Slam-bang update of Bond series. It seems to cut back on the Bond dalliances, but the beautiful women are there. Moves rapidly from location to location with the most powerful action sequences: in Miami regarding the bankers' plot to destroy the prototype of the new hyper jumbo jet (Yes, they are involved in a risky scheme to make a huge profit on terrorist money!); a terrific chase sequence in a construction site in Madagascar that rushes over enormously high construction cranes and ends in a typically cold-blooded execution of the fugitive by Bond; and the pièce de résistance finale that has a whole building in Venice slowly crumbling into the Grand Canal resulting in drowning of Bond's love interest. The poker sequence in Montenegro (actually filmed in the Czech Republic) is quite long but it holds our interest largely because of Craig's acting and its being punctuated by another chase and kill sequence with African terrorists. Craig is excellent from beginning to end – a bit more ruthless and cold-blooded (he shoots unarmed people without compunction), more real emotions (he falls truly in love with Green, and he makes much of his mask that covers his feelings so that he can get his ruthless and unpleasant work done), and a lot more wear and tear on the body, particularly his much mistreated face. Film is darker and more realistic than other Bond entries: many dark shadows in action sequences; Bond is more brutal and his body suffers more; psychological realities are deeper, including malaise, resentment against his job and falling truly in love. The testicular torture sequence with the hollowed out wicker chair is quite harrowing and horrifying (PG-13?). The film plays wittily with the Bond trademarks: when asked whether he wants his martini shaken or stirred, Bond responds acidly, "Do I look like I give a damn?" And at the end, after Bond cold-bloodedly shoots a bad guy, he stands over him and says, "The name is Bond...James Bond." Black out, credits roll. One hopes that the next entries in the series will take their cue from this excellent entertainment movie. (2007)

Casque d'or 1952 Jacques Becker (France) 4.0 Simone Signoret in charismatic starring role as loose woman in 1900 Paris who falls head over heels for a most unprepossessing man (she is the blond-headed woman after whom the film is named), Serge Reggiani tall, thin, decent ouvrier who maintains nobility and dignity throughout the violence, Claude Dauphin as rather suave, fastidious and

yet brutal and ruthless crime boss in Paris, Raymond Bussières as a common member of Dauphin's gang, a simple man, loyal to his friend Serge until the end. Tragic and moving love story that chronicles the coup de foudre of Simone and Serge and then follows the consequences resulting from jealousy and revenge to the tragic conclusion. Piquant since this moving love story takes place within the confines of the crime world of turn-of-the-century Paris. The Belle Epoque is lovingly and accurately created on the sets of the Joinville studios – Signoret's elaborate satin costumes, convincing sets that are both arty and realistic, seamless mixing of exterior and interior shots, crystal clear and perfectly lit cinematography; many of the scenes are reminiscent of Impressionist paintings – the luncheon of the boating party in the beginning mixed with dancing (two Renoirs in one!), the lounging of Serge and Signoret in their love idyll in the fields next to the river in the Paris suburbs, etc. (Would this be a tribute to his mentor Jean Renoir's father, Pierre-Auguste?) Signoret is substantial and compelling throughout the film, but somehow Reggiani is more memorable and iconic as a slight, well-groomed, decent, and noble working class figure who – very mysteriously – sweeps Signoret off her feet (the initial dance scene where Reggiani and Signoret swirl under the watchful eye of Signoret's jealous boyfriend is indelibly iconic – the way she looks into his face, the way he maintains his dignity as he dances with one arm hanging at his side, we know that this is for keeps). Both are caught up in amour fou and there doesn't seem to be any way to escape destruction. Jealousy drives the behavior of the gang members, leading eventually to the death of four men. In finale, Reggiani shows that his love for Signoret and his friendship for Raymond outweighs self-preservation: after being arrested he escapes, and then attacks Dauphin in revenge for the death of Raymond and shoots him under the nose of the police. Final scene has Signoret and an apache (gang member) renting a room on the top floor of an apartment building – why, we wonder? Then we discover that she is there to witness the execution by guillotine of her lover in the street (her companion sleeps on the bed). When his head falls, the director cuts to a reimagining of their first dance except this time they dance alone – he is dead but they are together forever. Film is done in classic French style – precise and calculated mise-en-scene, a lot of cutting, not much moving camera, a leisurely pace, a lucid scenario that advances the plot carefully step by step. But the impact is very moving: indissoluble bond – of friendship between Manda (Reggiani) and Raymond; especially of love between the lovers. The world – society – can be so hostile. Why do our attempts at capturing and keeping happiness so often fail? (2006)

Cassandra's Dream 2007 Woody Allen 2.5 Ewan McGregor as ambitious young Londoner who wants to land a beautiful woman and a lot of the expensive trappings of life; Colin Farrell as his sweet-hearted, ne'er-do-well brother; Hayley Atwood as beautiful actress looking for the man who will take her to the top; Sally Hawkins as toothy, loyal girlfriend to Farrell; Tom Wilkinson as the wealthy Uncle Howard, who leads the boys into temptation. Over-long, sloppily constructed philosophical drama about two nice young kids who decide to accept the job of murdering a likable man in exchange for material advantages: Farrell is way over his head in debt and McGregor needs money to help his blood kin and to invest in a too-good-to-be-true investment scheme in California. The setting is a tight-knit lower-middle class London family (the father owns a marginal restaurant); since the family benefits from the largesse of the apparently wealthy Uncle Howard, it is hard to turn down his murder proposition made halfway through the film. The two principals do a creditable job with their roles, especially Farrell who generates a lot of sympathy when he is beaten down by his own conscience after he and his brother commit the murder and he threatens to turn himself into the police. The actual murder is the most successful part of the film: the boys' conscience qualms, their inexperience, and their blunders make the long murder sequence tense and suspenseful. The conclusion defies credibility and dramatic integrity: Uncle Howard convinces McGregor that Farrell (his own brother!) has to be disposed of, but when McGregor prepares the drug overdose on their boat ('Cassandra's Dream'), he can't go through with it, and as the brothers grapple with one another, McGregor falls and is killed (!), and afterwards the viewer learns that Farrell then committed suicide. The film script plays a lot with Allenian themes like taking risks (not developed), and of course whether there is such a thing as morality: McGregor is an opportunist who doesn't seem to have a problem with murder (even of his own brother?), but Farrell is tortured by his deed. In any case, there is no 'Match Point' style pay-off, since both of them are killed in the end, making us think that the real trajectory of the drama is something like fate or Greek tragedy with the boys

destroying themselves. The film is often hard to watch because it seems to have been made so carelessly: the filming and editing style is style-less and matter-of-fact; the plot limps along at a pace that suggests no thought was put into narrative efficiency; on several occasions the same two characters seem to repeat a conversation already presented in a different location. Woody Allen needs to make fewer films, and to take more care with the ones that he does make. (2011)

Cat on a Hot Tin Roof 1958 Richard Brooks 2.5 Elizabeth Taylor as Maggie, the horny wife of Brick, who appears to be still truly in love with him, Paul Newman as Brick, the alcoholic who can't stand the lies of society and of his family in particular, Burl Ives as Big Daddy, a rich planter (28,000 acres!) who is dying of cancer (although for a while at the beginning he doesn't think so), a curmudgeon who has a tie with Brick but is disturbed by his alcoholism. Jack Carson as submissive other son, who is married to the piggish Mae, who has five "no neck monster" children, and who doesn't speak up until the end. Only fair adaptation of Tennessee Williams play. Ives is the most dynamic actor as he portrays a bigger than life curmudgeon who has the good sense to have vocal contempt for the society he lives in and for Gooper and his wife who are trying to get hold of his money; Taylor is in the play primarily for her glamour and reputation, and impression is that Newman plays Brick in too tame a fashion. Williams' play is also gutted for meeting the Code: Brick is completely alienated because Maggie broke up his relationship with his best friend (whereas in the play he was in love with Skipper). A lot of redemption à la Hollywood going on. Big Daddy and Brick are alienated, Brick refuses to make love with Maggie, Big Daddy and Big Mamma seem to despise one another. But then Brick and Big Daddy talk through their alienation, and Brick apparently realizes that Big Daddy loves him more than he thinks; then a kind of chain reaction that sends Big Daddy back into the arms of his wife, and decides Brick that he will lust after his wife – in last scene he embraces her passionately and throws the pillow on the bed anticipating joyous sex and the conception of a child, as a good couple must do. Impression all the way through that we have here a hard-hitting, cynical (?), realistic play that has been eviscerated to please the Breen Office and MGM. Richard Brooks is no artist or ground-breaker. Still entertaining for watching the first-rank stars and listen to some of the biting dialogue.

Cat People 1942 Jacques Tourneur (Val Lewton: RKO) 4.0 Simone Simon, French actress perfectly cast as young woman, Irena, who suspects that she is under an ancient murderous Serbian curse; Kent Smith as her dorky naval architect suitor, then husband; Jane Randolph, the other woman who ends up in jeopardy because of Irena's jealousy; Tom Conway also perfectly cast as cynical psychiatrist who pooh-poohs the curse explanation, is interested in sex with Irena, and pays the price at the end of the film. The first and the most successful of the low-key Lewton psychological horror features. Set in impeccable studio version of New York City in the 1940s: street entrances to apartments with the canopy, rather elaborate interiors, even for the modest Irena, several scenes in front of the panther cage at the zoo with the animal always pacing back and forth behind the bars, Randolph walking next to textured (Central Park?) stone wall when she is being pursued by Irena/the panther, fog appears at appropriate times to ratchet up the atmosphere. Direction by immortal Tourneur is also flawless and graceful – camera moves subtly to frame the characters, and yet he uses cuts when appropriate; continuity between shots is natural and graceful, photography is crisp and expressive with lots of darkness and shadowing (one of the earliest film noir style films); the print is beautifully restored. Menace is provided by indirection and suggestion: when Randolph is walking fearfully next to the wall, she hears steps that stop when she does, she picks up again, and then the loud hiss of a panther...that turns out to be the air brakes on a bus that pulls to a stop next to her: the famous "Lewton bus" startles the viewer by barging into the scene from the opposite direction expected. Famous scene in swimming pool is set up by Randolph being alone, a small black cat scurrying into the pool room followed by Irena; Randolph is frightened and dives into the pool where she sees suggestive designs on the wall, some of them reflections off the pool water; she calls for help and is not killed. Teaser is whether Irena really is in danger of turning into a murderous cat when a man makes love to her (reminiscent of some insects, etc.), or whether she is suffering from delusions, as lady's man Dr. Judd insists, much to his discomfiture eventually. The viewer is kept in suspense until the end, when it is apparent that Irena was indeed possessed – she escapes from the apartment with part of Conway's sword in her, and then dies in front of the panther cage. One of first movies in Hollywood where

connection between female sexuality and homicide is posited; tension is increased by Irena's insistence that she and Kent Smith not consummate their marriage until she shakes off her fear; but trouble becomes unavoidable when two-thirds of the way through, Smith dumps Irena and offers to give her a divorce so he can marry Randolph, the woman he really loves (!). Excellent script that provides at one point a convincing distinction between true love and sexual obsession, and keeps us interested from beginning to end. Begins and ends with quotations from John Donne referring to the bad side of us all that we cannot avoid. A slow moving film, whose delights have to be tasted patiently, in contrast to the Universal horror movies that rely on monster suits, special effects, and direct attacks. Made on a budget of under \$150,000, the film was a great success, grossing about \$4,000,000. (2007)

Cat people 1982 Paul Schrader 3.0 Nastassja Kinski as stunningly beautiful, sexy, and feline Irina constantly in danger of turning into a panther when she has sex or even when she walks around naked – pubic hair and all; Malcolm McDowell off-putting, disgusting rather than scary, and annoying as her brother living in New Orleans who has already murdered several women; John Heard as a somewhat over-his-head zookeeper who falls in love with Irina; Ruby Dee in rather superfluous role as McDowell's faithful housekeeper; Annette O'Toole as undefined character working at the zoo – she seems to be in love with Heard. Kinski arrives in New Orleans to rejoin her brother, who is a cat murderer, the only way to stop him being for his sister to have sex with him (ughh, says she); she falls in love with Heard, but then becomes a threat to him because of her cat soul. Remake of the classic 1942 Lewton version. Heavily updated mainly in the direction of explicitness: extensive background scenes showing maidens in some primitive society being sacrificed, one thinks, and then turning into panthers; great gobs of gore, including Ed Begley Jr. having his whole arm ripped off by the McDowell panther, Heard's autopsy of a dead panther uncovering what appears to be a whole human body inside, McDowell crawling naked on the floor covered with particles of skin and flesh from his most recent victim; several sequences of either McDowell or Kinski crunching and creaking in their metamorphosis from human limbs and faces to rapacious feline ones. The film often reads as soft porn: O'Toole's swimming pool scene (obviously a homage to Lewton's classic movie) has her parading around showing her lovely breasts (yes, they are more shapely than Kinski's); primarily, Kinski takes off all her clothes when she gets the panther urge and she parades around softly a little like Emmanuelle in the moonlight supposedly hunting but really just showing off her beautiful body and small breasts. While the nudity in the film may have been intended to make explicit the connection between Irina's sexuality and her urge to kill, its real effect is distraction – isn't she beautiful; you can't take your eyes off her and you forget what the film is about. The setting in New Orleans is convincing, the minimalist sound track is interesting, the panthers are handled expertly slithering and creeping in and out of shadows, and the cinematography is often lovely and atmospheric (as when the camera tracks close to the ground as Irina is hunting rabbits), although sometimes it falls into clichés (the tree of good and evil with the cats draped over several of the branches). The conclusion is touching with a final dose of campy absurdity. When after finally having sex with Heard Irina turns into a panther, she does not kill him because of her love for him; when the panther is later captured, she is put in the zoo. During his break, Heard takes some meat, walks over to Irina's cage and feeds her snacks as she look on with her contented eyes. Suddenly, she opens her mouth with a roar – end of film. (2009)

The Celebration (Festen) 1995 Thomas Vinterberg (Denmark) 2.5 Ulrich Thomsen as Christian, the older son of a family having a birthday party for the paterfamilias in a country manor house/hotel in rural Denmark; Henning Moritzen in excellent performance as Helge, the respectable looking father being honored; Thomas Bo Larsen as the impulsive, violent youngest child, Michael; Parika Steen as the passive-aggressive sister Helene – she even has a Black American boyfriend; Trine Dyrholm as the pretty blond servant who seems to have a long-term romantic relationship with Christian; Blithe Neumann as the too-young, seemingly clueless wife of Helge. High-pitched drama about scandalous revelations about an upper-class Danish family getting together to celebrate the 60th birthday of the father, Helge. Enjoyment of the film is severely compromised by a near literal adherence to the provisions of Dogma 95: available light only, narrative strictly set in the present, use only of handheld camera, etc. Despite a few good scenes, the film is filled with shaky camera, chaotically edited scenes,

scenes that are too brightly lit (almost any shot facing a window), others that are so dark and grainy that the viewer can barely discern what is going on. The characters are well drawn – from the existential hesitations of Christian to the near hysterical ravings and violence of Michael, the insecure resentment of Helene, the vacuous cluelessness of the wife, and to the pained expressions and anger of Helge. The revelations are facilitated by Christian, who rises toward the beginning of the film to accuse his father sarcastically of sexually abusing him and his twin sister, Linda, who committed suicide a short time before the party; he then rises a second time to accuse Helge of murdering Christian's sister. Meanwhile there is much farcical footage while Michael and other males try to kick Christian out of the house, even tying him (temporarily) to a tree in a vain attempt to keep him from rejoining the festivities. Helge of course denies everything and tries to convince the guests that Christian is mentally unbalanced, but the discovery of Linda's suicide note, in which she confirms the abuse, is definitive; the film ends with the guests gathered for breakfast the next morning, when they ostracize Helge from further contact from the family. The truth has come out and the family is in complete shambles. There is a certain morbid fascination arising from the spectacle of the revelation of the horrible truth and the moral chaos it creates. A very pessimistic vision that one often suspects is just facile cynicism. (2012)

Celeste and Jesse Forever 2012 Lee Toland Krieger 3.0 Rashida Jones (co-wrote the screenplay) is dark-haired, pretty, engaging and humorous as successful LA PR-type person who is always sure she is right and does not permit people to break in lines ahead of her; Adam Samberg cute, a bit clueless as her ne'er-do-well, artist husband that she is now getting a divorce from; Ari Graynor as Beth's pretty typical Hollywood romantic comedy-type friend; Will McCormack (co-wrote) as alpha male friend of Celeste; Elijah Wood as her gay co-owner of the business; Chris Messina as Jesse's heir in Celeste's affection once she decides to move on. Entertaining, often amusing, sometimes insightful anti-romantic comedy that begins with Celeste and Jesse still spending a lot of time together despite their impending divorce (delayed by Celeste's reluctance to sign the papers) and then following their relationship through until – faced with Jesse's decision to marry another girl pregnant with his child – Celeste decides to move on and gives Chris Messina the "I am ready" phone call. Subplots include Jesse discovering that he impregnated a girl in a casual date and then deciding to own up and marry her; and Celeste's aversion to one of her clients, the egregiously immature Riley (Emma Roberts playing a kind of evil Taylor Swift), with whom she however eventually reconciles when she discovers they have common issues (we girls have to stick together). The narrative toys a bit with the romantic comedy genre as the viewer wonders whether the two principals, who are both obviously attached to one another, will eventually decide to get back together, or whether Celeste is right – Jesse is just too irresponsible for her – and they both decide to move on. The script also pokes light fun at the dating scene in Los Angeles – the unexpected oddballs and jerks one ends up with, e.g., the good-looking guy that Celeste is attracted to, but who starts to masturbate noisily on her when she gets to the point saying "I have never felt like this, oh!" It also sometimes plays like a typical Hollywood romantic comedy, the main female characters focusing on finding their mate as opposed to their careers, their fear that they will not find "Mr. Right" and will have to spend the rest of their lives alone, not to mention the East Coast wedding scene where participants behave in the usual immature So Cal style (but wow! Are we good and loyal friends – forever!), and a thoroughly drunk Celeste makes a sad speech that doubles as a confession and an implied decision to let Jesse marry Veronica and move on with his life. The best thing about the film is Rashida Jones, droll, smart, arrogant at first but moderating her behavior toward the end (shown by her refraining from complaining about a guy breaking in line in a convenience store), playing well her lingering attachment to Jesse and the pain of breaking with him definitively. Better than the average romantic comedy perhaps because it is not really one. (2013)

Le cercle rouge 1970 Jean-Pierre Melville (France) 4.0 Alain Delon with a moustache is rather mysterious released prisoner who organizes a jewel heist in the Place Vendôme, Yves Montand charismatic as usual as a retired police officer who hires himself out as a marksman, Gian Maria Volonte as also mysterious escaped prisoner (escapes in a great train scene) who joins Delon in his caper, André Bourvil (yes, the singer Bourvil!) as very persistent Maigret-like commissaire who loses the prisoner and has to get him to save his career (he has three cats at home whom he adores and talks baby talk to – they

are his substitute for the eminently domestic Mme. Maigret). Outstanding cleanly plotted jewel heist movie that benefits from charismatic stars, a clean, lean script, and a rather moving theme. Fate seems to play a big role (fate is the theme of the opening quotation supposedly from Siddhartha) as the three men are brought together (in Siddhartha's "cercle rouge"), cooperate intimately and expertly, and then are all killed in violent finale. The script begins following the progress of Delon and Volonte separately (we do not know if they are supposed to have a connection) until they meet; afterwards we focus on the organization of the heist, which is done very precisely and professionally, and the pursuit of Volonte by the policeman. All principals are tough and lean; the director allows us to learn more about the commissaire (his cats and having to work under an impossible chief inspector) and especially Montand, who is a raging alcoholic – the first scene has real-looking rodents and spiders crawling all over the seriously hung-over Montand in bed. Film style reminds one of the best of American *film noir* and crime caper movies – clean no-nonsense style with minimal dialogue, strictly visual exposition (Melville uses wipe cuts to speed the pace), and often leisurely pace of development. Editing style is rather elliptical, since we are given only part of the information and we are kept wondering and questioning: we do not know, for example, that Delon has seen Volonte climb into the trunk of his American car and thus we wonder what will happen when he discovers it and why he drives through the muddy field, stops the car and waits on a hay rack for Volonte to open the trunk; we also wonder what the role of Montand will be in the heist and we don't find out until he actually shoots out the lock with his special alloy bullet. Filmed in a wonderful color palette – stony, dark colors that give the *mise-en-scène* a richness and weight. The catch in the movie is that there *is* honor among thieves – although they had never met, Delon and Volonte cooperate perfectly without fighting like punks and they die together with their honor safe; Montand is so moved by the experience of cooperating with his two confederates that he abandons his alcoholism, and even refuses to accept a cut of the take. The cynical chief inspector is wrong – it is not true that everyone turns evil after an innocent start in childhood; there is honor, professionalism and dignity even (especially?) among thieves. The director makes better American movies than the Americans; he knows how to use charismatic stars for his own purposes. (2006)

La Cérémonie 1995 Claude Chabrol (France) 4.0 Sandrine Bonnaire, Isabelle Huppert, Jacqueline Bisset (remade to be almost unrecognizable). First class latter day Chabrol tragic film, remade from Ruth Rendell's 'A Judgement in Stone.' Setting is upper middle class French bourgeois family living in lovely small French chateau in lovely Breton countryside; family is spoken ill of by Huppert (wife is a 'whore,' etc.), but seems happy, reasonably harmonious, and cultivated – strains of Mozart on several occasions, and the whole family is watching a TV performance of 'Don Giovanni' when they are murdered. Bonnaire is hired as cook and maid, but her responses and interactions are dry and distant; she works well but has no personal expression; she watches junk French television; turns out that she is illiterate – every time she has to read something, she panics. Meets spunky, impulsive, mildly disruptive (opening the family's mail) mail clerk at local post office. Although she has Sandrine help her with sorting clothes for the poor at the local Catholic church, it turns out she was suspected of having killed her own child, and Sandrine had a hand in the death of her father. The two bond and watch television together in Sandrine's bedroom. Hints of disaster in several references to guns in the house, and in the impulsive and sometimes desperate attempts of the women to escape reality. Climax comes unexpectedly, when without discussing their plans, they kill the husband, and then the other three in the TV room. Turns out that the daughter was recording the performance, and that the tape was running while both murderesses commented on their handiwork. 'Fate' has Isabelle have a fatal accident as she leaves the house, and since police listen to the tape (Isabelle has made off with the boom box), it appears that Sandrine will be incriminated (although she says so little, it is not certain). Nice twist at the end. Movie made in matter-of-fact, impersonal, objective way with traditional filmmaking techniques. There is no obvious interpretation of the reason for the crime. Some of it seems to be class envy – several references to the resentment of Isabelle against the family. Sandrine seems to have almost a psychosis about her illiteracy – the unforgivable sin in modern times. Is it the poor who suffer from the shame of illiteracy? (2005)

Le Chagrin et la Pitié 1969 Marcel Ophuls (France) 4.0 Famous, ground-breaking documentary made by Ophuls to puncture the myth of patriotic unanimity against the Germans in World

War II. The film has an impartial tone: without narration, it includes some newsreels (especially in the first part), but focuses on rather long interviews, some with leaders and celebrities (e.g., Pierre Mendès-France, Georges Bidault), and some with smaller fry such as the leaders of the Resistance in the Auvergne region; it centers on the city and region of Clermont-Ferrand during the war. The first part deals with the collapse of France and the beginning of repression in the first years of the Pétain regime; the second more with the birth of the Resistance and the differing reactions of French people to the war. In the broadest sense the film is about the experience of the French faced with the German occupation; specifically it focuses on the differing reactions of people to the question of collaboration represented by Pétain and Pierre Laval (whose policies are tendentiously and annoyingly defended by his bourgeois son-in-law). It seems that the majority of the people supported the Marechal's government – after all, the natural priority of people caught in the whirlwind of war is to survive. Ophüls interviews a lot of men who joined the Resistance, including 'Colonel Gaspard' who commanded the movement in the region, and other participants, some of whom were deported to Germany after being denounced to the Gestapo by their neighbors. The participants indicated that the men who joined the Resistance did so not out of idealism, but they were mostly misfits, ruffians, or those who had specific reasons for resisting, e.g., escaping the labor draft in Germany. The film included several segments of a long interview with a former Wehrmacht Kapitän who had been stationed in Riom at the time and who was in charge of anti-partisan operations. A pleasant enough fellow, he insists that he did nothing wrong, that he was unaware of the Jews and others being shipped off to death camps, that it was unfair of the partisans not to wear some sort of identifying uniform or insignia. An extremely self-satisfied and confident Bürger, he still wears his decorations. Maurice Chevalier is raked over the coals on a couple of occasions, especially surrounding the interview presented at the end of the film in which he exculpates himself of being a collaborator: you see, he was just an entertainer and he went to Germany only to entertain the imprisoned French soldiers; he ends singing a song about remaining happy despite all the problems around you. Very entertaining too was the interview with the homosexual British secret service man who had an affair with a German officer, but who never revealed to him his identity; he asserted that the real Resistance patriots were the common people in France, and not the bourgeois, who adopted a neutral attitude. Fascinating was the interview with the Jewish Mendès-France, who was tried and convicted for "desertion" by the Pétainist regime when he went to North Africa, but who then escaped dramatically to go to London to help DeGaulle. The author includes an interview with Christian de la Mazière, a fellow from a right-wing family, who volunteered for the SS Charlemagne Division and was one of the few members who survived the war; he told the interviewer that he regretted his choices. The film was extremely controversial at the time because of its deflating of the Resistance myth, but from the present-day perspective (2011) it comes across as fair and balanced. Very thought-provoking. (2010)

La chambre bleue 2014 Mathieu Amalric (France) 3.0 Mathieu Amalric as rather passive and depressive "happily married" man, Julien, living in a small French town and having an intense affair in the blue room of a local hotel with...; Stéphanie Cléau (co-writer with Amalric) as tall, brunette, sexually dominating woman, Esther, married to a dying man and having the steamy affair with Amalric; Léa Drucker as Amalric's blond wife, mysteriously ambiguous as sexy and loved by her husband, but also resented by him and a potential victim. Intriguing, but ultimately ambiguous film about a love affair that eventually becomes a murder mystery with a courtroom trial. The film begins with a tryst between the two lovers in the Blue Room, but the viewer soon realizes that this scene is a flashback from police and judicial interrogations of a handcuffed Julien. Beginning with only the knowledge that some big crime has been committed, the screenplay reveals through questioning and flashbacks that first, Esther's husband has apparently been murdered (can't be sure since he had a history of strokes), and second much later when the juge d'instruction is looking at photos in his dossier, that the wife has also been poisoned, probably by some jam that was sent home from the pharmacy where Esther worked. Much of the film time is taken up by interrogation of Julien and his response; it is difficult to discern whether the flashbacks are an objective record of events or Julien's self-serving version. The film ends with a series of brief trial scenes, where the prosecution fails to present convincing evidence; the two accused are nevertheless found guilty and condemned to life imprisonment; the film ends with the condemned being led off and the courtroom being cleared. Although the film is compelling, it is unsatisfactory as a police

investigation or a thriller. It is difficult to understand what the perpetrators were up to – if Esther’s husband and Julien’s wife die suddenly and murder is indicated, wouldn’t the lovers be automatically implicated? Didn’t most everyone in town know about the affair? It seems also that the prosecution doesn’t have conclusive proof against the accused – no witnesses, no forensic evidence directly against them, but mainly a loose skein of circumstantial evidence or worse – e.g., the postal employee testifies that Julie “looked like death” when on the day of the death he came to the post office for another purpose. And the defense is incompetent – the lawyer just occasionally objects to something the prosecution or judge said, but has, for example, no alternative scenario to explain the death of the two victims, nor does he try to undermine the prosecution’s evidence. The film is interesting primarily for its psychological probing, and for formal and visual reasons – the opening scene, which with its fragmented editing, its sensuous photography of Esther’s body, the drop of blood falling on the bedsheets when she bites Julien’s lip, Julie standing naked with his back to the viewer at the large French window is all suggestive of a fascinating story to come; very careful mise-en-scène throughout; manipulating the color blue from the description of the room to the final shots of the courtroom wallpaper that has Napoleonic bees (?) on a dark blue background. (2015)

The Changeling 2008 Clint Eastwood 3.5 Angelina Jolie as alone, severe, gaunt, almost plain-looking fond mother of an eight-year-old boy kidnapped in 1928 Los Angeles – she works as a supervisor on roller skates in local PacTel telephone exchange; John Malkovich as calm, quiet-talking bewigged Presbyterian preacher Gustav Briegleb who leads the campaign against the corrupt LAPD; Michael Kelly as detective from LAPD who joins the fight to find the true son of Jolie; Jeffrey Donovan as holier-than-thou, ruthless police captain charged with dealing with the rebellious Jolie; Colm Feore as sleazy publicity chasing chief of the LAPD; Jason Butler Harner a bit over-the-top as crazed serial murderer executed at the end of the film; Denis O'Hare as effective detestable doctor in the mental hospital; Amy Ryan as Jolie's defiant cellmate who teaches her to stand up for herself. Excellent Hollywood-style film about Jolie's campaign to find her abducted son (based on historical event in Riverside); she is put through the mill by a police department that is expert especially at protecting its reputation; but very satisfying ending – two additional protagonists (police lieutenant Kelly and Malkovich dedicated to expose the corruption in the LAPD) enter the fray to defend Jolie, all the police perpetrators are punished (captain fired, police chief removed in riveting courtroom scenes), LA crowds are mobilized in defense of justice, Jolie finds out that her son had acted nobly while in captivity, and although she never finds her son, she continues looking for him for the rest of her life, and there is a hint that she finally finds a man seven years after his disappearance. The film is an excellent underdog movie: Jolie reminds one of Erin Brockovich, except that you like Jolie and admire her, and despite one's possible reservations about formulaic Hollywoodiana, you root for her and feel great satisfaction when the bad guys are punished. Upsetting scenes: the hospital scenes where Jolie is trapped by a corrupt doctor, nurses, and orderlies who do the bidding of the police department (Jolie comes within a hair's breadth of being subjected to sadistic-looking shock treatment); the flashbacks showing the kidnapping of the boys, their imprisonment in a chicken coup on a ranch in Riverside County, and their murder with various size axes; the very graphic execution by hanging scene (the scene gives the impression that Eastwood is critical of the death penalty). Very important in the success of the film is Eastwood's direction: low-key, generally eschewing melodrama, a quiet, understated, mood-promoting musical score written by Eastwood himself and recorded in his recording studio, classical mise-en-scène (beautifully framed shots) and editing (natural and traditional). Filming style is a drastic contrast to the pumped up style of 'Slumdog Millionaire'. Film is perhaps a little long, but the viewer's attention never wanes. An admirable mainstream Hollywood film. (2009)

Charlie Chan at the Opera 1936 Bruce Humberstone 3.0 Warner Oland, Boris Karloff, Keye Luke (as #1 son). One of the better entries in the Chan series. Intricate, sometimes confusing who-dun-it set during the performance of an opera ('Carnival' by Oscar Levant) in Los Angeles. Higher than B movie with good acting, good sets, and good direction, particularly during an opera sequence where we are in suspense about whether the female lead will be murdered by Karloff dressed in the Mephisto role. Chan is treated mostly with respect by the Anglo LA police, although William Demarest (of Preston

Sturges fame) is comically resentful and skeptical. Chan delivers proverbs in impeccable Chinese accent, although most of them are American sayings dressed up in Chinese phraseology. Holds viewer's attention, since we know that we are being misled and we want to know who did it. Denouement is a bit improbable (the murderer singer found two people unconscious, both of whom she dispatched with costume knives!), but it was satisfying that Karloff is not guilty, although he is pretty disturbed mentally. Karloff pretty good, but he chews scenery perhaps with too much delight.

Chaplin 1992 Richard Attenborough (Britain) 2.5 Entertaining, if shallow, biopic of Charlie Chaplin covering his life from childhood through advanced age (his death is announced in a written onscreen postscript). Robert Downey Jr. charming, good-looking as the younger and older Chaplin; Geraldine Chaplin care-worn, on the brink of insanity as Chaplin's mother, Hannah; Paul Rhys as Chaplin's loyal older half-brother; Moira Kelly pretty in dual role as Chaplin's first love, Hetty, and his last wife, Oona; Anthony Hopkins in thankless role as editor, who is prodding Chaplin in Switzerland to be more forthcoming in his autobiography – he frames the story as a kind of flashback; Marisa Tomei, Penelope Ann Miller, Milla Jovovich, Diane Lane (Paulette Goddard) as several of Chaplin's charming wives and girlfriends; Dan Aykroyd as Mack Sennett; Kevin Kline genial as Chaplin's bosom buddy, Douglas Fairbanks. The film is colorful, excellent period sets and costumes, attractive actresses trying to get their hooks in Charlie (aside from Oona, Lane seems the only one who truly cares for him), and a good performance from Downey – he sometimes resembles him, he is good at the Chaplin walk and gestures, he portrays the guy's clownishness, melancholy, and sentimentality. The film focuses on the Tramp's amours from Hetty all the way to Oona portraying Chaplin's intense need for female company and sex with women, especially very young ones; the film even ends with a gallery of the actresses that played the lovers and wives with indications of what happened to them. The film leads the viewer through the different stages of Chaplin's career – his work with the irrepressible Mack Sennett, his mocking of the immigration authorities in 'The Immigrant', his main films from 'The Kid' to 'The Great Dictator', many of which seem to be inspired by contemporary historical events (the crisis of capitalism, the rise of Hitler), his friendship with Douglas Fairbanks, his persecution by J. Edgar Hoover (an oily, relentless Kevin Dunn) that results in his expulsion from the USA. The film evokes nicely the culture of Hollywood in its halcyon days. It does not seem to get to the bottom of Chaplin's artistic inspiration – the extreme poverty of his childhood in the slums of England, the mental illness of his mother and his guilt at putting her away in a low-level mental hospital, his sympathy with the underdog. The final montage at the end of his life emphasizes his desire to make people laugh (and thus bear up a little better under the trials of the world) and his tearful empathy with the simple people – the film ends with extended tearful excerpts from 'The Kid'. (2016)

Charlie Chaplin

The Rink 1916 3.0 Another 20 minute Chaplin two reeler. Crosscuts between Chaplin as waiter doing unpredictable and quirky things (putting a cat under the food cover, battling with the long-bearded cook, etc.); and the roller-skating rink, where normally he is jauntily competent with everyone else flailing around helplessly, and generally causing chaos. The romantic plot is much less sentimental and important than in the 'Immigrant.' Again a lot of personal business – swinging his cane and knocking off his own hat, waddling like a bow-legged duck, taking pratfalls in the most unlikely places, chuckling when his enemies are discomfited, busy fussiness is everyday tasks such as preparing dinner, folding napkins, etc., pushing down other skaters, etc. Generally lacks the realistic social environment of some of his other shorts, and not as emotionally involving.

The Vagabond 1916 4.0 One of first directed by Chaplin. Edna Purviance is cute and real. Excellent one with funny routines and a lot of sentiment as we root for the tramp against his social superiors. He rescues girl from cruel gypsy family (complete slapstick performance), but then almost loses her to a respectable artist, but then girl realizes her true love for Tramp and returns to fetch him – artificial happy ending! CC very effective is projecting lover's enthusiasm and jilted lover's dejection. Excellent routines – the chase around the corner in the bar; the power of music (he plays the violin) to speed up work place and to begin romance; the routine with the stick from the tree limb; collapsing in the

water barrel several times; washing face and hair of girlfriend, and then doing her coiffure. Very effective mix of comedy and sentiment.

The Immigrant 1917 Charlie Chaplin 3.5 Charlie Chaplin, Edna Purviance as the mostly decorative and passive love interest, Eric Campbell as the waiter. Charming 20 minutes about down and out Tramp in realistic environment – with immigrants on an immigrant ship, arrive in NY where he continues to pursue girl, and they decide suddenly at end to get married. One of Chaplin movies in strong social milieu. The life of the poor is very difficult – on the ship where they suffer from seasickness and discomfort, but especially in the restaurant, where the waiter does not give the Tramp the service and respect he would accord a “respectable” patron. The poor are frustrated when they try to enjoy the good things of life (eating in restaurant). Restaurant scene longest running routine with Chaplin very cute trying to make do with little money, impress his girlfriend, and outwit the fascist-like headwaiter. Lack of money is a big theme – on ship worried about it being stolen, and in the restaurant concerned about the embarrassment and physical danger if you are a little short on the bill (the restaurant staff will beat you up). Authority – here represented by the waiting staff in the restaurant instead of by the police -- tends to treat the poor violently – beat you up if you are ten cents short! The movie is a bit “subversive,” since it (lightly) critiques the money orientation of American society. Chaplin is socially awkward: would like to be respectable, have good manners, but can’t manage it: he eats beans either one-by-one with his fork or in large amounts with his knife! Chaplin excellent with little physical routines: his bowler hat, cane and waddling walk; his manipulation of playing cards on board ship; his farcical handling of beans, coffee, knife and fork when eating with his girlfriend. Camera rarely moves; basically is set there to record the antics of the Tramp persona; few close-ups. Sentimental tone: Charlot so good hearted, such a true, devoted lover, smiles with such eagerness that he tugs at our hearts. Artificial happy ending, where Chaplin suddenly drags his girl into the marriage license office with no preparation.

Charlotte’s Web 2006 Gary Winick 4.0 Dakota Fanning very cute and winning as Fern; and a host of voices playing the animals – Julia Roberts strong, mature, mellifluous and wise as Charlotte, Robert Redford as the horse who is afraid of spiders, John Cleese somewhat snotty and bossy as Samuel the head of the five sheep (he keeps telling them not to “follow”!), Cedric the Entertainer and Oprah Winfrey as the two observer geese, Thomas Haden Church as one of the hilarious crows who debate at length about whether the scarecrow is a real human, but why doesn’t he move?, and Steve Buscemi irresistible as Templeton the Rat who is the self-indulgent, selfish character in the lot, and who got the most laughs from the young audience. Outstanding screen adaptation of E.B. White’s classic children’s story. Done with live actors, but the computer animation of the moving and speaking of the animals is excellent; it is hard to take your eyes off Templeton and to laugh every time he shows his snout; Charlotte the spider is the only animated animal and she blends perfectly with the others. Situated 50-60 years ago in small town America apparently in New England (the fall leaves are beautiful) with the countryside somehow treated or photographed in clean outlines and heightened color to give it an idyllic look. Farm life in the barn is immensely entertaining with a lot of good-hearted bickering, but in the end all the animals are part of the community of living things. The story is compelling with great narrative drive – will Wilbur the spring pig be slaughtered to make ham for Christmas? Charlotte, the perfect mentor of Wilbur and a woman with a vocation for writing, concocts a strategy – make Wilbur a celebrity in the farm community by writing in her web praise words for him: ‘some pig’, ‘terrific’, ‘radiant’, and ‘humble’. All the viewers – children and adults – are of course rooting heartily for Wilbur, and the emotional payoff is great when he is given a special prize at the county fair, and thus saved from a trip to the smokehouse. The moral is piled on a little thick at the end – we are all friends and should support one another; the seasons go around, and we are all part of the circle of life. When Charlotte dies, there is not a dry eye in the audience; but the formerly selfish Templeton drags the egg sack back to the barn (to Charlotte’s exhausted thanks), and when the snows of winter pass and spring returns, the film ends with the little spiders hatching in the warmth and flying off to dispersal at the end of their little silks; three of them however take their place in the barn entrance, where Charlotte had lived. And thus the cycle continues....

Charlie Wilson's War 2007 Mike Nichols 2.5 Tom Hanks charming, apparently shallow, ironically humorous, self-indulgent, sybaritic (single fellow who likes women; film opens with Hanks in a Las Vegas hot tub with several naked women snorting cocaine) congressman from Houston Texas who finds a cause that moves him; Philip Seymour Hoffman riotously entertaining as CIA covert action specialist shunted aside – profane, rough around the edges, direct, sassy, slobby personal appearance; Julia Roberts rather incompetent and annoying as right-wing, hyper wealthy Texas matron and Bible thumper who has seized upon the anti-Communist cause in Afghanistan (her Texas accent rises and ebbs unexpectedly in different parts of the same scene); Ned Beatty as senior congressman who is bamboozled by the ever resourceful Wilson to get the money needed to defeat the Russians. Reasonably entertaining movie about the efforts of an unknown Texas congressman to appropriate congressional funds to help the mujahadeen defeat the Russians in Afghanistan (the film goes from 1980 to 1989); the big issue is enough money to buy weapons to shoot down Russian helicopters (channeled through President Zia of Pakistan), which happens at the end of the film with the impact of much patriotic heart-thumping and cheering from the audience. Film is rather annoying at the very end (last couple of minutes), when it suddenly decides that it is too bad that the United States, which has been providing \$500 million per year in military aid, cannot find the money to help reconstruct the country; millions of returning refugees are going to find their country destroyed and they will not have the funds to rebuild; one can't help but wonder why the script couldn't incorporate this notion of moral responsibility in all the movie instead of just playing the military chord. By far the best part of the film are the performances of Hanks and Hoffmann, who have some great set-tos toward the middle of the film; the scene where Hanks is dealing simultaneously with a morals pr issue (his press secretary is a winsome brunette that he calls 'Jailbait') and with testy, repartee-filled negotiations with Hoffmann is perhaps the high point of the movie; somewhat predictably the two hug at the end – with some embarrassment. Interesting concept that a high-living, decidedly unevangelical politician can get something important done in comparison of course with the supposedly decisive evangelical incompetents. Overall, pretty run-of-the-mill patriotic film with a couple of pungent, entertaining performances.

The Chaser 2008 Hong-jin Na (South Korea) 4.0 Yun-seok Kim as ex-cop who has gone into pimping and who is losing some of his girls; Jung-woo Ha as expressionless, ineluctably compulsive serial killer; Yeon-hie Seo as pretty prostitute with a little daughter – she becomes the main reason for the film's considerable suspense. Taut, highly suspenseful detective-horror-thriller essentially about a pimp's desperate search for one of his kidnapped prostitute, for whom he gradually develops tender feelings, primarily from having to look after her daughter during the search. The film gets its title from the very energetic chases on foot involving Kim – two when he is after the perp and one being chased himself – through the narrow, congested streets and simple, modest apartments of the poor sections of Seoul. The narrative is twisty and inventive in its determination to maintain the tension of the suspense: at first Kim thinks that two of his girls have been kidnapped and then sold without paying him (apparently South Korean prostitution works on the sex slave principle); through use of cell phone records he finds out who is responsible, but he cannot find the address of the house where Yeon is half-dead and imprisoned; being an ex-cop dismissed for corruption, Kim has constant problems with the police, who however sometimes do him favors because of past associations; when Kim stumbles upon Yeon's adorable daughter (pretty, attentive, and wise beyond her years), he decides to take her to a restaurant and then take her along in his frantic search for her mom without telling her what is up; Yeon manages to escape from the death dungeon, but then by the most random of circumstances, she is found by Ha in a small grocery store, where she is murdered, beheaded, and dismembered; the conclusion of the film has Kim find Ha in his house, where they have a brutal final vengeance fight – Kim is on the verge of killing him when the cops break in and save the perp's life; Kim goes to the hospital and holds the hand of the little girl – her mother is dead, but perhaps Kim will care for her. An entirely desolate ending that betrays the (American) hope that Kim will rescue the girl, restore her to her daughter, and perhaps – live happily ever after! The film is a bit long and the violence is disturbingly explicit and protracted (splattered blood and severed body parts, etc.: What does this say about Korean society?), but its many virtues more than compensate. Essential is the superior acting of Kim in depicting his character's ambiguous nature – the search begins

as a purely financial undertaking, but he portrays effectively his (partial) conversion to caring about the girl and his daughter; we like and root for Kim both for his virtues and his slashing fight style that he displays copiously in his two extreme beatings of Ha. The film also adopts the usual Korean critique of the police and judicial authorities: the police are comically bungling (Yeong is murdered because they are asleep and arrive too late at the grocery store; the female policewoman detailed to tail Ha after he is released sits passively outside the shop while the last murders occur), chaotic (never methodical and thoughtful, they are constantly rushing about and running in circles), venal (Kim was dismissed from the force because of corruption, which is on-going), and insensitive (judicial authorities force the police to release the murderer despite every indication that he will continue his crimes). A riveting entertainment; very difficult to press the Pause button.

Chasing Amy 1997 Kevin Smith 3.0 Ben Affleck as balanced, laid-back Holden, main author of cult comic book, 'Bluntman and Chronic'; Jason Lee as his partner Banky, humorous homophobe who appears to have an unrecognized gay affection for Holden; Joey Lauren Adams, husky-voiced, rather overwrought lesbian, Alyssa, who has a fondness for the word "fuck" and allows Holden to fall for him; Dwight Ewell as Black gay guy who acts as wise man and confidant for Holden; Jason Mewes as amusing motormouth slacker Jay who likes to say things like "Life ain't nothin' but bitches and money"; Kevin Smith as slacker Silent Bob, who rarely says anything until he waxes philosophical defending true love and giving the movie its title when he tells the story about how he was "Chasing Amy". "The boy-meets-lesbian comedy" (Gleiberman) with a huge fondness for obscene language and talking explicitly about sex. Kevin Smith jettisoning his off-the-wall slacker image and delivering a true romantic comedy (without the payoff at the end) that also reaches for the same raunchy humor in his previous films. The narrative is absorbing and interesting: Holden strikes up a friendship with Alyssa, but when he becomes romantically interested, he learns that she is a committed lesbian; nevertheless, the two fall in love and begin an affair; the real kicker comes when Holden finds out that on at least one occasion in high school "Finger Cuffs" Alyssa had simultaneous sex with two guys and he realizes that he can't resign himself to her sexually checkered past (the perverse sex with guys bothers him much more than her lesbian sex); Holden, who realizes that Banky's anger is due to his unresolved sexual feelings for Holden, proposes that the three of them have sex together as an ingenious self-serving way to resolve everyone's dilemmas; Alyssa, who is completely transformed by her love for Holden, angrily turns him down with "I am not your fucking whore" and returns to her lesbian predilections; a coda has the two meeting a year later and regretfully saying goodbye for an uncertain future. The original first part of the film focuses on raunchy language and explicit discussion of sexual subjects – dick jokes, fart jokes, discussion of injuries suffered during oral sex, hang-ups girls have about the odor associated with oral sex ("they sit there frozen like a deer in headlights"), having "finger cuff" (double penetration) as a major issue in the plot, discussion of whether the definition of sex has to include penetration, even ridicule of nerdy fans that love the dick jokes in 'Bluntman and Chronic'. Interest in sex and uncertainty about what makes a good romantic relationship is then transmuted into true love between Holden and Alyssa. The problems they show seem to carry the lesson that you have to take your partner as she (he) is, as long as true love is present; don't let ego hang-ups about her past ruin the relationship. Even though the relationship doesn't work out, the ending has a warm feeling since the principals have learned this important lesson. (2013)

Le Chef (Comme un Chef) 2012 Daniel Cohen (France) 2.5 Jean Reno usually funny and convincing as high-highfalutin' celebrity chef, whose status is threatened by critics pushing a new style of cuisine; Michael Youn as annoying young chef and passionate food amateur that refuses to take his clientele into consideration when cooking; Julien Boisselier usually overacting as the son of the owner of the restaurant, who is plotting to get rid of Reno. Intermittently amusing comic film lampooning the cuisine scene in France. Reno serves classically inspired food, but his status is threatened by the French infatuation with newfangled cooking styles, specifically "molecular" cooking that uses test tubes and liquid nitrogen to produce small geometrically shaped pills arranged on a plate. Boisselier tries to get rid of Reno by inviting "molecular" critics to the restaurant, but in a series of often hilarious adventures Reno teams up with the obnoxious, unpredictable, but brilliant chef Youn to pull off a triumph. In a Hollywood-style ending, everyone lives happily ever after -- Youn finally gets his fiancée to marry him (a

neutered glamorous Raphaëlle Agogue pursues him throughout the film), Reno teams up with a glamorous restaurant manager brought in from the provinces (completely undeveloped romantic subplot for the chef widower), and the two bury the hatchet to open their own restaurant (financed by the deus ex machine father of Boisselier); the film ends wittily with Reno and Youn falling into another on-the-air argument on their cooking TV show. The film begins strongly: Reno is officious, dominating and funny; Youn gets himself fired job-after-job because he insists on marketing the most unlikely culinary creations to inappropriate audiences, such as truckers; the two have an impressive comic chemistry; many laughs from Youn's advice to a multi-ethnic trio of cooks in an old folks home; he then recruits them to help in the new restaurant. The film however scrambles out of control in the second half, stepping back from its satire and degenerating into awkward slapstick (dressing up as Japanese to dine unrecognized at a molecular restaurant, breathing a fog of liquid nitrogen when they taste the food, etc.). Film could have been much better if the script had been tailored less to easy laughs and more to a true comedy of manners. (2015)

Chéri 2009 Stephen Frears (Britain) 2.5 Michelle Pfeiffer cool but effective as aging courtesan in Belle Époque France; Rupert Friend as her idle young lover until his mother arranges a marriage for him when he is 26; Kathy Bates as garrulous and gossipy mother of Friend, also a courtesan; Felicity Jones charming and pretty as Friend's neglected young wife. Disappointing adaptation of Colette's famous two novels about Chéri. Set in the impossibly privileged world of wealthy courtesans (lots of servants), the story focuses on the love between Pfeiffer and Friend (she is old enough to be his mother); her life profession requires her to remain aloof while carrying on the long affair with him; but when he is married off, she breaks down and sobs alone in her bed; they try to reunite when he returns from his honeymoon, but the film ends in supposedly bittersweet separation. The film has absolutely sumptuous costumes, sets and furniture; everything takes place in the most elegant of Parisian, *Art nouveau* décors and it is difficult for the viewer to watch the actors instead of looking at the elegant vegetative lines of the bed frame or the soft contours and pastel shades of the drapes or the carpets. Essentially the story does not work because it is impossible to identify with Friend, who is just a spoiled rich kid who has done nothing worthwhile in his life; he has long, feminine dark brown hair, cool leisure clothing, and a top hat that he wears romantic-poet-fop-style on top of his mop; when he declares his love for Pfeiffer, we can scarcely believe that she will respond and are annoyed when she does at the end of the movie; her rage or anger would have been a more satisfying ending. The film also has the problem of being played in English with some actors speaking brash American (Bates), cultured American (Pfeiffer), and reserved British (all the others including Friend); if you know France and the French, no one or nothing in this film seems genuinely French. Perhaps the bottom line is that the charm of Colette's novels is not so much the content – the characters and the plot line – but the delicate, subtle, finely tuned prose (witness the beauty of 'La chatte' despite the insipidness of the plot [two spoiled young rich people getting married]), which of course a film has difficulty in reproducing. The film is dull and tests the viewer's patience, especially toward the beginning; that's the price you pay when the story doesn't have a heart, a riveting center. (2009)

Cherry Blossoms 2008 Dorris Dörrie (Germany) 2.5 Elmar Wepper as older German provincial with children living in Berlin and Japan; Hannelore Elsner as his dutiful wife, who is devoted to Japanese shadow dancing and who learns in the beginning of the film that her husband is going to die; Aya Irizuki as rather annoying young Japanese dancer that Elmar (Rudi) encounters in a park in Japan. Slow-moving, arty treatment of old age and loss: Rudi and Jannelore lead a flat provincial life; she finds out from some tongue-tied doctors that he is going to die (from what we don't know); she dies unexpectedly (heart attack?); he goes to Japan, finds renewal in a father-daughter relationship with Irizuki (much more genuine than the embarrassed, inhibited, almost hostile relationship with his own children); he visits a hotel in view of Mt. Fuji in the company of Irizuki; and he dies while doing an imaginary shadow dance with his deceased wife. The point of the film seems to be that the couple was not nearly as honest and open with one another during their lifetime; but they are attached and cannot live separated, and through the power of art (?) and friendship (?) they are joined in death. Film deals honestly with a significant subject – how to deal with death as you grow older, but it moves very slowly for someone not impressed by the heavy load of symbolism, which is often explained to us carefully by a character. Cherry blossoms are elucidated as a symbol of impermanence (there are four or five exquisite shots of

them); when Irizuki does her shadow dance, she mutters aphorisms about good relationships and wraps herself in a long telephone cord to emphasize communication in one of her dances; the camera returns often to flies buzzing about with reference to the mother's admonition not to kill them; when mourning his wife, Rudi wears her clothes under his overcoat and lays out her bedclothes on the bed beside him. The couple's relationships with their children are heavy-handed in their alienation: the parents drop in on the kids, who welcome them but look annoyed and complain behind the back of their parents when they are in the other room; when visiting the son in Japan, Rudi has little to say and spends most of his time hanging around the house or walking aimlessly in the streets, but when they finally connect they burst into tears simultaneously. The filmmaker appears to believe in immortality, since at the end the physical finality of death is emphasized by ceremony over the cremated skeleton of Rudi, while his spiritual union with his wife is obvious in his dance with her under the shadow of Fuji. Quiet European- or Japanese-style meditative art film.

Chicken with Plums 2011 Marjane Satrapi; Vincent Paronnaud (France) 3.0 Mathieu Amalric ("Diving Bell") as depressive Tehran violinist constantly at odds with his wife; Maria de Medeiros ("Pulp Fiction") as his wife, sometimes a shrill harridan, sometimes a loving mate; Golshifteh Farahani as the impossible beautiful woman (always young) that Amalric never learns to let go. Beautifully expressive but dramatically flat film about a 1950s Iranian violinist that decides to embrace death because of his lost love for Farahani and the destruction of his violin by his wife in a fit of jealousy. The film begins with an angry and self-destructive Amalric, who decides to take to his bed to await death. After the omniscient narrator (it turns out later that he is the character Death) informs us that Amalric will die on the eighth day, the screenplay leads us through a series of flashbacks and flashforwards that give us the background of his predicament. Amalric had fallen deeply in love with the beautiful Farahani, but had married de Madeiros on the rebound after the former's father had cruelly rejected Amalric because of his paltry income. Other flashbacks show how he turned his romantic pain into poetic expressiveness on the violin, thus touring the world for 20 years as a concert artist, and how his wife later destroys his violin because of her frustration at his pining for Farahani and his inattention to his children. A flashforward shows his children neglected and confused after his death, especially his son, who emigrated to the USA to attend college. Toward the end of his ordeal, he is visited by Death, who is presented as a comic and wisecracking figure that refuses to take him yet (his time had not come; he just follows order). Although live actors are used, the film still has the look of an animated fantasy. It takes place on a carefully styled (German) soundstage that seems straight out of Hansel and Gretel and to have more relation to a small German or French town than the real Tehran. One senses that the authors regret the passing of the traditional Tehran, where middle class, European-looking Iranians could pursue their art without reference to the strictures of the ayatollahs. Quite a bit of magical realism, as in the little puffs of smoke that collect over the grave of Amalric's mother (Isabella Rossellini). The film is always visually interesting and has effective comic and dramatic moments, but overall suffers from the sensation of a slide downhill -- the protagonist must die because he cannot recover from his attachment to a woman that rejected him perhaps 30 years ago. Some inexplicable events, e.g., when Amalric encounters Farahani in the street -- she has not aged a whit in 30 years (his love is still "blind"?) and she does not recognize him - complete blank.

Child's Pose 2013 Calin Peter Netzer (Romania) 2.5 Luminita Gheorghiu as middle-aged Cornelia, wealthy, bleach blond, chain-smoking Rumanian architect, who is neurotically attached to her son; Bogdan Dumitrache as her son Barbu, willless, directionless and possessed of an unexplained hatred for his mother; Ilinica Gola as Carmen, Barbu's live-in girlfriend (they are not married). Cinema verite treatment of the evolution of Cornelia's and Barbu's relationship in the space of a couple of days after Barbu kills a peasant child in an accident in which he was driving too fast. His mother is a complex of tenseness and worry as she tries to smooth over the legal consequences of the accident -- she tries to influence the police investigation (the police treat her with some contempt); she tries -- unsuccessfully -- to iron out Barbu's relationship with Carmen, she meets with a witness to the accident to try to influence him (a devious, smooth talker) to change his testimony in Barbu's favor; at the end of the film she visits the victim's family parents, where in an almost interminable scene she pleads, weeps, and snivels to get

them to drop the charges against her son, telling them about his boyhood and pleading with them not to ruin his life. Throughout the film the camera is informal, shaky, swishing back and forth between the characters in a scene. Most of the time is taken up with very long, seemingly improvised conversations between Cornelia and another character: with her sister in which she complains about her son's shabby treatment of her (he tells her to go fuck herself); with Carmen in which she learns of her son's detachment -- he refuses to ejaculate inside of his girlfriend; with the witness, where the two spar about his changing his story and perhaps accepting a bribe (he suggests at least 100,000 Euros, upon which Cornelia seems to give up); with Barbu in which he demands of his mother that she quit calling him on the telephone (thus their relationship might mend a bit), and with the victim's family in the final scene, which ends inconclusively: Barbu finally steps out of the car and says something unrecorded to the father, but Cornelia remains more or less slumped over the wheel of her BMW; more or less stasis. The film has a strong emotional punch in its pitiless analysis of a tragically broken relationship, and Gheorghiu certainly has the thespian weight to carry the film; it is however long-winded, often repetitive, and graceless. It was difficult for this viewer to stick with it. (2014)

Children of the Damned 1964 Anton Leader (Britain) 1.5 Ian Hendry; Alan Badel; Barbara Ferris, et al., as various players in the sequel to the famous 'Village of the Damned'. Clearly inferior and derivative sequel to the 1960 film. The plot is full of hokey elements: a psychologist and a geneticist (Hendry and Badel?) are fascinated by the superior puzzle-solving abilities of a gifted child, whose mother is a slutty woman who wants nothing to do with him; it turns out that there are six of the kids living in different countries including the Soviet Union and Nigeria; somehow they all end up in London, and their respective countries plot to return them home so they can help improve their genetic pools; sensing they are under attack, the children congregate in a mannered dilapidated abandoned church; there they are besieged by various forces including units of the British Army, and although the benign psychologist seems to convince everyone that the children should not be "destroyed", a screwdriver runs amok, causes a short circuit, and the signal to attack goes out: everything is destroyed, there follows some regret and the end of the film. The film is reasonably well made and acted, but the fact that the viewers already know from 'Village' who the children are and what is going on deprives the film of most of its suspense or intrigue. We are reduced to wondering whether the kids will somehow be civilized and taught to be a positive force in society, or whether they will have to be destroyed; it is pretty inevitable that the latter will happen. The film is never scary: e.g., the scene where armed invaders from an unnamed country are deafened, bamboozled and finally killed in the church by a hokey contraption the kids have dreamed up is ridiculous rather than frightening; not even campy; one also tires of watching the children parade around the premises zombie-style and in groups. Some good, British-style humor from the two principals.

Children of Men 2006 Alfonso Cuarón 3.0 Clive Owen as Theo, apparent protagonist of film who is just as scared about what's happening as anyone else; Michael Caine as Jasper, good-humored hippie type who is killed off by guerillas; Julianne Moore as Julian, Theo's former love -- she is also killed by random thugs raging on England's roads; Danny Huston as Theo's highly placed cousin, Nigel; Clare-Hope Ashitey as Black woman that carries the hope of the world in her belly. Dystopic science fiction film (based on little known novel by P.D. James) that presents an enormously depressing vision of the immediate future. The setting completely dominates the film: London 2027, recognizable but extremely degraded by environmental disasters, civil conflict, despair, and primarily the inability of humans to reproduce (it has been 18 years since a child was born in the world) due, one thinks, to environmental pollution. The whole world has collapsed, but "Britain soldiers on" thanks to a repressive police state that seeks to expel all immigrants by means of ruthless soldiers herding immigrants (mostly dark skinned but including a German grandmother) into a concentration camp, where they are apparently murdered. Owen hooks up with Moore, who is the head of a terrorist organization seeking to protect the rights of immigrants; she commissions him to escort the pregnant Ashitey to a ship off the south coast that is operated by a shadowy organization called The Human Project, which will somehow use the baby for good (?). The film is basically a linear thriller tracing Owen's ultimately successful effort to deliver the woman and her baby (born about halfway through) to the ship, which appears mysteriously in the fog

at the end – credits roll. The negative vision of the world is arresting: London is shabby, smoky, chaotic; fires burning all around, misty atmosphere; buildings collapsing, rubble and rusting metal everywhere; a cacophony of different languages (including a key character that appears to be a gypsy/Balkan woman); immigrants imprisoned in large cages; police and soldiers standing around; in the streets vicious battles edited with extremely high impact (helmeted soldiers challenging passersby, artillery shells slamming into buildings, individuals blown sideways by bullets from ubiquitous automatic weapons); a universal picture of bleak despair. Some empathy and drama are evoked by the plight of humanity and the danger surrounding Ashitey and her child, but there is little catharsis at the end: we don't really believe that the freighter approaching Ashitey's little rowboat will really make a difference. The achievement of the film is not the simplistic narrative or engrossing characters, but the creation of an intensely dystopic vision of where the world might be heading. (2014)

China Seas 1935 Tay Garnett (Irving Thalberg: MGM) 3.0 Clark Gable handsome, upright, male, gruff talking and smooth-mannered, take-command captain of a merchant steamer in the China Seas; Wallace Beery a bit low-life, sneaky, although good-humored as ship passenger who is actually plotting with Malay pirates to take the ship; Jean Harlow “dangerous loose cannon”, sexy in slinky dresses (with a minimum of inner support) as platinum blond girl with a past who is “stuck on” Gable; Rosalind Russell dull and sporting a British accent as Gable's long-lost love that he is unaccountably still drawn to; Lewis Stone worried, even tortured, looking as third officer known for his cowardice; Akim Tamiroff amusingly slimy as libidinous ship's officer; Aubrey Smith his usual stuffy self as on-board director of the shipping line; Robert Benchley one-note as his usual inebriated self appearing on-screen a half-dozen times too many. Hattie McDaniel amusing and smart-mouthed in pre-‘Gone With the Wind’ role. Well-acted, well-directed high-quality Thalberg pot boiler combining romance, adventure, star quality, and action in an exotic foreign location; film focuses on sometimes improbable entertainment since Thalberg is reported to have said about it, “To hell with art. This time I'm going to produce a picture that will make money.” Gable takes the ship out from Hong Kong bound for Singapore; ‘Grand Hotel’ style, the ship is filled with participants in the plot, many of them stars; ship goes through an extremely well-presented raging typhoon and then an attack by the Malay pilots, who are assisted by the treacherous Beery; Gable's rejection of Harlow leads her into a potentially disastrous relationship with Beery, but in the final frames they are reconciled, he agrees to exculpate her from any responsibility for the assault (she doesn't deserve it), and the two plan on marriage, still fussing at one another like Gable and Vivien Leigh in ‘Gone With the Wind’. The film, which is in excellent condition, is pure high quality entertainment. Gable's masculine star quality dominates the film, the action is exciting, the acting and direction are classy, the sets and special effects are entirely convincing. The MGM money shows. The dialogue between Gable and Harlow is filled with sharp innuendo – obviously very carefully written. Surprisingly little anti-Chinese racism, although there are a couple of scenes where the Chinese servants are showing an awful lot of teeth. The Lewis Stone character is a bit hokey: he eventually redeems himself from his previous spinelessness by throwing himself into a pirate junk with live hand grenades pressed to his body – and this after his ankle has been shattered by a pirate hammer. Entertaining vehicle that made a lot of money for MGM. (2011)

Chinatown 1974 Roman Polanski 4.0 Jack Nicholson, Faye Dunaway, John Huston. Great updated film noir with Nicholson as respectable gumshoe (he has principles and he has two respectable looking assistants) who gets embroiled in high politics when he takes on an adultery case. Terrific 30s LA atmosphere – art direction completely integrated with hair, clothes, interior decoration, sepia photography, streets swept of anything modern. Cool jazz score pretty much perfect. Fascinating because of water politics – after many twists and turns viewer learns that JH is rooking the city out of money for a dam so that he and his buddies can develop San Fernando Valley. Plot is ingenious – just the right amount of confusion and misdirection so that viewer remains interested, but doesn't get annoyed by false leads and red herrings. At first there seems to be two strands – one adulterous and the other political – but the two eventually merge – very neat and satisfying. Plot famous for JH's line, “Just find the girl,” in the priceless dialogue scene with Nicholson (on Santa Catalina Island with his nose bandaged after the attack by Polanski!). Nicholson as great star presence that carries that movie from beginning to end.

Faye Dunaway quite glamorous and generally believable, although with periodic indications of distaff scenery chewing. JH as great screen presence adding intense piquancy with his acting reserve and his distinctive mannerisms in his mouth and hand gestures. Direction seems skilled and appropriate, although no particular scene or technique stands out. (2009)

Chop Shop 2007 Ramin Bahrani 2.5 Cinéma vérité style treatment of poverty in worst part of Queens, New York, where two parentless children of about 12 and 16 struggle to build some sort of future. Alejandro Polanco as Ale, endearing, decent kid with street smarts, no education, and no family determined to buy a rusted out truck to make into a taco wagon; Isamar Gonzalez as his pretty older sister, Isi, who turns tricks with local truckers to help Ale save up enough money; the film does not develop any more characters. Film focuses on visualization of the depressing neighborhood: street half filled with puddles of water, cars moving through besieged by “chop shop” agents anxious to repaint, fix fenders, replace auto parts, a sea of badly sorted signs, men and a few women from every background (Hispanic perhaps dominates), a New York bridge in the background, Shea Stadium next door regularly visited by the locals without paying the price of admission. Ale and Isi live in plywood-lined apartment over one of the chop shops, sleep in the same bed, cook popcorn; whenever Ale collects a little money, he puts it in a tin cup that he hides under a board on an abandoned bridge. When he buys the truck from the father of one of his buddies, it turns out a cheat – the truck is so rusted out that it is impossible to repair, and he has to sell it for a huge loss to a local garage owner for auto parts. One of the few hopeful symbols of the film is feeding pigeons with seed; when Ale feeds them at the end and they then fly off in a hurry, the viewer wonders whether to take it as a hopeful sign that the lives of the kids will also at some point take flight; not to give up on their ingenuity and persistence. The film gives a realistic view of life at the bottom of the social scale; the pleasant, naively optimistic viewpoint of the two kids is endearing; but the slightness of the narrative and the exiguous acting abilities of most of the characters interfere with the pleasure of viewing. (2016)

Christmas in July 1940 Preston Sturges 3.0 Dick Powell as sweet guy-next-door who thinks he has won a jackpot in a slogan contest (but no crooning); Ellen Drew cute and wholesome, and a little dull, as the girl-next-door who is one hundred percent behind her man; Raymond Walburn effective as excitable, blustering head of the coffee company that ran the slogan contest; Franklin Pangborn as sissy-like radio announcer; William Demarest as the stubborn lone holdout on the jury supposedly choosing the winning slogan; and numerous other members of the Sturges company. Sometimes amusing, almost always loud, satirical second comedy by Sturges. Powell and Drew are a cute, poverty-stricken (although well enough dressed) couple that is tricked into thinking he has won a slogan contest – his slogan raises eyebrows everywhere since no one seems to understand it. He receives the check from Walburn (who doesn't realize that the slogan jury is still hung because of Demarest), and then goes on a spending spree, most of which benefits delighted poor children in his neighborhood. The bosses find out the deception and try to take the prize back, but improbable plot developments ensure a happy ending – in a feel good speech Drew convinces Powell's boss to let him keep his job and private office, and Demarest bursts into Walburn's office to tell him that the jury has finally chosen a winner – Powell! This comedy has much in common with Capra's 30s comedies, but is less feel-good, louder, faster moving, and more satirical. The screenplay is rather pessimistic: decent kids are so poor can't even buy a sofa for their mother (USA in 1940 is still suffering from the Depression); they have to rely on pure luck to get ahead in life; when the chips are down, the capitalist bosses show that they are cads (they go to Powell's neighborhood to try to reclaim the gifts that they insist are theirs); when he finds out that Powell's prize is a hoax, his boss instinctively decides to take his job away from him until Drew hits him with a Capra-style speech. The film obviously sides with the common people working in Kafka-like rows of desks and struggling to make a living against the bosses, who always seem to be angry running in circles; all the characters outside of Powell and Drew speak fast in flat American accents (no more Herbert Marshalls!) interrupting one another in mid-sentence. A good slapstick scene in the street where the bosses, who are interrupting a popular celebration, are hit with various kinds of food, suction-cup arrows, etc. Rather punchless comedy with a lot of stylistic momentum; Sturges will hit high gear the following year with 'The Lady Eve'. (2010)

Chronicle 2012 Josh Trank 3.0 “Found footage” science fiction drama about three Seattle high school boys that acquire telekinesis powers. Dane De Haan as depressive loner Andrew, who decides to film his self-described miserable life; Alex Russell as his more outgoing cousin and friend, Matt; Michael B. Jordan as popular African-American classmate, Steve; Michael Kelly as Andrew’s abusive, alcoholic father, who makes life miserable for his mortally ill wife and for Andrew, whom he pummels periodically. The film is made from alleged found footage, most of it filmed by Andrew, but some of it produced by convenient fellow filmer, and intercut bits from news reports; for a connoisseur of traditional Hollywood filming the effect is irritating. Bored at a party, the three boys discover a mysterious cave in the woods; they find themselves in a cavern with some sort of large, shining crystal; after emerging they discover that they can move objects telepathically and levitate themselves. The screenplay examines the social and psychological consequences on them. Their early experiences are innocent – throwing and manipulating baseballs and flying dizzily through the clouds – the vertiginous sequence ends with a jetliner slicing through the air right past them; the boys also use their powers to make themselves more popular among their high school buddies and to get some girls at a party (Andrew turns one of them off by (apparently) spurting semen all over her clothes). The consequences of the newfound powers soon however turn darker: an obnoxious driver is forced off the road and seriously injured; various annoying people – especially friends at school – are hurled against walls when they get in the way. Jordan is soon killed in another cloud caper, and Andrew becomes increasingly more paranoid and destructive despite the calming influence of the emotionally balanced Matt. The film ends with a dreary, violent, Armageddon in downtown Seattle illustrated with eye-popping special effects of massive destruction and ending with Andrew getting speared by an Indian statue in a downtown square. The screenplay tries to give the film an upbeat ending by having Matt visit Tibet (he and Andrew had promised that they would go there together) and end with an adolescent-style whoop of triumph. After the death of two of the three protagonists and the near-destruction of a major American city, one can’t help but wonder where the victory is. For a mere reported \$15 million, the special effects are effective, even spectacular, especially in the first part of the film. The found footage shtick is a bit old hat; the unrelenting focus on high school emotionalism also wears thin. (2016)

Chungking Express 1994 Kar Wai Wong (Hong Kong) 3.0 Takeshi Kaneshiro as emotional cop (in first segment) emotionally devastated by breakup with his girlfriend; Brigitte Lin as impatient, petulant drug dealer in a big blond wig, more interested in violent revenge than potential romance; Tony Leung as dreamy, sexy cop in second segment that is pining away from his breakup with an airline stewardess; Faye Wong steals the show as sexy, pixie-like, slight-figured restaurant worker, who sets her sights on Leung (but he can think only of his lost love); Chen Jinquan as humorous, cupid-like owner of a fast food restaurant in the heart of Hong Kong where most of the narrative takes place. Hip, spontaneous, loosely organized diptych about lovelorn policemen in contemporary Hong Kong (the director apparently intended a third segment, but dropped it). The first segment mixes Kaneshiro’s frustrated romantic life with underworld elements, as the belligerent drug dealer Lin pursues some non-Chinese (Pakistani?) underlings that abscond with her goods – the viewer never gets to see her without her wig. The second story is a kind of romantic comedy without the crime elements; it is much more charming and engaging because of the irrepressible Fong, who is focused on going to California and seems always to be listening to the Mamas and the Papas’ “California Dreamin’”. Romantically obsessed with the inattentive Leung, she gains access to his tight little apartment, which she visits while he is at work to clean, redecorate, and hang out excitedly. Leung improbably notices nothing, until he runs into her in the apartment. Since the relationship builds slowly, she decides to visit California for a year. When she returns and runs into Leung, a clever exchange about a (handwritten) boarding pass indicates that they may become a couple, although nothing is sure. The film style has the spontaneity and evident pleasure of film-making reminiscent of the early days of the French New Wave – rapid-fire editing, experimenting with different shooting styles, the roundelay of young romance, romantic coupling and uncoupling occurring in rapid motion, playing of pop music on the soundtrack (including a song performed by Wong, who was a Hong Kong pop star at the time), sexiness produced by the yearning of the characters for a romantic partner.

The film feels slight, disorganized, and improvised, but it has the virtue of honesty and spontaneity. Hip and contemporary when compared to Chinese or Japanese films. (2014)

The Cider House Rules 1999 Lasse Hallström 3.0 Tobey Maguire low-key and minimally responsive as the orphan Homer who knows gynecology and obstetrics; Charlize Theron as very beautiful girlfriend of Russ; Paul Rudd as lieutenant in the Army Air Force, who brings Theron to the orphanage St. Cloud for an abortion; Michael Caine (Academy Award) in extraordinary performance (Maine accent and all) as the kindly head of the orphanage who however has an addiction to ether that finally kills him; Delroy Lindo as powerful acting head of the harvesting crew on the apple farm where Homer works after he leaves the orphanage. Lovely, often interesting and easy-to-watch film that takes place in Maine during World War II. Much of the narrative is about the orphan Homer's coming of age: he is compelled to go out in the world to seek his place (Caine tells him that he must find something useful if he must leave), he finds work in an apple orchard (beautiful shots of the ripe and delicious-looking apples), falls in love and has an extended affair with Rudd's girlfriend, finally agrees to perform an abortion when it is necessary, and returns to take his place as medical head of the orphanage when Caine dies. Another focus is the relationship between Caine and Homer: they love each other like father and son; Caine is determined that Homer will succeed him as medical chief even though Homer doesn't have a medical degree (or even a high school diploma). Another is dealing with the issue of abortion: the film treats it usually in a positive way: Caine performs safe and expert abortion so that young women won't die of coat-hanger infections (one does toward the beginning of the film); he loses his job apparently because of the abortions; Homer is at first opposed to them, but seems finally to decide when he operates on Lindo's daughter that they are ok in the case of rape and incest; on the other hand, all the characters in the film associated with the performance of abortions die or are punished in some way (e.g., Theron ends up with a man "paralyzed from the waist down" who won't be able to produce children for her), except for Homer, who – switch again – will be performing them as new head of the orphanage. The main moral of the film – that you can't just follow the rules given to you by society but that you have to make your own according to your own needs ("cider house rules") – is somewhat garbled, since this principle would seem to justify infidelity, abortion, or murder (in the case of the murder of Lindo by his daughter) in many cases. Cinematography is gloriously beautiful – the rolling hills of Maine, the quaint farmstead, the colors of the different seasons, especially the fall, the bright reds and yellows of the eating apples, the yellow blond hair and bright carmine lips of Theron, the quietly monumental orphanage on top of the hill overlooking the railroad station. The film's tone is kind, peaceful, serene, bucolic: happiness in life is experienced outside of society, i.e., on the farm or in the protected world of the orphanage. (2011)

Cinderella Man 2005 Ron Howard 2.5 Russell Crowe in another meaty, intensely physical role as James J. Braddock, the Irish everyman underdog who challenges and defeats the supposedly unstoppable killer, Max Baer, Craig Bierko convincing and also with a physical presence as Max Baer (but he is unfairly presented as violent and threatening), Paul Giamatti as somewhat ruthless manager of Braddock, René Zellweger as squinting, hesitant, jaw-trembling, weepy "kewpie doll" of a wife who despite all stands loyally behind her husband and eventually achieves her goal of suburban bliss. Evocative, paint-by-the-numbers Hollywood rags-to-riches, triumph-of-the-human spirit epic about the problems of the down-and-out Braddock and his courageous struggle to get that title fight with Max Baer (he held his title only for a short time). The unimaginative symphonic score drones interminably in the background. Impossible not to compare it to the 'Rocky' series. Set against the background of Depression America, where workers are living in Hoovervilles, struggling to get even a day's work (on the docks), and trying to avoid the temptations of radical politics (those nasty Communists); Braddock stands for the little guy, who while remaining decent (he makes his son return the sausage that he stole from a meat shop) is able to make good and pull his family out of poverty. Much tear-jerking going on as Crowe fondles his children and gives them important life lessons; he never fools around with the bimbos that inhabit Baer's world, and returns all his winnings to the patient, long-suffering and wife. Boxing is a nasty business run by hard-headed businessmen who take much of the earnings of the fighter, but there is no crime or fight-fixing involved (vide 'Raging Bull' and 'Body and Soul'). Boxing sequences are well filmed and Crowe is very convincing as go-for-the-jugular fighter, who has terrific staying power in the

ring and able to withstand the fury of Max Baer. Fights, which tend to be too long (compare with the short and sweet fight scenes from 'Raging Bull'), are filmed with shots of both the fighters and the fans, and lots of sound effects. Movie is undeniably effective in rousing the crowd and the acting is good, but it is formulaic and manipulative. (2006)

Citizen Ruth 1996 Alexander Payne 4.0 Laura Dern as Ruth, Swozie Kurtz as anti-abortion activist who ends up being a pro-Choice spy and is a hilarious genius at switching personalities to fit in with Babysavers, Mary Kay Place and Kurtwood Smith as priceless mealy-mouthed, sincere but shallow Christian rescuers of Ruth, Burt Reynolds in cameo as publicity oriented head of antiabortion movement (he also has adolescent pretty boy as his boy toy!), Ken Mars as hilarious addled doctor, Kathleen Noone as unforgettable antiabortion nurse with the ingratiating smile, Tippi Hedren in very small cameo as stylish pro-Choice national leader, M.C. Gainey as ex-Vietnam slob who along with his biker friends provides protection for the Abortion clinic. Side-splitting satire on the forces involved in the abortion conflict with more heavy guns trained on the antiabortion movement (Babysavers). Dern is excellent as filthy, drug-addled street person (she sniffs glue, brake fluid at every opportunity and substitutes Courvoisier in a pinch; and you know she is in trouble when the cops know her name); she is pregnant for fifth time, and to prevent her from having an abortion she is rescued by abortion activists; she is shallow, foul-mouthed and greedy when she is sober and resorts to stimulants when she encounters the least frustration; she gives into her first impulse like a child, and is thus open to manipulation by both sides of the abortion controversy; when both sides offer her money to sway her decision, she accepts with alacrity! Payne as usual aims his satire at everything – the clueless irresponsibility of Dern, the hypocritical oiliness of the Christian rescuers, the lesbian pro-Choice activists who pray to the moon (they purport to favor free choice, but it is apparent that they want Dern to have the abortion), but most of his ridicule is aimed at the Babysavers – some wonderful close-ups of women snarling and grimacing as they shout denunciations. Film has astute theme – no one cares about Ruth and her baby; it is all politics and only the cause counts; the last scene has Ruth (who has lost her baby through a miscarriage) sneaking away from the clinic and no one in the crowd pays her the least attention. Dern has a few more dramatic movements toward the end, where her miscarriage seems to make her think about putting her life together – audience feels a little more sympathy. Still, a daring movie with no positive characters and no one to root for! We are invited to laugh at everyone, and it works! Terrific minimalist musical score by Rolfe Kent, composer of the scores from 'Election,' 'About Schmidt,' and 'Sideways.' Humorous use of music – opening credits has Sinatra singing "When you love someone, you have to love them – all the way!" and we cut to Dern being shagged on the floor; when Dern opens the bag with the money in it at the end, Handel's "Hallelujah" chorus blasts through the soundtrack!

Citizen X 1995 Chris Gerolmo (Britain: TV filmed in Budapest) 3.5 Stephen Rea as intense, persistent pathologist in Rostov (Soviet Union) who is put in charge of investigation of a serial murder case; Donald Sutherland looking gaunt in Soviet colonel's uniform – he is Rea's superior, supporter and friend; John Wood red-face, arrogant and ill-tempered as party hack who constantly blocks the investigation; Max Von Sydow as avuncular Russian psychiatrist who is brought in toward the end to profile the suspect and then wheedle a confession out of him; Jeffrey DeMunn has rousing confession scene as serial killer. Very engaging investigative film in which scenario lets us know who the perpetrator is and leads us through a difficult and lengthy investigation. Local worker and member of the Communist party is a sexual deviant who murdered 52 victims – mostly girls and children – over a 10-year period. Rea is put in charge of the investigation, but is blocked every inch of the way by Communist Party apparatchiki, especially John Wood, the local Party bigwig, who insists that there are no serial murderers in the Soviet Union and who forces Rea to focus on local homosexuals (despite most of the victims being girls covered with semen!). Meanwhile, the obsessive Rea has to deal with his supportive wife (a very Russian-looking Imelda Staunton) and he gradually develops a close friendship with Sutherland, who goes out of his way several times to defend him against the party hacks. Very entertaining is the picture of the Soviet Union frozen by its propaganda self-image (they refuse to allow the publication of the news of the crimes or to contact the FBI for help in the investigation) and its bureaucratic procedures: the big shots rely on their friends and protect their own butts; the lower-down

policemen are depicted as shiftless, lazy, and unreliable; a demoralized country. The ideologist is particularly entertaining in his blustering, self-righteous domination of his underlings, until – to the delight of the viewer – Sutherland discovers that he is a homosexual himself and is able to quiet him by blackmail. The progress (?) of the investigation is charted by the changing portraits of the Communist Party boss on the wall – from Brezhnev, to Andropov, finally to Gorbachev; only with perestroika in 1990 is Sutherland put in complete charge of the case, at which time he gives Rea the manpower needed for tracking down the killer. The confession scene, in which the murderer breaks down in tears under Van Sydow's prompting, is moving, largely because of DeMunn's performance. The scenario is sometimes frustrating: e.g., the failure of Rea to put a tail on the killer after his first arrest and release is inexplicable. The film ends with the investigators being applauded by the local population for their work (heroes after allowing 52 murders in 10 years!!) and the perp being suspensefully executed with a shot in the head. Interesting film for its insertion in the history of the decline of the Soviet Union; moving from the performances of the main actors and the bond developed between Rea and Sutherland. (2011)

City of God 2002 Fernando Meirelles (Brazil) 3.5 Alexandre Rodrigues as Rocket, who somehow does not get sucked into the crime vortex of the Rio de Janeiro slum, City of God, Firmino Da Hora as L'il Ze, the very toothy vicious crime boss of the slum, a lot of young Brazilian male amateurs playing roles of the bosses and followers of street gangs. Very disturbing drama about what it's like for a young man to grow up in the Rio slums – chances are you will be drawn into drug dealing, gang warfare and extreme violence. Rocket (who later as a newspaper photographer writes a book on his experiences) tells the story, starting with a street celebration when the hoods are chasing a chicken through the streets, and then three flashbacks – the 60s when it all gets started, the 70s when the hyper-vicious casual killer l'il Ze slaughters his way to the top of the gang world, and the 80s when his viciousness catches up with him and he and his followers have to slug it out with a rival gang until Ze and virtually all of his men are dead. Most disturbing part of the movie is the casual way that pistol toting ten-year old boys are drawn into the gangs, become vicious killers, and then have their lives snuffed out – boy L'il Ze goes back to the brothel and then pointlessly shoots most of its denizens to death, teenage gang members ask boy which foot he wants to be shot in and then choose one while little guy whimpers, Carrot give a pistol to a kid who insists that he is a man – he says he has taken drugs, shot people, killed them -- , gang members suddenly drop at the crack of a pistol shot when we expect it least, etc. Rocket narrates in a loose, informal style (it is hard for the non-Portuguese speaker to follow the camera action and read the subtitles). The photographer is a kind of *cinéma vérité* grab you at the throat – shaky hand-held camera, swish pans, motion speed-ups, jump cuts, etc. is tiring to watch, but it works because of the active-violent subject matter. Rocket as a character is often absent from the action, but toward end film focuses on his redemption – even though he loses the pretty girl to Benny, he manages a job in the newspaper, and after delivering papers, he moves up when he gets pictures of the Ze's gang (Ze uses him as a kind of public relations outlet) and eventually of Ze's dead body. At end Rocket has a real life, but the ten-year olds are cruising the streets talking about drugs and guns – there are always replacements for the dead. In its high-velocity violence and narrative drive and its narration by a participant, the film reminds one of Scorsese's 'Goodfellas.' (2006)

City of Life and Death 2009 Chuan Lu (China) 4.0 Hideo Nakaizumi as Kadokawa, the innocent, wide-eyed Japanese soldier shocked by the atrocities he witnesses; Ye Liu as tough, heroic Chinese soldier resisting the Japanese advance into Nanking – he is then executed by the IJA; Yuanyuan Gao as Miss Jiang, a Chinese woman working under John Rabe, who tries to save the lives and the honor of her girls; Wei Fan as portly Mr. Tang, Rabe's secretary, who struggles – in vain – to save the lives of his wife and children; Ryu Kohata as a young Japanese officer giving orders for the massacre but becoming increasingly disillusioned with the slaughter and raping. Very disturbing Chinese account of the infamous Rape of Nanking (1937-38), which depicts the events frankly, although not sensationally, and which refuses to demonize the Japanese soldiers participating. The film, which often seems more a documentary than a fictional story, is shot in striking widescreen black and white on huge eye-popping sets that depict graphically the ruined city: burnt-out hulks of buildings with their roofs and much of their walls missing, fires blazing with Chinese prisoners inside, bodies and severed heads hanging from

lampposts, vast fields filled with bodies machine-gunned by the Japanese soldiers, a cart laden with female bodies stacked like firewood bumping down the street to the horrified gaze of Kadokawa, etc. Particularly through the impact of bullets on bodies the direction makes the violence very realistic. The film first deals with the Japanese assault on the city and the scattered resistance of the remnants of the Chinese army; then the rounding up of Chinese soldiers and their execution by machine gun fire; then the outrages against civilians, particularly the rape of the women and the rounding up of young Chinese women to serve as “comfort women” to the Japanese soldiers; the efforts of several Chinese characters to save either themselves and their families or the civilians under their care. The film sticks to the grass roots – no higher officers or analysis of causes and reasons, but strictly the experience of selected, probably fictionalized, individuals on both sides. With the Chinese the emphasis is on suffering and anxiety – sometimes there is a bit too much sobbing and hand-wringing. With the Japanese the film focuses on their efficient carrying out of orders, but includes also some insight into their camaraderie, their leisure, their hunger for women (most of the sex in the film is officially sanctioned by the Japanese command in tents). The film appears to take the point of view that Japanese individuals are not responsible for the atrocities – they are not depicted as monsters – but that the brutality of war led to commission of the crimes. The baby-faced Kadokawa is dazed and shocked throughout the film by the horrors he witnesses; the officer Kohata starts off as a hard-nose warrior but softens toward the end. The film ends with the two soldiers releasing two Chinese prisoners; after bowing repeatedly to his superior, Kadokawa stumbles in a daze back toward the city, and Kohata walks to the top of a hill and shoots himself in the head with his pistol. Just before the final scene, the army celebrates its victory with an aggressively rhythmic drum performance and a victory parade in which the traditionally clad participants march in a jagged, mugging style with arms flying in unison out to the side of their bodies. Such is the power of militarism and collective behavior – it turns (probably decent) individuals into killing and raping machines. Unforgettable film.

Cloak and Dagger 1946 Fritz Lang (Warners) 2.5 Gary Cooper his typically unexpressive self as American atomic scientist sent to Europe at the end of World War II to keep the Germans from developing their own atomic bomb; Lilli Palmer as very cute, nattily dressed Italian partisan who has a lot of screen presence and looks charming dashing through the woods carrying a submachine gun. By-the-book Hollywood spy thriller that offers few thrills aside from a couple of good scenes. The initial scenes in Switzerland are fairly compelling, especially a well-edited one in a hotel room where Cooper unmasks a German agent. The fight scene in Italy between Cooper and a Nazi agent is compelling – quirky, lengthy, and violent, with the bad guy trying to gouge Cooper’s face and ending with Cooper throttling him – we get just a shot of the dying man’s feet. Most of the film is taken up with Cooper hanging out with supposed partisan fighter Palmer in Italy as they labor to extract an Italian atomic scientist from the country. Palmer is extremely bright and sprightly, but it is hard to accept that she is active in an anti-German Resistance movement and that she is attracted to the inexpressive, although handsome Cooper, who is a couple of decades older than she. It is nice to view a spy thriller where actors actually speak foreign languages – Italian and German – rather than speak in British-accented English, as often happens in Hollywood spy films; Cooper being able to get by with his American-accented German is however hard to take. Reportedly Lang included an anti-nuke message in the film, which however was edited out by the studio – with the exception of an early speech by Cooper in which he comments on the destructive power of nuclear weapons. The film ends with a rather pitiful embrace between Palmer and Cooper, in which the latter promises to come back to get her; then the props on the transport plane thunder into action (thanks to ‘Casablanca’), and Cooper flies to safety. One hopes that Cooper no longer played in thrillers or spy films. Certainly one of Lang’s more humdrum efforts. (2013)

Closely Watched Trains 1966 Jiri Menzel (Czech) 4.0 Vaclav Nickar as Milos, the gangly, shy dispatcher;s apprentice in a provincial railroad station in Czechoslovakia occupied by the Nazis; Josef Somr as Hubicka, the randy dispatcher; Jitka Bendova as Masa the hyper-cute, fetching conductress who tries to seduce Milos. Small masterpiece about life in a train station under Nazi occupation. Much satire about uniforms and bureaucracy – petits bourgeois in the town can think of nothing better for their child than to be a dispatcher wearing a railroad uniform, and then to retire at 45 and do nothing for the rest of

his lives; the overweight station master is ridiculous in his social ambition to hang out with the haunchy local countess; the top railroad supervisor is an absurd Nazi puppet who enters a scene to the accompaniment of strains from Liszt's 'Les Préludes' and who regales his subordinates with absurdly tendentious reports about the 'strategic withdrawals' of the German army on all fronts. Everyone in the train station is obsessed with sex – Hubicka seems to be having sex with every woman in the vicinity, and he is the perpetrator in the most famous scene in the film – his using official railroad stamps to stamp the thighs and the buttocks of the prettiest and most willing employee working in the station (the follow-up investigation prompted by her outraged mother provides much humor toward the end of the film). Milos is attracted to Masa, but in another sexy scene in which she crawls into the bed with him in her uncle's photography studio (he has a case of roving hands with his pretty clients), he fails to get an erection and then tries unsuccessfully to commit suicide. In the final sequences, the film veers into anti-German resistance when the station staff succeeds in blowing up a German ammunition train as it passes through the station; Milos, who has just been initiated into sex by an obliging resistance worker, is shot by a German guard, Masa is left standing waiting for him to return (they are never able to consummate their relationship), and Hubicka can't stop laughing when he sees the explosions. Surely the resistance passages were meant to be allegorical protests against the Soviet control of Czechoslovakia as a satellite state, and the obsession of all the characters with sex would seem to be an outlet for freedom in a country oppressed by a dictatorial regime (cf. 'The Unbearable Lightness of Being'). The strength of the film is its tone – light-hearted and with an affection for human nature and its foibles, a light satirical tone that never condemns and that recalls New Wave films especially of Truffaut; even German soldiers are lonely, and they hook up with equally lonely, well-scrubbed nurses in a hospital car for a little consolation. The tone includes real sexiness, something often missing in films dealing with the subject: the girls are adorable and willing, the guys curious and meaning no harm; where else is the spice of life in an environment filled with death and repression? Yes, a minor masterpiece. (2009)

Closer 2004 Mike Nichols 3.0 Clive Owen in blockbuster performance as emotionally violent, macho dermatologist; Julia Roberts keeping her smiley star persona under control as manipulative and deceptive photographer; Jude Law as originally decent fellow who ends up betraying his lover as brutally as anyone else; Natalie Portman in her first adult role as Alice, a naïve girl with red-dyed hair who has to grow up a lot in the four years of the film. Rather gripping, emotionally violent film about two British men and two American women in London coupling, uncoupling and then recoupling in a manipulative, duplicitous manner. Edited with lots of jump cuts that emphasize the lack of obvious narrative continuity in the plot. Examines the impact of sex: when all the principals are talking about love and considering themselves in significant relationships and yet all except for perhaps Portman are interested in sexual power and domination rather than caring, equal relationships. Roberts seems so sensible in the beginning and yet she commits the worst betrayal – a year-long affair with Law without telling her husband, Owen. Owen steals the show from everyone – he has violent monstrous male ego that has to have possession and domination of his women; and more than once he has sex with a woman to cause suffering and to demonstrate his contempt for his male rival; he is a sadist. Portman is radiantly and innocently beautiful despite her working as a very complaisant stripper in a London night club; she falls heart and soul for Law and is emotionally crushed when he tells her ("This is going to hurt.") that he is in love with the other woman. In the end, when Law tries to rekindle their relationship, she is horrified by his (male) jealousy and she snaps, ending the relationship and returning to New York to start all over again after the disastrous four-year foray into sexual politics. Meanwhile, to show that the heart of the film is cynical, Roberts and Clive Owen end up back together (after being on the verge of divorce) reading quietly in bed next to one another. Film takes us back to "Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf" and 'Carnal Knowledge;' Nichols again makes a rather depressing venture into the realm of sexual relationships without real love...the result being hatred and disappointment. (2010)

Coco Avant Chanel 2009 Anne Fontaine (France) 3.0 Audrey Tautou rather gaunt when not wearing makeup as the famous Coco Chanel before she became famous (does her thinness come from her constantly smoking cigarettes?); Marie Gillain charming as Coco's sister, Adrienne; Benoit Poelvoorde as Étienne, Coco's light-hearted but devoted lover; Alessandro Nivola ('Junebug') as Boy, the rather low-

key English love of her life until he is killed in an auto accident at the end of the film; Emmanuelle Davos as straightforward, non-conformist actress and friend of Etienne. Pleasant, sometimes visually poetic depiction of the early life of designer Coco Chanel at the turn of the century before she became famous. Coco and Adrienne came from a very poor family, they were raised in an orphanage, and they make their way through the first part of their lives by becoming lovers of wealthy men (courtesans); much of the film is shot in the region of Compiègne where Etienne had a magnificent chateau and on the ocean at Trouville. Film focuses on the travails and ambition of Coco: she apparently was taught to be a seamstress while living in the orphanage, and on the numerous occasions that she sews dresses and hats in the film, the viewer cannot help but think of what her destiny was. Much of the film however is devoted to her relationships with men: she is allowed to stay in Etienne's chateau while he continues to party and pursue other women, but he eventually becomes very attached to her and asks her to marry him at the end; by that time however she is hopelessly in love with Boy, who marries a rich English heiress, but continues to visit her until his death. Coco is very "modern": she doesn't believe in marriage (although she would probably make an exception for Boy) and she dreams of setting up her own business in Paris; the viewer of course cannot resist a "ha-ha!" when she moves there and with the benefit of a single edit becomes rich and famous (society women nod approvingly at her in expensive restaurants). She specializes in straw hats and dresses with simple lines, perhaps derived in part from the habits of the nuns that educated her. Film moves at a leisurely pace with exquisite pictures of sumptuous interiors and poetic exteriors bathed in pale sunlight. A pleasant film that lacks gripping drama. (2010)

The Cocoanuts 1929 Robert Florey, Joseph Santley (Paramount) 3.0 The Marx Boys with Groucho as manager of a hotel in Cocoanut Beach in Florida during the 20s land boom; Zeppo as desk clerk, Harpo and Chico as hangers-on; Margaret Dumont as the usual clueless, wealthy woman; Mary Eaton as her daughter – the center of a subplot about whom she is going to marry– she is the main musical offender; Kay Francis as guest trying to pull off a jewel theft with her partner. The first Marx Brothers movie: very roughly made on New York sound stage with a completely forgettable plot about a proposed jewel theft and an ineffably boring score by Irving Berlin – the trite theme song "The Skies will all be blue" is repeated umpteen times. Harpo plays the clarinet and the harp, and Chico the piano for a minute or two at the very end. Some fairly complex choreography, the best of which has tights-clad chorus girls dancing up and down steps and with little hand movements in the beginning of the film; one short scene previews Busby Berkeley choreography with a bird's-eye view of dancing girls. The film is in part a satire of huckster real estate deals in the Florida land boom of the 1920s – Groucho is trying to sell empty lots with the help of Chico, who however ruins the occasion by bidding too aggressively. All the boys' acts are used. Groucho insults Dumont by referring to her as a whale (the original reference was the Prince of Wales); long ten-minute "register" scene toward the beginning of the film with signature behavior from all three performing brothers, the boys imitate Revolutionary War marchers and Harpo eats a telephone; the famous word play, e.g., Chico confusing "viaduct" and "Why a Duck"; Chico seriously overdoing his fake bidding during Groucho's land auction scene; Harpo's long silent gags in the jail (hitting his hand with the hammer and bending one of the bars to get out) and then by the doorway with Groucho (having objects cascade out of his pockets and stealing the sucker's handkerchief). At one point Harpo shows his child-like sweetness by offering Mary Eaton a lollipop when she's sad. Not much of a movie, but some memorable moments from the boys. (2015)

A Coffee in Berlin (Oh Boy) 2012 Jan Ole Gerster (Germany) 3.5 Tom Schilling as aimless law school dropout Niko – he seems to be alcoholic; Katharina Schüttler as Elli; Marc Hosemann as Niko's droll, also aimless friend, Matze; Steffen Jürgens as outraged director of performance art; Frederike Kempter as unstable actress Julika that Niko meets in a coffee house – significant inferiority complex about being too fat, although she is skinny. Slow-moving, almost plotless film that follows an alienated, aimless young German through the streets of Berlin for no particular reason. The film begins with his mumbled explanations to his girlfriend for their breakup; in the course of the day he sits in a lot of bars and cafes, has several cups of coffee, smokes cigarettes, and spends time with friends and other people he just encounters. Strangers often approach him and monopolize him, perhaps because they sense his loneliness and passiveness. As he rides the busses through the city night, he looks aimlessly out

the window at the passing Berlin buildings; he sometimes evaluates himself in a mirror, like Jean-Paul Belmondo in 'Breathless'. He encounters a sadistic-acting psychologist, who refuses to give him back his driver's license (he had lost it for drunk driving); his friend Matze, who has a car but is just as aimless; the pitiful older guy in his apartment, who adores soccer and tells him that his wife just had both of her breasts cut off; his father (amusing, sardonic sense of humor), who cuts off his allowance, since he hasn't been attending classes for two years; a friend of Matze that plays a German officer in a film set in the Nazizeit; two S-bahn officials that make fools of themselves checking Niko for tickets; the unstable Julika, who would like to be his girlfriend; the director of a performance art theater, who becomes enraged when Matze and Niko giggle during the (ridiculous histrionic) performance; a drug dealer's grandmother that he treats with affection and respect; a drunk in a café that tells him about his childhood during Hitler's time. The film ends with Niko sitting motionless smoking a cigarette – a young man lonely in the crowd and no direction in his life. The film is made in expressive, finely textured black and white with hyper close-ups and charming animated scenes from Berlin streets that recall shots from 'Menschen am Sonntag'. The black and white and the pleasant traditional jazz score remind one of some Woody Allen films. The Nazizeit often lurks in background: the friend playing in the Nazi play and the old drunk in the bar at the end who recounts how he threw stones through the windows of the Jews on Kristallnacht. A moving look at alienated German youth – cut off from the purpose of the Nazi national cause and the hard-working business world of his father. Whither...? (2015)

Coherence 2014 James Ward Byrkit 3.0 Emily Baldoni as frustrated ballerina that eventually becomes the focus of the film; Maury Sterling, Nicholas Brendon, Lorene Scafaria, Elizabeth Gracen, Hugo Armstrong, Alex Manugian, Lauren Maher as the other seven of the eight LA middle-class diners that gather at one of the participants' house for a dinner party laden with snarky conversation. Rather confusing, improvised ensemble film about the mysterious impact that a passing comet has on the dinner group in an LA suburb. The lights go out, the party discovers that there is a lone house down the street that still has lights burning; investigating the house they discover that the inhabitants down there are clones of the original eight – the two groups carry different color glow lights, boxes are discovered with photographs of the originals and a ping pong paddle in them, hand scrawled notes are affixed to the door, there are some suggestions of violence – one man has a cut on his forehead after returning from an outing, broken car windows, knock-down, drag-out confrontations when the two groups start to mix (hard to tell them apart since they look exactly like one another). Vague connections are made to 20th century science – Schrodinger's cat and quantum mechanics. The script is more a puzzle than a narrative; although some of the characters become more violent and confrontational as the film progresses, there is no payoff in story, meaning, or theme. By focusing exclusively on the eight characters framed by the living room of their house, the film develops a fair amount of suspense as the viewer waits for possible confrontations, revelations, etc. Essentially they never come. The last scene has Baldoni (the focus of the film for the final minutes) in the same frame as her husband, while he takes a phone call, which he announces to his wife is from her (the other wife is apparently on the phone). The filming style is shaky, zooming, unsteady, often out-of-focus camera that wears on the nerves. Characters speak informally often talking over one another as they argue about what to do in response to an outside stimulus from the other group; it is apparent that the actors don't know where the story is headed, but are given general instructions about the actions and reactions of their characters on each of the five days of filming. The film should get credit for taking risks; the interactions of the characters and the brain-teasing hold the interest of the viewer. Perhaps that's the most one could expect from an exceedingly cheap film. (2015)

Cold Mountain 2003 Anthony Minghella 3.5 Nicole Kidman very pretty and long-suffering as city girl from Charleston who has to tend a large farm when her father dies suddenly, Renee Zellweger very unglamorous, ornery, sensible as woman sent by neighbor to help Kidman tend the farm, Jude Law handsome, long-suffering, determined to return to his beloved after the frightening battle of Petersburg, Natalie Portman in cameo as very pretty young widow with a baby who asks Law to spend the night with her (chastely), Ray Winstone as evil Teague, who as leader of the Confederate Home Guard is lusting after Nicole, Philip Seymour Hoffmann in cameo as lecherous clergyman who is about to murder his black mistress when first encountered by Law. The film is set as a love story between Kidman and Law,

who barely know one another before Law departs to the war, and who send each other lots of letters that never arrive. Film begins with an epic and gruesome account of the Battle of Petersburg, when the Union forces blow up the Confederate lines and then the attacking soldiers are caught in the crater and decimated. Most of the film is devoted to cross-cutting between Law's difficult and violent return to Kidman (he is a deserter and thus has to trudge across country) and Kidman's trials and tribulations on the farm with her helper Zellweger. The film has a hard time working as a love story, since the lovers hardly know one another, and they are not reunited until the very end, when to our chagrin, they are again separated when Law is shot to death by one of the Home Guard (the especially vicious somersaulting one with the blond hair). The scenes of the Blue Ridge, actually shot in Romania, are poetic and beautiful: they provide a moving ironic backdrop to the violence and misery of the human story in the Civil War. The film is incredibly violent -- the depredations of the Home Guard are particularly vicious -- and the viewer is surprised at the end to see that there are enough survivors to populate a good extended family on Kidman's farm. Particularly satisfying is Law's visit to Portman and her baby: the Union soldiers torture the baby in front of the mother and then try to rape Portman; they are stopped in their tracks by the vengeful Law, who kills two of them with an axe. The film is reminiscent of the 'Odyssey' with Law trekking homeward, encountering numerous elemental and folkloric characters (the medicine woman who heals his wounds is one of them [Calypso without the sex?]), having adventures and many close calls. The viewer feels a bit cheated at the end, since Law is killed almost immediately after reunion; but their one night of love (filmed in typical Hollywood lyrical fashion) yields a daughter that presumably will be the light of Kidman's life. The film is very anti-war -- the death, destruction, suffering and cruelty is almost non-stop; men are butchered in battle and the women left behind suffer almost as much. Far above average Hollywood fare. (2006)

Collateral 2004 Michael Mann 2.5 Tom Cruise, Jamie Fox, Mark Ruffalo, Jada.... Urban thriller with Michael Mann signature. Takes place in Los Angeles night with 'Miami Vice' colors (yellows, oranges, chartreuse, light blue, etc.) and original rock soundtrack. Tom Cruise is hit man who has to kill five people scheduled to testify in federal anticrime trial, in one evening; for some reason he hires a cab at the Department of Justice Building and then forces cabdriver Fox to drive him around. Incredible amounts of gratuitous violence, beginning when a body falls three stories and lands on top of frightened Fox's cab. Lots of suspense, particularly in nightclub in huge three-way gun battle with FBI and security forces of Korean crime boss destined for death; and in protracted finale in federal building with ruthless, relentless Cruise stalking Jada in the dark; goes on almost forever with Fox saving Jada by finally shooting Cruise, and then surviving Terminator-like resurrection of Cruise who chases the duo through the MTA (LA subway). Interesting scene with jazz trumpeter, including lengthy tribute to Miles Davis and deceptive hope that Cruise might spare the jazzman. Cruise plays completely ruthless hit man with extreme professional pride (he contracted to kill five and he will get them, no matter what), but he also has sensitive, sympathetic side due to having been raised in an orphanage; he likes the likable Fox, and in the end gives him little pep talk about getting on the ball with his dream to have a limousine service. Nice scene with Fox's mom in hospital room, where Cruise learns that Fox is more talk than action. (2007)

College 1927 (Buster Keaton) 2.5 Buster Keaton in role as clueless college student; Anne Cornwall as the girl he is trying to get. Pretty flat, short (1:04) Keaton silent vehicle, in which he plays a studious college student who decides that he has to excel at athletics in order to get the girl. Film was made in the same year as 'The General'; Keaton felt that he needed a hit after the financial failure of 'The General'. The film is set in colorful fashion on a 20s college campus -- the dean is in charge of discipline, the male students wear boldly patterned sweaters and beanie caps, the girls are liable for expulsion if they are caught with a guy in their room. Almost no psychological or thematic content, just gags and superficial satire of college culture. Heart of the film is Keaton's attempts to play baseball (his clueless booting the ball in the field and confusion in a run-down between third and home are fairly amusing) and then trying successive track and field events -- sprinting, high jump (pretty funny), long jump, hammer throw, and finally pole vaulting, which he is especially incompetent at performing. A kindly dean, who is still pining after his college sweetheart, has mercy on the guy and has him appointed as coxswain on the

college crew team; victory in the race brings the credit he needs to turn the head of the girl, but only after Keaton uses his pole-vaulting skills (performed by a double) to barge into her dorm room to save her from the clutches of a stupid jock, who wants to force her to marry him by embarrassing her. When the dorm matron threatens the two with expulsion, Keaton says that they couldn't care less since they are going to get married (apparently getting the college degree is not first priority). Certainly the weakest of the feature-length Keaton 20s films; even the gags seem improvised. (2009)

Colossal 2016 Nacho Vigalondo 1.5 Sort of science fiction film combining Godzilla destroying Seoul and a comic treatment of alcoholic millennials working out their frustrations on one another. Anne Hathaway in game performance as an alcoholic who returns from New York to her provincial home town to reboot her life; Jason Sudeikis as childhood friend who has more Angst and bitterness than first appears; Austin Stowell as dim-witted drinking buddy who Hathaway falls for (very weak sequences); Dan Stevens as Hathaway's straight-laced boyfriend; Tim Blake Nelson as another drinking buddy. Most of the film takes place in Hathaway's pleasant little town, as she integrates with Sudeikis and his cronies in his bar (you rarely see a character without a beer in his-her hand, but never a cigarette!) and experiences not-so-interesting frustrations such as no furniture in her parents' house (they are conveniently missing) and the deflation of her air mattress. As illustrated by several short flashback sequences featuring Hathaway and Sudeikis walking past the park site with models of Korean towns, hostility and resentment between the two are reawakened (had they forgotten about it at first?). It seems that Sudeikis had destroyed Hathaway's model by stomping on it, something she could not forgive. The arousing of their anger is somehow paralleled with the appearance of two monsters in Seoul, Korea (!), who eventually attack one another – Hathaway is the good guy seeking to protect the city against the hyper-destructive Sudeikis. The footage oscillates between the embattled city and the emotional confrontation in upstate New York (?) until the Hathaway monster turns against the Sudeikis one and chases him away. The good monster's change of heart seems to represent Hathaway's determination to break with the past and start a new life. The film is oriented toward millennial types who watch a lot of television, but particularly videos on their cell phones: one scene has Hathaway and Sudeikis in the playground provoking combat between the two Korean monsters as their friends wait for the action to appear on their cell phones. The film's premise is kind of interesting for a summer movie – better than watching Godzilla stomp another city – but the delivery is silly, childish, and disjointed. (September 2017)

Come and Get It 1936 Howard Hawks, who is fired by Sam Goldwyn when the latter finds out Hawks has been tampering with the script; William Wyler finished the film probably directing the second part of it. 3.0 Edward Arnold as imperious, ambitious, unbending, rather bulldoggish roughneck lumberjack running a timber concern in northern Wisconsin – he marries for money; Frances Farmer glowing as dance hall girl – she has a heart of gold – with whom Arnold falls in love and then abandons for a capitalistic marriage; Farmer also plays Farmer's angelic-looking although rather materialistic and ambitious daughter in part II of film; Walter Brennan (AA) completely unrecognizable as the goofy, warm-hearted, perhaps a bit too lovable Swede sidekick of Arnold with Swedish accent; Andrea Leeds as Arnold's pretty daughter who is also his confidante – she calls her dad by his first name; Mary Nash as Arnold's homely wife; Joel McCrea innocent, upright and decent as Arnold's son. Creditable 30s melodrama divided between a rough and tumble first half with dramatic logging sequences and barroom brawls and a more psychological subtle, soap-operaish second half where the proper romantic relationships are sorted out. Film has strong sense of place in the upper Wisconsin woods in the first half. Film has an environmental, New Deal approach – Washington (time of Teddy Roosevelt) is beginning to impose limits on logging, and, to the chagrin of his dad, son McCrea thinks it not proper to clear cut timber. Strong point of the film is the acting. Brennan is colorful and cuddly. Arnold is a bit bearish for a starring role, but we believe him and his predicaments – mainly his potentially scandalous infatuation with the younger Farmer – and his struggle to resolve them. Farmer is downright glowing in both her roles – it is sometimes hard to take one's eyes off her. Film ends on positive, redeemed note: after near Oedipal brawl with his son and Farmer's cry "He's an old man!", Arnold appears to realize the errors of

his old ways and he returns to his backwoods persona as he beats the triangle and tells his guests to “come and get it!” Film perhaps suffers from having a gruff, overweight character in the starring role. (2008)

Comme une image (Look at Me) 2004 Agnès Jaoui (France) 3.5 Marilou Berry as Lolita, an aspiring singer and overweight daughter of a well-known author, Jean-Pierre Bacri (then husband of Agnès) as Étienne, enormously egocentric, self-absorbed author in France who is also a publisher, Agnès Jaoui as Sylvia, a voice teacher who is usually the sensible moral center of the film. Film about the privileged literati of France – two well-known authors, their publishers; takes place in Woody Allen-style Paris interiors, although a bit disheveled, and in the country home of Etienne (where is that beautiful country?). Kind of comedy of manners with bits of farce thrown in about shallow, egocentric, self-absorbed upper crust intellectuals in Paris, who care mainly about success and being lionized (not to mention the money), who are interested in people mainly for their usefulness in taking them to literary celebrities and powerful people, especially publishers, and who even with while making protestations of devotion to their art, are ready to abandon friends and publishers for success. Paul, husband of Sylvia and successful author himself, is consumed by success and resorts to petty subterfuges and hypocrisies to land Etienne as his new publisher: e.g., he praises and swallows the rabbit dish of his host when he in fact does not care for it (whereas the honest Sebastien protests that he cannot eat it). Drama focuses on the extremely insecure daughter Lolita, who is constantly looking for recognition and attention from her distracted, insensitive father; he constantly ignores her (refuses throughout the film to listen to the audition tape that Lolita made for him), and even in the end when he attends her performance in a charming Romanesque local church, he ducks out during the performance, returning only to applaud at the end; and after he hobnobs with a pretty singer, he offends everyone by predicting she will be a big success – because she is pretty and sexy! Jaoui is very observant of the foibles of insecurity and of social climbing, and she makes Etienne very amusing despite his overwhelming obnoxiousness; he can’t help ignoring or insulting the people around him, from his daughter, to his young, trophy wife (who leaves him momentarily toward the end of the film – she finds his face “scary”), to his long-suffering assistant who seems to expect him to be caustic. Islands of sanity are Sylvia (although toward the beginning of the film she is suddenly more interested in the singing career of Lolita when she discovers that her father is the famous Etienne) and the guy friend of Lolita (Sebastien), who helps her find a kind of sensible stability at the end. Everyone is looking for sane constancy, which some of them find toward the mixed end: Sylvia hangs in there with her husband, Etienne’s wife comes back to him, Lolita has successful concert and seems to find soul mate in Sebastien, but her father is still distracted and inattentive. Very entertaining movie after some initial confusion. (2005)

Compliance 2012 Craig Zobel 2.5 Well-made, low-budget provocateur film purporting to show that Americans will perform the cruelest acts if ordered to by someone in authority. Ann Dowd as Sandra, incredibly naïve and obtuse manager of fast food chicken sandwich outlet in Anywhere USA (probably Midwest); Dreama Walker (‘Good Wife’) as Becky, slacker teenaged employee interested more in talking on her cell phone than working; Pat Healy as ballsy prankster, who poses on the phone as police officer claiming that Dreama stole money from a customer; Bill Camp as Van, Sandra’s fiancé conned by Sandra into “watching” and humiliating Becky. After introduction to the scene at a fast food restaurant, Healy (at first presented only over the phone) contacts the frazzled manager, informing her that Becky has been credibly accused of stealing money from a customer and instructing her to detain her for the police. Incredibly, Sandra takes the caller seriously, and then arranges for a series of sexual humiliations of the incredulous, although passive Becky: she is stripped, searched and dressed only in an apron; after Sandra’s boyfriend has been summoned for assistance, Becky is forced to remove the rest of her clothes, Van is told to submit her to a cavity search; in a confusing sequence it then becomes apparent that he has raped her. The plot is wrapped up in about ten minutes. The real police come, an investigation is conducted, Healy is arrested at work, and in an interrogation (one supposes with a policeman), Sandra acts as clueless and uncomprehending as ever, expressing shock at the actions of her fiancé, and refusing to take any responsibility for events – she insists that she just did her duty, like anyone else would have done. I.e., the rather heavy-handed moral. The director often shows his mastery of mise-en-scene and editing, cutting from the back room to the busy restaurant, using evocative, often

scary, close-ups of Healy's body or of French fries cooking in the basket, etc. The problem throughout the film however is credibility. Although the idea is that anyone might have done the same thing as Sandra, her naivete and submissiveness is unbelievable; she goes along with every absurd, humiliating order she receives over the phone. Wouldn't almost anyone recognize the caller as an imposter and insist on waiting for the arrival of the police? Wouldn't Sandra's assistant manager have objected? Sandra is a character so supine and so uncomprehending that the viewer spends most of his energy protesting loudly. It is not likely that many viewers believed his contention that similar actions have occurred 80 times across the USA. (2015)

Un condamné à mort s'est échappé 1956 Robert Bresson (France) 4.0 François Leterrier, an amateur actor, as a French Resistance fighter arrested, imprisoned in German-operated Fort Montluçon in the streets of Lyon, and condemned to death; he spends most of the film plotting to escape and preparing meticulously by constructing ropes from clothes, building hooks from pieces of metal extracted from the cell grills, using a sharpened spoon to chip away at the wooden door and finally open a hole in it, which he conceals meticulously for the moment; and then finally escaping at the end. The distinctive style of the film is flat, matter-of-fact, low key: the dialogue is sparse, the action is straightforward and factual, the cuts are simple with fade outs followed by a fade in. Rarely is there music, except sometimes when the prisoners are walking in line accompanied by strains from the Kyrie of Mozart's Mass in c minor. The camera follows Leterrier in every scene; the viewer rarely sees other characters for long; the guards' faces are usually missed in the shots of their legs. Much use of sound effects: the potentially tell-tale chipping and scraping at the door; the prisoner listening intently to footsteps in the corridor, wondering whether guards are coming to take him for execution, or perhaps to take his neighbor prisoner that he has befriended through the thick wall. The viewer can't help but ask why he is left alone so long in the cell without interrogation or trial (of course under the Germans there is no trial), and why the guards never search his cell thoroughly to find the tools he has prepared. The film generates quite a bit of suspense toward the end (despite the fact that we know from the title that the escape will be a success), especially in Leterrier's dilemma about whether to take Jost with him. The film is not about faith, but it is pervaded by the presence of God, the mysterious workings of God. On various occasions, the characters speak of a "new life" outside; there is a priest who has lost his way, it appears, and especially a Protestant pastor, who when faced with Leterrier's hesitations and fear, encourages him to go saying that he has to have faith and avoid the temptation of despair; when shortly before his escape a second prisoner, Jost, is placed in his cell, Leterrier has to set aside the temptation to kill him for his own safety, and to take charge (in Christ's love) to take him to true freedom, "I will take charge of you." The whole escape is a kind of miracle leading the viewer to wonder whether the hand of God played a role. A deeply engrossing and moving film despite the deadpan and low-key filming style; a wonderful example of less is more and a testimony to a sensitive Christian soul.

Confidences trop intimes 2004 Patrice Leconte (France) 3.0 Sandrine Bonnaire as mysterious, strangely beautiful woman who is alienated from her extremely jealous husband and, while lounging sexily on his couch, spills her story to Luchini thinking erroneously he is a psychiatrist; Fabrice Luchini as tax accountant who receives Bonnaire's 'confidences' but he is so repressed that he cannot respond to her very subtle advances; Michel Duchaussoy as psychiatrist down the hall who doesn't seem to know much about his profession; a pretty Anne Brochet as Luchini's sensible ex-girlfriend and confidante. Film that takes place almost exclusively inside offices (most of that is Luchini's office) but is beautifully shot and edited (deep, striking colors, subtly moving camera, a wait in black between scenes) to show psychological drama and mysterious ambiguities. Two main characters are very off-beat: it is hard to know what Bonnaire wants from visiting Luchini – one supposes she finds talking with him helpful even though he is not a psychiatrist; Luchini is repressed and bemused – his facial expressions are always underplayed – and we aren't sure why he continues the charade, presumably because he has a vague romantic interest in his interlocutor but is too shy and repressed to act on it. Viewer must work a lot in the beginning to figure out what the subject of the film is; the tone is vaguely menacing and holds promise of violence, what with the tightly repressed nature of Luchini and the threatening posture of the husband; and it is not clear until the very end that we are dealing with a romantic involvement, when

Luchini tracks Bonnaire to the Midi and moves there himself in order to strike up a permanent relationship with her. Film is quite talky with very little happening by American standards; major events are the sudden appearance of the jealous, potentially menacing husband, and Luchini's departure for the Midi. One likes it, despite – or perhaps because of – its opaqueness and mysteriousness. Film might have benefited from a little less subtlety and more direct action. (2005)

The Conjuring 2013 James Wan 3.0 Lili Taylor short, dark, affectionate, and protective as the mother of five daughters in a haunted house; Ron Livingston as straight-arrow big-rig-driving husband ready to jump to Taylor's defense when called; Patrick Wilson ('Young Adult') as confident, Christian-seeming ghostbuster specialist, the character backbone of the anti-spook campaign; Vera Farmiga as his wife, who is much more susceptible to possession by evil spirits than her husband (or any man for that matter). Old-fashioned, well-made, effective haunted house film in the tradition of 'The Haunting' and 'The Amityville Horror'; it will scare the pants off you, especially in the first part. The film is set in a large, multi-roomed, creaky, but charming farmhouse on a deserted lot in Rhode Island, although the surrounding foliage and the pond in front of the house seem southern. It is divided into three parts: the first, the scariest, chronicles the arrival of the family and their progressive persecution by the resident evil spirits, who are the spiritual remnants of murders committed in the house since the middle of the 19th century; the second recounts the campaign of the exorcists to record electronically the activity of the spirits (in order to convince the Catholic Church that an exorcism is indicated); stirred up by these counter-attacks, the spirits accelerate their attack against a horrified Taylor, leading to a lurid and violent confrontation between the forces of good and evil that is played out largely in the dark, dank, spider web-infested cellar; the film ends in peace and happiness with the family restored and the exorcist couple moving on to the next challenge. No doubt that the script and direction know how to make the viewer jump and squirm: attached to the all-American family of girls, we dread the next suggestion of persecution by the spirits: the doors opening and slamming inexplicably, the bruises on the mom's arms, the mysterious tugging at the legs of the girls while sleeping, the creepy scene in which the spirit claps out of the armoire while Taylor is playing a hide-and-seek game with her daughter, the mother's exploration of the dusty, junk-filled cellar, the camera following the running mom through the house, peeking expectantly around corners or over the edge of beds and then turning upside down to look underneath, the repeated showing of the mysterious little music box with the spiraling mirror that allows the viewer to see the spirits; the arrival of the ghostbusters in the middle section of the film is a relief for the tense viewer, but terror returns with the harrowing conflict of the final scenes. The film has an apparent Christian evangelical ideology: emotional, panicky women need a strong steadying hand from the men around them; the existence of evil, haunting spirits is taken seriously, as is the efficacy of the exorcist ritual of the Catholic Church – crucifixes around and Wilson uttering Latin phrases in the absence of a priest. The resolution through Catholic ritual of course recalls the more believable 'The Exorcist'. An enjoyable spooky ride. (2013)

The Connection (La French) 2014 Cédric Jimenez (France) 3.0 Violent, glamorous, action-packed police drama in which fanatic magistrate Jean Dujardin relentlessly pursues the Marseille-based heroin drug cartel ("la French"). Jean Dujardin as emotional, obsessive magistrate with a lovely family, who throws all else overboard in his determination to destroy la French and to bag the leader; Gilles Lellouche dark-haired, ruthless, but somehow a bit hesitant and sometimes decent. The film seems to be a French parallel to the famous 'French Connection' 1971. The film is set in sunny Marseille, cars careening down narrow streets, motorcycles racing along seaside promenades to the accompaniment of rock music, impressive mansions situated on rocky, shrubby hills overlooking the sea, cool-looking guys hanging out in glamorous night clubs ogling beautiful, tacky girls. The "French" is selling heroin to customers in the USA, where "everybody" uses it, huge profits, but this time the French police are taking the initiative and not the Americans. It is easy to confuse the police and the gangsters because of their similar dress, speech and behavior. The film is often exciting and engrossing: the pace is fast to the point that the viewer can't be sure who the victims are in the gangland-style rub outs; the violence is quick, bloody, and unpredictable; the duel between Dujardin (his first good role since 'l'artiste') and Lellouche is interesting because of their similar appearances and personas. Dujardin's wife imposes a lot of

personal pressure on him for his obsessiveness and absence from the family; and in an emotionally wrenching scene he is murdered while riding his motor scooter in the street. The ending is effective: as large number of police surround the seaside house where Lellouche is hiding; the police shout that the house is surrounded and he has 30 seconds to emerge with his hands in the air; Lellouche hesitates, then laying his pistol on the table, he emerges into the bright light to the accompaniment of the bitter strains of Dinah Washington's killer song, "Bitter Earth". The scene ends with the gangster's humiliation – hands in the air, falling to his knees, wrists handcuffed; he will spend the rest of his life in a dank prison. The film then wraps up with an official tribute to Dujardin. The film makes an impression. (2016)

La Conquête 2011 Xavier Durringer (France) 2.75 Denis Podalydès in accurate, squirmy, fidgety, slumped over portrayal as Nicolas Sarkozy; Florence Pernel pretty, willowy and angry as his estranged wife; Bernard Le Coq deliciously smooth and catty as Jacques Chirac, president of the Republic; Michelle Moretti also catty and elegant as Chirac's wife; Samuel Labarthe as elegant, handsome, white-maned, charismatic Dominique de Villepin. Entertaining political movie that charts the rise of Sarkozy to the French presidency between 2002 and 2007 and simultaneously the catastrophic decline of his relationship with his wife. The film is edited in sometimes confusing flashback sequences, alternating scenes on election day (including his triumphal speech after being elected) with scenes from years before that focus on his in-fighting with other members of his own party (Union pour le Mouvement Populaire). The picture that emerges of Sarkozy is a very ambitious man who does not hide much anything – his confrontational luncheons with de Villepin are among the most amusing scenes of the film, as are his meetings with Chirac where neither one of them mince words. He is rude and has poor table manners (shocking for an elite Frenchman!). He appears to be in love with his wife, whom he also depends upon for political advice, but he also treats her slightly and awkwardly, as in the scene when he repeatedly yanks her suitcases out of her hands as she tries to leave their apartment. The story of their deteriorating relationship never really builds momentum since the viewer is given too little insight into its secrets; did she really just "get sick of politics", as she tells him, and fall in love with another man?. The satirical orientation of the film is emphasized periodically by the use of circus music on the soundtrack. French politics is presented as a blood sport; the film focuses on the cynical ambitions and egos of the top men in the UMP, who tear each other up more or less viciously with only a few references to the Socialist opposition (amusing mocking of Ségolène Royal toward the end of the film); de Villepin and Chirac repeatedly refer to Sarkozy as "the midget" and "the dwarf". To be fully appreciated, the film requires some prior knowledge of French politics and the personalities of the main personalities, e.g., who is Johnny Hallyday, what is the Clearstream scandal? Cynical and amusing but with little drama or feeling. (2012)

The Constant Gardener 2005 Fernando Meirelles (Britain) (based on LeCarré novel) 4.0 Ralph Fiennes low-key and shy as mid-level British diplomat in Kenya; Rachel Weisz as the mysterious, unfathomable social activist who marries him but doesn't tell him what she is up to; Danny Huston as Fiennes chief, hypocritical diplomat and straining a bit to talk British; Bill Nighy very entertaining as Bernard Pellegrin, a more than usually duplicitous British diplomat, who to everyone's satisfaction, is revealed for what he is at the end. Excellent movie detailing an interesting and moving love story, while simultaneously involving the viewer in a complex and suspenseful thriller-style plot. Meirelles' film style is a bit off-putting – edgy, vibrating, obviously hand-held, challenging time lines rushing from present to past and then back again – and reminds one of certain TV shows, but in some cases it is appropriate to the plot. Film is passionate indictment of the machinations of multi-national corporations, and their domination of policy in undeveloped areas like Africa, where the British government supports the drug companies, despite their putting many AIDS patients at risk of death (Le Carré denies that his indictment is based on specific historical fact). After the brutal murder of his wife in the African bush, Fiennes spends most of his time traveling in Europe and Africa uncovering the plot behind the crime. The search is combined with a gripping love story: Fiennes had married the mercurial Weisz suddenly in the grip of passion, and he doesn't know her very well. It is only as he uncovers the plot that he comes to understand her better, and to realize that she was not unfaithful to him (she used her flirtatious sexuality to win advantages for her political activism), but that she was truly attached to him,

and that her soul was a noble and self-sacrificing one. In moving finale in the same place where his wife was found dead, Fiennes throws his handgun away and awaits assassination by the thugs apparently sent by the drug companies. Has elements of the paranoid thriller, but the appearance of the good-hearted friend Ham and his computer nerd son makes us think there is some advantage on the side of the good people; and then it is immensely satisfying to watch the outing of Pellegrin at the end. Perhaps the main takeaway from the film is the vivid pictures of East Africa (the crowded, poverty ridden cities, the joyful positiveness of the inhabitants who are often dancing and smiling, the parched, deserted landscapes [marvelous from the UN airplanes flying over them], the deep sympathy for the suffering African people exploited from every direction). Marvelous entertainment with interesting divided LeCarré characters, suspense, and themes. Perhaps a 3.5 on second viewing. (2006; August 2017)

Conte d'été 1996 Eric Rohmer (France) 3.5 Amanda Langlet (from 'Pauline à la plage') as Margot, the girl Gaspard confides in, Melville Poupaud as Gaspard, the fellow on the beach in St. Lunaire who finds he has three girlfriends, Aurelia Nolin as Lena, the girl he idolizes and thinks he is destined to be with (but she is temperamental and very elusive), Gwenaëlle Simon as Solène, the sexy musically inclined girl who makes a play for Gaspard, but she is hard and has "principles." Another look by "the satirical poet of the French bourgeoisie" at the sexual and romantic mores of young people in France in the 1990s: as usual, nice, slim, attractive, more or less footloose young people who are well spoken and students or recently were; especially attractive young French women; the romantic principals kiss (in friendly or open-mouthed romantic fashion) but don't seem to insist on passionate sex; beautiful, simply framed photography of pleasant places in France (this time around St. Malo along the beaches of the north coast of Brittany); dialogue has conversational tone as principals discuss their personal lives and relationships with one another, sometimes becoming very analytical. Film is a somewhat farcical romantic comedy about the amours of Gaspard, who arrives to wait in the resort town for Lena, strikes up a friendly relationship with charming Margot, then dips into love affair with Solene, but with the possibility of love for Margot and the return of the effervescent Lena, has to decide among the three women, balance them against one another, and in the end has to flee the scene on a ferry to Ouessant. Gaspard is engaging and philosophic, but he lacks self-esteem and aggressiveness, he hesitates to take risks, and he has a hard time making up his mind. His best relationship is with Margot, since he is able to be open and honest with her (not being lovers), and he has to play games with the other two, especially with the difficult, emotional and unpredictable Lena. Viewer would like to see Margot and Gaspard get together, but their togetherness is suspended in the end when the latter leaves town. A delightful experience that sometimes moves slowly for the viewer, but it is worth it. It is such a relief to escape the rules and procedures of the Hollywood romantic comedy!

Cool Hand Luke 1967 Stuart Rosenberg 3.0 Paul Newman in quintessential role as non-conformist convict who won't give up; George Kennedy (AA) as fellow inmate, initially suspicious but then becomes admirer of Luke; Strother Martin in droll, piquant role as slow drawlin' but tough and authoritarian warden. Solid film made in turbulent 60s about non-conformist Newman: sent to the chain gang after decapitating parking meters, he is at first submissive and hard-working, but he rebels after the visit of his mother, tries to escape twice (he does not get very far) and he is finally shot in the neck when he smart-asses his pursuers out of the window of the house where he is holed up – "What we have here is a failure to communicate!" Newman is friendly, likable and believable throughout the film with his chiseled features and blue eyes – the boxing match with Kennedy where he refuses to give up despite being beat to a pulp; his winning the bet where he says he can eat 50 hard boiled eggs; his fooling the prison authorities at the end by making them believe that his spirit has been broken, whereas he is just setting things up for another escape attempt. Film is rather long (like a good opera, we find relief by enjoying the acting of the principals), but the plot moves logically and straightforwardly, and the viewer is always hooked by the charm of Newman and the question of what he will do. The performances of character actor Martin (apparently easy-going and avuncular on the outside, but ready to destroy a prisoner who doesn't fit in) and Kennedy (limited intelligence, but a good heart, a ready smile, and a great affection for Newman) help maintain the interest of the viewer. The film obviously makes 60s-style references to the cult of rebellion and non-conformity in 60s America – with 'Bonnie and Clyde', 'One

Flew over the Cuckoo's nest', etc.; no matter how tyrannical and ruthless the structures of society, the dignity and independence of the individual will survive. The restored color print is excellent. The pictures of (an apparently reformed and more humane) road gang is realistic and believable. (2007)

The Cooler 2003 Wayne Kramer 3.0 William H. Macy as down and out “cooler” working in an old-fashioned Las Vegas casino; Maria Bello as cocktail waitress hired by casino boss to keep Macy from leaving town; Alec Baldwin as Shangri-La casino boss who alternates between heartless ruthlessness and good-guy redemption. Small scale but good romantic comedy about cooler, a total loser whose luck is so bad that casino owners place him next to winners to kill their luck (usually works!); Baldwin calls him “walking kryptonite”. Good on Las Vegas as “prostitute” and the place where you can’t tell the difference between night and day; takes place in a time of transition when the old-style casinos are being dynamited and making way for the family-oriented Disneyland of the 90s. Alec Baldwin plays the brutal and cynical casino boss to the tee, although he is capable of loyalty and nobility at the end when he decides to defend Macy and Bello against the new corporate thugs who are taking over the casino. Maria Bello, cocktail waitress hired by AB to seduce Macy and keep him around (he is disillusioned and wants to leave), but they fall in love, and Macy’s luck turns and he is no longer effective in his cooling job. Their relationship is real and convincing, and their sex scenes (almost full nudity for Bello, playful and full of feeling for Macy who can’t believe that a woman is actually putting her hands on him) are as real and endearing as they get. There are several subplots, the most unattractive being Mikey, Macy’s deadbeat son, and his fake pregnant wife taking Macy’s money to gamble it away in the casino. Point seems to be that when you are happy and especially when you are in love, you are lucky. Nice ironic ending: when Bernie and girl are about to be assassinated by crooked cop (they have \$150,000 from casino that Bernie has won at the casino for their future life away from Las Vegas), Lady Luck comes their way, a car hits the cop, and the lovers ride off into the night! Acting is first rate and Maria Bello is beautiful from inside out. Excellent cool jazz soundtrack with lots of crooning – ‘My Funny Valentine’, etc. Evocative mise-en-scene and editing inside the casino – shots from below of dice landing on the table, shots from high above the table, Baldwin using his apparently x-ray eyes to notice that Mikey is cheating at the craps table, etc. Director gets credit for giving his actors room to act. Essentially a romantic comedy with a strong sense of place and lots of dark shadows. (2007)

Contagion 2011 Steven Soderbergh (writer Scott Z. Burns) 3.0 Gwyneth Paltrow as American businesswoman that contracts a deadly disease in Hong Kong, brings it back to the USA, and then dies within a few minutes of the beginning of the film; Matt Damon in low-key role as her husband, who spends most of the film trying to keep his daughter (Anna Jacoby-Heron) from being infected; Lawrence Fishburne avuncular and portly as the head of the medical team at the CDC in Atlanta charged with isolating the virus and finding a remedy; Jude Law as a Julian-Assange-like venal newspaper reporter, who does not hesitate to stir up panic so he can make a lot of money; Jennifer Ehle as noble CDC doctor who injects herself with a drug to make sure it works; Marion Cotillard talking pretty good American as WHO doctor working in Hongkong; Kate Winslet as CDC physician sent to Chicago to deal with the infection; Bryan Cranston as pompous Homeland Security official; Elliott Gould, looking pretty good for his age, as CDC researcher working in San Francisco. Interesting, documentary-like, but often dramatically flat, big budget film about the appearance of a Spanish Flu-like pandemic, its rapid spread, the herculean efforts made by the CDC and other health organizations to find an effective vaccine, and finally the development of a vaccine and its distribution. The film uses a “hyperlink”- style narrative with several plot lines that interlink in informal ways to show different aspects of the pandemic and people’s reaction to it: Cotillard is kidnapped by Chinese co-workers to ensure they get first access to the vaccine; Damon demonstrates the behavior of men who do all they can to save their family (his wife and son are already dead); US citizens riot and loot in Chicago, some desperate for food or drugs, and others just taking advantage of the weakened police protection; Fishburne labors conscientiously to develop the vaccine, but he is under suspicion from Congress for profiteering and favoring friends and relatives; Winslet travels to Chicago to set up procedures to contain the outbreak, but she soon sacrifices her life in the service of humanity; Ehle injects herself to see if the vaccine works on humans, and in an unguarded talk with her severely ill, dying father, gives the viewer one of the few personally moving moments of the

film; Law severely annoys the viewer to portray people who try to take advantage of the crisis. The most intriguing aspect of the film is the efforts of several of the players to figure out how the pandemic started by replaying the surveillance videos of Paltrow in a Hong Kong casino. Essentially their quest fails, but in a sharply edited sequence a postscript shows how a bat infected a herd of pigs with a piece of banana and how the virus was communicated to Paltrow (and tens of millions of other people) through her posing arm-in-arm with the chef who had just prepared the pig for the feast. The audience knows what the film's players did not. Interesting film that could use some dramatic sharpening. (2012)

The Conversation 1974 Francis Ford Coppola 3.5 Gene Hackman as ace surveillance professional, Harry Caul; John Cazale as his resentful assistant; Allen Garfield as fast-talking rival surveillance guy from New York; Frederic Forrest as the man talking with Cindy Williams in the first sequence of the film; Cindy Williams as apparently innocent girl that Hackman overhears in Union Square; Teri Garr in minor role as his devoted slutty girlfriend; Harrison Ford a bit callow in early cameo role as office bureaucrat that follows Harry; Elizabeth MacRae as slutty woman who seduces Harry for surprising reason; Robert Duvall as the corporation director interested in the tape. Famous, slow-moving psychological film about secret electronic surveillance, corporate monumentality, conscience and paranoia in the form of a thriller with a twist ending. Hackman is the center of the film, present in every frame. The film begins with the famous surveillance sequence in Union Square, San Francisco, in which Harry and his team record a conversation between Forrest and Williams that indicates (to Harry) that their lives may be in danger. Harry, apparently moved by Catholic guilt (he has a statue of the Virgin in his apartment and goes to confession), plays the audio tapes over and over, obsessively piecing together the conversation, wondering what his employer (Duvall) plans to do with the couple he spied on, and struggling with his own conscience about the consequences of his actions. In a tense, sometimes horrifying series of scenes however, Harry discovers that he has got it wrong: it turns out that Duvall is the one that is murdered (in the Jack Tar Hotel, Room 773, on Sunday afternoon at 3:00) and that the supposedly endangered couple are the plotters; it seems that they are lovers plotting to take over the company controlled by Williams' husband. The film ends with the famous scene in which Harry tears apart his apartment in a vain search for the bug that he is now aware the conspirators have installed. The pace of the film is slow, allowing the viewer time to become absorbed in the disturbed emotional state of the protagonist. Harry is complex: he is a loner with an active conscience that causes him to call into question his profession spying on people; as the film progresses, he becomes increasingly paranoid, imagining lurid scenes of murder that he apparently does not witness and the famous (symbolic) scene of the toilet overflowing with bloody water until his breakdown and paralysis in the final scene. Coppola has a critical attitude toward secret surveillance, which in its violation of personal privacy, he clearly indicates, is dehumanizing. Early indications that the film might share the anti-corporate outlook of early 1970s films are belied by the plot switch that presents the corporate head as the victim rather than the perpetrator. Intense, focused, slowly paced psychological portrait that is livened up by suspense and a thriller-style plot. (2013)

Coraline 2008 Henry Selick 4.0 The voice of Dakota Fanning (Coraline) and Teri Hatcher (her mother and the Other Mother). Winsome stop-motion long feature from the creator of 'A Nightmare Before Christmas' about a pesky and plucky 11-year-old who doesn't get along very well with her parents; she crawls through a birth-canal-like tunnel to encounter an apparently better version of her parents and her house, only to discover that the glamorous and wonderful cook that presents herself as her better mother is really a kind of witch who is lusting to steal her, entrap her soul forever, and feed on her energy. Redemption finally comes after suspenseful adventures and cliffhangers – mainly thanks to the ministrations of a very mangy, skinny cat who tears the face of the Witch to shreds. The stop-motion animation is astounding real and graceful: characters have realistic, balletic-style motion, hair follows the pull of gravity, faces are mobile and expressive, mouths open expressively with characteristic teeth for each character. Film has great charm and humor: in the basement of Coraline's house live two elderly English society ladies and a very eccentric Russian with spindly legs and a pumpkin-like belly; in her perfect other world Coraline encounters a surreal garden with bright, hard-edged, gleaming flowers, and a circus performance in a theater whose audience is dozens of comical, teathy Scottish terriers with

triangular beards. The mood of the film is quirky: Coraline is no picture-perfect Disney child: she is impatient, dissatisfied, and talks back to her parents, who are rather disconnected from their daughter as they work on the publication of their garden book (but they never do much gardening!); the atmosphere in the Other House is at first bright and sybaritically perfect, but becomes quirkily frightening after the Other Mother turns from her beautiful self into a kind of Cruella De Ville spindly witch. Coraline's character defects then serve her well as she fights and plots to restore some lost children to life and to get back to her "real" parents – she appreciates them now and the three of them seem happy with one another at the end of the film. Events in the Other World sometimes seem to be a dream – a pleasant one that turns into a nightmare where children are lost and separated from their parents. The moral of the story seems to be to appreciate what you have: your loved ones may not be perfect, but they love you and you are not liable to find anything better, certainly not something perfect. (2009)

Le corbeau 1942 Henri-Georges Clouzot (France) 4.0 Pierre Fresnay as mysterious doctor practicing in St. Robin who is rich, rather supercilious and is accused of adultery and performing abortions, Ginette Leclerc as former mistress whose aim is to seduce Fresnay, Micheline Francey as Fresnay's mistress who is married to a man much older than himself, Pierre Larquey as the older husband who circulates in ironic and detached way in the town, Liliane Maigne as precocious, rather disturbing, possibly sexual younger sister of Leclerc. Smashing film directed by Clouzot for the German-administered Continental Films toward the beginning of the Occupation; it earned him a suspension of activity after the war for supposed collaboration. Very vivid depiction of a small French town, giving viewer an intimate and evocative physical view in first scene (emphasis on the cemetery), a look at all the different social groups (peasants, professionals such as doctors, administrators such as the prefect, children playing wildly in the schoolyard, teenagers, women gossiping in the shops, etc.). Film is presented as a detective-style thriller -- poison pen letters are appearing everywhere, and the director rushes us from character to character never giving us a clear clue about the guilty person (reminds one of postwar US detective thrillers like 'The Big Sleep' and 'Murder My Sweet' where the viewer is usually confused). Presents the town, St. Robin, as riven by internal divisions, jealousies, hatreds, plots of revenge, etc.; hard to imagine a more negative view of any society. We learn about Leclerc's sordid past, Fresnay's affair with Larquey's wife, the possibility that he is performing abortions, the corruption of the politicians, the puritanical jealousy of the nurse sister of Francey, the thefts of Maigne from the Post Office where she works (14 1/2 years old?); even an eight-year-old girl in the playground smilingly lies to Fresnay when he is looking for a letter that has fallen out of his window. For first half of film our prime suspect for the Raven is Fresnay since among other things he has a hidden past, but we find out he is a good man -- he rejects the suggestion that he perform an abortion, he explains that the mysteriousness of his past is due to the death of his wife and child, after refusing to listen to the play noise of schoolyard children he opens the window to hear them, and at the end he falls again in love with Leclerc who is pregnant with his child. It turns out that the guilty one is Larquey, who is a misanthrope bitterly jealous of his wife's youth and beauty, and who gleefully decides to destroy the town is an act of revenge. In arresting final scene, he is murdered by the mother of a young man that he drove to suicide with one of his letters (she had previously appeared heavily veiled in black); great final shot has Fresnay looking out the window past a group of children playing with the hunched black clad assassin receding down the street. Direction is flawless with sharp restored print showing the beauty and expressiveness of black and white photography: intense close-ups of Fresnay's and Leclerc's faces when he has to decide whether she is lying; shot of a letter fluttering down from a top gallery in the church during mass, reverse shots/editing on the stairs when various characters pass one another, deep focus shots out of the window of a dress shop with gossiping women inside and a young girl on the outside mailing a letter to her lover, famous scene of nurse running down a street from a howling mob, but the street is empty and we only hear their cries, in the funeral cortege of the suicide a letter emerges from the flowers on the hearse and lies on the ground as many of the people following do not dare pick it up, the conversation between Fresnay and Larquey about the necessity of evil with the bare light bulb oscillating back and forth around the globe that stands between them. Conservative Vichy authorities hated the movie because of the negative light it sheds on French humanity; the German Gestapo did not like it because it suggested that delation (informing), upon which they depended in occupied France, was a destructive practice; the German government liked it

because they showed it in Germany to show the French at their worst. Amazingly evocative misanthropic movie. (2006)

The Corpse Bride 2005 Tim Burton 3.5 Johnny Depp as skinny, pallid Victor; Helena Bonham Carter as the Corpse Bride; Emily Watson as Victoria, the live girl that Victor wants to marry; Albert Finney; Christopher Lee as the hilarious spectral (live) pastor – all add voices. Absolutely charming, rather short (1:16) stop-motion film directed by Tim Burton. Stop motion technique is realistic enough to be engrossing, but filled with fantasy to enchant the viewer; the characters' faces are long with large bulging eyes. As one would expect from the director, the film is an off-beat, sometimes faux-dark romance. Depp is a young man from a wealthy, social-climbing family who wants to marry a girl from the impoverished upper-class; there are of course difficulties and he mistakenly proposes marriage to what appears to be a bare branch in a snowy landscape but what is really what remains of a broken-hearted young woman who has been left in the lurch by a heartless bastard, whose identity is revealed at the end. She accepts and draws Depp into the world of the dead, where skulls and bones dance to Danny Elfman's catchy and touching music (the scene where Depp and Bonham Carter play a Chopin-like duet on the Underworld keyboard) and colors are much brighter than they are in the grey, dour, depressing real world of snobs, needy, impoverished nobility, and grasping opportunists. Despite her one bony leg, bony arm, and the hole in her cheek that shows her teeth, Bonham Carter's blue-skinned dead-live girl is cute, sincere, and romantic with her miraculously preserved ample décolletage. Depp wants to return to his true love on earth, but for a while he is caught between his two sincere girl friends; the Corpse Bride's attachment is strong and jealous, but always sweet. The film ends of course on a happy note when the Corpse Bride and Victor rescue Victoria at the altar from marriage with the sneering opportunist and then the Corpse Bride sacrifices herself so that the two lovers can live out their romance above earth. Charming, sweet, infectious, romantic entertainment. (2011)

Coup de torchon (Clean Slate) 1981 Bertrand Tavernier (France) 2.5 Philippe Noiret as apparently lazy police chief in a Senegalese village; Isabelle Huppert sexy, empty-headed, very cute and pouty, and adorably freckled as Noiret's mistress; Stéphane Audran as Noiret's wife, who detests him; Eddy Mitchell as the idiotic Nono, who claims to be Audran's brother but is her lover; Guy Marchand as Marcel, another policeman equally as corrupt as Noiret. Beautifully made film adopted from a novel by Jim Thompson and posing as an existentialist drama. Noiret is early presented as a lazy, supine, and shiftless police chief in a Senegalese village, but little do we know that he is tortured by existential pessimism and anxiety; and he proceeds to murder the French people in the village that he considers evil or whom he just doesn't like; he somehow arranges at the end for Huppert to kill Audran and Nono. Film is obviously filmed on location with extremely realistic local color – the Africans usually hovering in the background staying out of the way, the racism of the local French who proclaim that Africans aren't really human beings, the kids playing in the dusty, red dirt, the colonial architecture of the French buildings, the weekly film shown in the local theater, etc. Excellent cast that does the best it can with the rather incredible narrative. The environment, the images, and statements of the principal characters loudly proclaim the film to be pessimistic and existentialist: for diversion white guys take pot shots at dead bodies floating down the river; Noiret asks "Do you know why dogs sniff each other's butts?" The local priest has to replace crucifixes because termites eat them, but Noiret remarks that at least the Christ figure is made of cast iron. Noiret often expresses his weariness with life, that there are millions and millions of unhappy people, and I am completely alone; there's only one death but there are a hundred ways to die; once you start on a path, you can't turn back; he says his only job is to reveal to others what their real nature is, i.e., miserable criminals and murderers (and then he murders them); when Noiret kills the nice black guy, he gives a speech first for the sake of the audience. Noiret seems to be imitating Meursault – murder is his rebellion against the absurdity of the world; you have to commit heinous crimes to make your statement. Perhaps the narrative would work in its original noir setting in the corrupt, racist American South, but it comes across as artificial when clothed in the language of Sartre. Perhaps Tavernier should have set the film in the USA. Great technical proficiency, an attractive cast (especially the charming Huppert), but the film has two separate souls that never come together. (2012)

The Cove 2009 Louis Psihoyos 3.0 Academy Award winning documentary that tracks the efforts of a team assembled by Ric O'Barry to record the slaughter of dolphins by Japanese fishermen in the cove of infamy in Taiji, Japan. O'Barry, who dominates the film, first recounts how he collaborated in the making of the TV series 'Flipper' in the 1960s (a kind of dolphin Lassie), but then changed his mind and spent the rest of his days trying to expose the depredatory practices of Japanese fishermen in hunting whales and slaughtering dolphins. Much of the film is devoted to the farce of the International Whaling Commission (IWC), which although it is supposed to regulate whaling throughout the world, is largely under the thumb of Japanese industry, which bribes small African and Caribbean countries to vote with them on that body; the put-downs of the smooth-talking, slick hair Japanese delegate are amusing. The film also seeks to establish that dolphin meat, which they theorize is sold to Japanese consumers as whale meat, is contaminated with mercury and thus a threat to the whole nation (this contention has been denied by the Japanese government, which replies that the amount of mercury in the meat is within safe limits). Most of the film tracks the determination of O'Barry and his recruits to get past the police and local henchmen in Taiji to film the slaughter of the dolphins in a nearby hidden, off-limits cove. O'Barry et al. are constantly interrogated by the police (never arrested in the film due, one supposes, to the American alliance and the constitutional guarantees under the Japanese constitution) and harassed by local men such as 'Private Space' who constantly wave placards or otherwise interfere with the protagonists when they are trying to film. The film tracks the exciting efforts of the group to create high-tech filming equipment (the cameras are hidden inside rocks), and their secret expeditions into the "national park" to plant the equipment where the killing takes place. The tell-tale footage, which shows the fishermen spearing the confused dolphins repeatedly in their sides thus turning the water red with their blood, is somewhat anti-climactic, unless one takes at face value that dolphins are highly intelligent creatures with a kinship with humans and that thus slaughtering them is a kind of betrayal. If one compares the activities of these fishermen with the cruel, assembly-line slaughter of cattle recorded in "Food, Inc.", one can sympathize with Japanese patriots who defend the practice of their countrymen. Nevertheless, an eye-opening and at times engrossing look at the issue. (2012)

Cover Girl 1944 Charles Vidor (Columbia) 3.5 Rita Hayworth talented redhead, good singer and dancer in small-time Brooklyn review, who would like to be cover girl for a major national magazine; Gene Kelly in his breakout role as true lover and small-time impresario who can sure dance (he also choreographed his own numbers); Phil Silvers showing talent as comic song and dance man as Kelly's sidekick; Eve Arden her usual wry, somewhat sardonic self, as talent scout for the cover girl; Otto Kruger as Arden's boss; a variety of pretty young women appearing framed in the magazine cover they will be featured on. Very entertaining, glossy, backstage Hollywood musical featuring a lame romantic plot (Kelly almost loses Hayworth to fame when she moves up, but true love triumphs in the end), but also bright stars who know how to sing and dance, excellent production numbers, and a mostly memorable score by Ira Gershwin and Jerome Kern. The numbers: 1) "The Show Must Go On" introduces the film with challenge to us to find Hayworth among the eight or so chorus girls -- **1/2; 2) "Long Ago and Far Away" expresses romantic yearning between Kelly and Hayworth -- immortal romantic crooning number -- ****; 3) "Make Way for Tomorrow" very energetic 'Singing' in the Rain'-style number with three principals dashing around the street, up and down stairs dodging a suspicious policeman -- **1/2; 4) "Cover Girl" title production number featuring elaborate huge stage with raised zig-zag pathway up and down which prances Hayworth in her fabulous gold lame dress -- ***; 5) "Poor John" is humorous flashback number (not written by Gershwin and Kern) with Hayworth in outlandish cockney costume singing about her boyfriend's subservience to his mother -- ****; 6) Kelly's "Alter Ego" number in which he works out his indecision about Hayworth by dancing with a ghostly, special effects version of himself -- ****. The film is in gorgeous early Technicolor, for once not too vivid or bright. It was made toward the end of the war when it was obvious that the US was going to win. Along with 'Meet Me in St. Louis' (1944) right at the beginning of the long string of fabulous late 40s and early 50s Hollywood musicals. Feminists will have to stay calm when Hayworth's dreams of making it to the big time (being a cover girl and performing on Broadway) are sacrificed for marrying Kelly and presumably focusing again on Brooklyn. Entertaining with many gifted participants. (2012)

The Cranes Are Flying 1957 Mikhail Kalatozov (Russia) 4.0+ Tatyana Samoljlova as Veronika – beautiful, intense whether in joy, love, sorrow, conviction that Boris is alive, indignation, anxiety, dejection, or guilt; Aleksey Batalov as the ideal, virtuous Boris who is killed by a single bullet at the front; Aleksandr Shvorin as Mark, the draft-dodging, immoral cousin of the pure Boris; Vasili Merkurev as Veronika’s faithful and kind father, a military doctor. An almost incredibly beautiful and moving film made during the Khrushchevian thaw about the suffering that Russia experienced in World War II. Boris and Veronika are deeply in love, when their wedding plans are broken by Boris’ decision to volunteer for the front at the beginning of the war. There are very few fighting scenes, but the film focuses on the travails of the people who stay at home; the women suffer grievously from the anxiety of losing their loved one; Veronika – for rather mysterious reasons – decides to marry the draft-dodging Mark, with whom she breaks up after finding out what a jerk he is; the film ends when Veronika finally is convinced of Boris’ death while the rest of Russia is celebrating around her. Despite its subject matter, the film almost always avoids sentimentality, but expresses genuine, deeply-felt emotions. It presents a scrubbed view of Soviet Russia during the war: all the characters look like westerners – fairly prosperous, well clothed, and middle class; the streets and buildings are solid and well cared for; the film starts in a large city (Moscow?) and then moves to a hospital city in Siberia. Aside from an occasional sarcasm, the filmmaker does not much criticize the Soviet system (and of course no mention of Stalin), but it makes it clear that the heroes of the resistance against the Germans were the Russian people and not the Soviet system. Aside from the deeply affecting performance of Samoljlova, the film’s strength is the bravura film style – mise-en-scène and editing that is obviously descended from the likes of Eisenstein. Smashing scenes using a brilliant visual style: a spectacular moving camera catches Veronika running through the moving tanks in the streets and then fast tracking through a crowd trying to find her beloved Boris who is going off to war – reminiscent of the famous Atlanta scene in ‘Gone with the Wind’; the extraordinary scene in which Mark violently proclaims his love for Veronika while a bombing raid smashes all the windows in the room and melodramatic piano music plays on the soundtrack and Veronika shouts “Nyet” to his sexual insistence; the dramatic/poetic impact of Boris’ death in the swampy woods –his death is delayed, an imaginary scene of his marriage (intense montage) runs before his eyes, he looks up at the trees seen through a fish-eye lens, he falls to the ground, close up of his face as he tells his buddies he is not wounded...; the camera focuses on Veronika’s guilty face while her father helps a distressed soldier in the hospital by telling him that his unfaithful girlfriend is worthless and that she is good riddance – Veronika’s guilt is palpable; fabulous montage of Veronika running through the snowy landscape, almost throwing herself in front of a racing locomotive and then saving a little boy from an oncoming truck; the ending, when again in a celebrating crowd, Veronika finally accepts that Boris is dead, and then expresses her faith in the future of a peaceful world that will not bring such suffering to others. The speaker makes it clear that if the victory is to mean anything, it must be peace for this ravaged people. (2010)

Crash 2004 Paul Haggis 1.0 Don Cheadle as thoughtful police detective who tells his mother he can't talk to her on the phone, because he is "fucking a white girl," Matt Dillon as tough racist cop who humiliates black motorists more or less for fun, but then shows his dedication and patience with his dad and shows his courage in rescuing the woman that he previously degraded, Michael Pena as a locksmith sensible fellow in this sea of misery and misfortune, Sandra Bullock as wife of Los Angeles DA -- she is always miserable but then mysteriously calms down in the end and hugs her housekeeper. Extremely irritating movie set in contemporary Los Angeles with a genuine LA feel, everybody constantly in cars, especially Lincoln Navigators, and running into one another. A big list of characters who weave in and out of the narrative, reminding one of Altman's 'Shortcuts' or '21 Grams;' begins with a small accident between an Hispanic and a Korean that of course immediately degenerates into racial name calling, and after flashbacks bringing in all the other characters and storylines, ends with the same accident. Everyone is miserably unhappy (except for Pena); they are constantly subjected to racial slurs and insults; most of the characters show a human or positive side (Bullock hugs her housekeeper in the end, the Uncle Tom film director saves the life of the little gang banger car hijacker, Dillon shows his bona fides (above), etc.), and the message seems to be that we all have the same frustrations and that we need to quit taking them out on other people. Pena is the only character I was attached to: the scene in which the angry Persian shopowner (who in imitation of the worst of LA can't stop saying "fuck") almost

kills his daughter (it turns out that his daughter has loaded his pistol with blank bullets (?)) is by far the most harrowing of the film. Narrative is ridiculously unrealistic -- the same characters run into each other several times in the course of the day -- "at times you have trouble keeping track of all the characters, but they run into one another with such frequency that, by the end, you start to think that the population of Los Angeles County must number in the mid-two figures - all of it strangers who hate one another on sight." (NY Times) Everything is contrived and metaphorical, and the surface veneer of realism is shown to be only an appearance. And why is there snow falling on Hollywood Hills at the end (evokes the raining frogs from 'Magnolia')? Film fails laughably in its intent to give us a wakeup call. "A frustrating movie: full of heart and devoid of life; crudely manipulative when it tries hardest to be subtle; and profoundly complacent in spite of its intention to unsettle and disturb." (NY Times). (2006)

Crazy Heart 2009 Scott Cooper (from Thomas Cobb novel) 3.0 Jeff Bridges in AA role as Bad Blake, over-the-hill alcoholic country western singer wandering from cheap motel to cheap motel with little reason for living; Maggie Gyllenhaal as young single mom with shy grin and furtive eyes who (only in Hollywood) falls for a chain-smoking, alcoholic, pot-bellied, old geezer 25-30 years her senior who drives his car with his fly upzipped; Robert Duvall thick and pasty as old friend who gives Bad some good life advice; Colin Farrell not always convincing as Tommy, an old protégé of Bridges -- he is now a country music star who remains loyal to his old teacher. Low-key and effective redemption story about more-or-less washed up once country music star who now prowls bowling alleys and bars in the American Southwest, playing rousing country music (by T-Bone Burnett) when he is not lounging about in cheap motel rooms watching television and drinking bourbon whiskey; his drives between gigs have spectacular southwestern sunsets as backdrops. The film is a low-key, slow-developing redemption story: Bridges meets Gyllenhaal, couples with her, becomes attached actually making calls from phone booths, and discovers the pleasures of family as he connects with her four-year old son. Narrative enters the crisis stage when he loses the boy on a trip to a bar in the mall; furious mom tells him that she cannot stand to be with him any more -- she doesn't trust him -- and she stalks off in a taxi to return to Santa Fe. After a roaring drunk, Bridges decides to get sober, goes through AA, and even though Gyllenhaal refuses to return to him (thank God! and anyhow she is engaged to marry a good man), he toughs it out with the help of his friend Duvall, and looking sober and neat he goes back to concerts telling his manager that "I guess there is still some gas in this tank." The movie moves slowly and the romance with Gyllenhaal strains credulity, but the film has a genuine heart. Bridges fully deserves his Academy Award: the viewer feels no distance between his acting and the character he inhabits; he is essentially a sweet fellow discouraged by loneliness and dragged down by addiction to the bottle. The viewers are happy when with the help of the good woman he puts his life in order; and relieved that the film resists the temptation to indulge the cliché of the romance with the younger woman. The connection to Duvall's 'Tender Mercies' (1983) is unmistakable, although this version does not invoke the aid of religion to bring redemption. (2010)

Crazy Love 2007 Dan Klores 3.0 Entertaining, well-made documentary about the obsessive romantic relationship of a New York couple, the probably psychotic Burt Pugach, and the beautiful brunette, Linda Kiss. The film is made without voiceover interviewing the intelligent, voluble, witty pair in their old age, many decades after they met on a street in the Bronx; statements from relatives and friends are just as pointed, insightful, and entertaining. Bert is an obsessive, impulsive, not-very-good-looking lawyer (later disbarred) that courts Linda obsessively and hires thugs to throw lye in her face when she dates another man; in his interview he seems sincere and remorseful for what he did to Linda. As a young woman Linda was looking for a well-heeled guy to take care of her; as an older interviewee, she is nearly blind from the attack (we never see her without her dark glasses on) and wearing a wig; she is sharp-tongued, funny, imperious in her relationship to Burt and seeming to be getting even with him for what he did to her. Burt goes to prison for a long term for the attack on Linda; in prison he represents some prisoners and gets their convictions overturned; when he is released by the parole board, he again courts Linda and persuades her to marry him (!); he is unfaithful to her (again), has to survive another court appearance in which he represents himself for battery against his mistress; Linda then takes him back (!), and the couple continue their sometimes affectionate, sometimes bickering relationship recorded

extensively by the filmmaker. The two are favorite fodder for the New York scandal press. The film's entertainment quotient is enhanced by a compelling compendium of rock music (ending with a dynamite Elvis song this viewer has never heard before) and stock footage of the streets of the Bronx and Queens in the 1950s -- big 50s cars cruising the streets, women in 50s clothes, etc. One wonders who took all the photographs of Linda used extensively in the film. The film is a kind of National Enquirer documentary; it entertains with its recounting of the story of an off-the-wall rogue and his victim, its improbable twists and turns, and what seems to be Linda's revenge. Every interviewee is focused and informative. At the end, one woman says that Burt should be executed, even though she doesn't believe in capital punishment; Burt's good friend, Bob, says that everybody deserves a second chance, although, he adds, Burt has used up so many second chances that he better not even go through a traffic light. Fun. (2014)

Crazy, Stupid, Love 2011 Glenn Ficarra, John Requa 2.5 Steve Carell as mild-mannered guy with a twinkle in his eye who is thrown onto the dating market when his wife dumps him; Ryan Gosling small-headed, totally ripped body as superficial womanizer who learns to love in the course of the film; Julianne Moore playing the bad guy – indecisive and hesitant as the wife who has an affair and decides to divorce her husband; Emma Stone charming, pretty, and sincere as a single girl who turn out to be the one who tames Gosling; Analeigh Tipton tall, gangly, and sexy struggling with her sexuality – she is in love with Carell; Mira Tomei hilarious and off-the-wall as nymphomaniacal middle school teacher who has one-night stand with Carell during his studly phase; Kevin Bacon in pretty thankless role as Moore's low-key, dull lover. Crowd-pleasing, PG-13-marketed comedy that focuses on the romantic problems of men in contemporary American society. The film emphasizes the romantic destiny of the early-middle-aged Carell: he learns from Gosling how to be a womanizer, but of course he misses his “only soulmate” Moore, whom he met when he was 15, and he gravitates back to her amidst absurd and amusing complications. Subplots include his one-night stand with Tomei, which renders her so furious that she gives him the finger during his son's 8th-grade graduation ceremony; the romantic misadventures of Carell's 13-year-old son Robbie (caught by his babysitter Tipton masturbating in bed, his determined pursuit of Tipton despite the age difference, her giving to him naked pictures of her under the assumption that she will wait for him to grow up and in the meantime he can use them for his self-pleasuring); Tipton surviving her sexual crush on Carell, evading the attentions of his son, and learning to postpone her romantic development; the improbable romantic journey of Stone and Gosling, the latter making a sudden change from hard-hearted womanizer to true-blue romantic and family man. Despite its risqué subject matter, the film hews the sunny, optimistic line: no nudity or sexual activity on screen; everybody is locked in pursuit of their “soulmates” and they all find them with the exception of the age-inappropriate characters. The comic pleasure of the film is somewhat undermined by sloppy plotting toward the end. Some amusing scenes and some truths awash in a desire to appeal to a wide audience. (2011)

Creature from the Black Lagoon 1954 Mark Arnold 3.0 (Universal) Richard Carlson, Julia Adams, Richard Denning. Low budget, though generally well done, sci-fi attack creature film from 1950s. Set in upper Amazon valley: lots of back projection scenes and a pretty good set built around the nice old steam river boat. Creature is very hokey, looking exactly like a man dressed in rubber scale suit – extensive scientific background in film identifies him as an evolutionary remnant from previous era (Devonian?), who has survived in a particular black lagoon off the river. There is apparently only one of him; he is very hostile to humans (no explanation why), whom he kills when he can; and he falls in love with the girl, whom he tries to carry off in the end. Scientist, doing research, are seeking the monster for scientific information; subplots include the relationship between Adams and Carlson, and the tension between straight arrow Carlson and overly ambitious, impulsive and macho Denning, who actually get in a fake looking fistfight! Most of movie involves attacks by gill-man on humans (mostly natives – not white man is ever killed), and then persistent pursuit of him by humans armed with harpoon guns. They finally kill him at the end. Awkward attempt to enlist our sympathy for creature by presenting him as completely alone and having him fall in love with Adams (he kidnaps her as opposed to trying to kill everyone else). Sole female character is also a scientist of sorts, but her behavior is definitely ‘female:’ she is not allowed to look at dead bodies, she is used as an attraction for the creature when she is taking a swim (he looks indecisive when he sees her), and she screams a lot to shock the audience! Extensive

underwater photography, but virtually no special effects: the several instances of our watching the beasts claw/web foot slither through a porthole, etc. are all amusing. Film does not appear to have any political overtones. (2005)

Creed 2015 Ryan Coogler ('Fruitvale Station') 3.0 Satisfying, genuine reinvention of the Rocky franchise (after six of the original). Michael B. Jordan excellent as Adonis, troubled son of Apollo Creed, who wants at any cost to compete in the boxing big time; Sylvester Stallone easily recognizable, mumbling dialogue agrees to train Adonis despite being in retirement; Tessa Thompson gives affecting performance as Jordan's supportive, although sometimes challenging girlfriend; Phylicia Rashad as his stepmother, who takes him in to her outlandish Hollywood mansion and tries to keep him from leaving his LA financial job for the world of boxing. The film has the Rocky triumphant tone: long shot kid that is a skilled boxer and brimming over with enthusiasm and dedication to become one of the best; Rocky takes him in, and despite having only one true fight under his belt (he had fought 15 in Tijuana dives), Donnie challenges the English light heavyweight champion of the world. As in the original 'Rocky', Adonis ends up losing the fight in a split decision after 12 grueling rounds, but he has manifested such pluck and skill, that it reads like a triumph; the brutal, in-your-face champion, who is about to retire, for the first time, acknowledges Adonis for his guts. Throughout the second half of the film – the training, the negotiations, the subplots of the romance with Thompson and Rocky's bout with cancer – the tension and suspense are built expertly up to the exciting climactic fight with a big crowd cheering for their hometown champ (and of course coming around to cheering too for the challenger), blood and bodily fluids flying in the ring, the resounding impact of the punches landing, faces scarred by powerful punches, Adonis's left eye completely closed in the final round, the champ saved from a knockout only by the final bell. The film has psychological and dramatic dimensions: Adonis is constantly distressed by the ambiguity of his relationship with his famous father, but meeting the challenge of the championship fight enables him to move on and be his own man; when Rocky discovers later in the film that he has cancer, he is able to focus on fighting the cancer as a parallel to Donnie's fight against the great odds of the championship bout. Despite the 'Rocky'-style progression, the film has a genuine, non-'Hollywood' feel; thanks to the good acting and direction, it is difficult not to get caught up in the suspense and expectation, even if you aren't fond of boxing movies. (2016)

Crime d'amour 2010 Alain Corneau (France) 3.5 Ludivine Sagnier as highly emotional, conservatively dressed and coiffed senior executive in Paris branch of American agro business; Kristin Scott Thomas as the cool, distant, manipulative, exploitative head of the Paris branch; Patrick Mille as another "cadre", also the lover of both women; Guillaume Marquet as Sagnier's loyal assistant. Often fascinating, though somewhat incredible French thriller based on a dysfunctional relationship between two strong women. The first half of the film is perhaps the more interesting: Thomas is used to manipulating her subordinates to do the work for her and then taking credit for it; she acts ambiguously seductive toward the emotional, vulnerable Sagnier, kissing, hugging, exchanging glances, telling her that she loves her and then extracting the same from Sagnier, intentionally sharing her boyfriend's sexual services with her, sending her to Cairo on an important mission and then taking credit for Sagnier's achievement. With Marquet's encouragement Sagnier strikes back by pursuing a deal with her American bosses behind Thomas' back, thus earning the vicious enmity of Thomas, who twice goes out of her way to humiliate her subordinate. In a transition, Sagnier performs certain tasks that are difficult to understand, but even they don't prepare the viewer for the huge surprise – clad in a white jump suit, she leaps on Thomas in her beautiful house and stabs her to death with a vicious-looking kitchen knife! The rest of the film is a back-filling twister, in which the viewer learns – in black and white sequences – how Sagnier plotted to exculpate herself of the murder and inculpate her ex-lover Philippe. She set herself up as a drug addict having an emotional meltdown, she leaves self-incriminating clues at the scene of the crime (including writing the first three letters of her name in Thomas' blood), and when confronted by a juge d'instruction, she collapses in a heap and confesses the crime. But then she arranges the discovery of several clues that tend to exculpate her: the discovery of the second knife in her tool shed, the discovery of the tell-tale shawl in Philippe's car, an alternative explanation of how Sagnier received incriminating scratches on her arm, the revelation of a file indicating that Thomas was about to crack down on Philippe

for embezzlement (she had instructed her sister to mail it at a particular time). Once Sagnier is cleared to the delight of the police, the newspapers, and even the judge (can anyone resist a pretty girl?), another twist has loyal assistant Marquet informing that he knows what she has done – he tested the uppers/downers that she was allegedly taking and discovered that they were placebos. Film extremely compelling to watch, but it has flaws. One is perhaps the lack of unity – having two distinct films set back to back. The other is Sagnier’s character: it is always difficult to believe that a callow woman with such an emotional make-up could be a successful business executive; it is perhaps even more difficult to accept her as a carefully calculating cold-blooded murderess. Nevertheless, well-acted, and the interaction between the two principals and the intricate plotting make it very watchable. (2012)

Crime Wave 1954 André de Toth 3.5 Sterling Hayden in top form as growling, motor-talking, in-your-face police lieutenant, who appears devoted to persecuting ex-cons – can’t trust them, and the sooner they are returned to prison the better; Gene Nelson (questionable acting) as ex-con who is trying to go straight but is pursued by his San Quentin ex-con friends seeking protection; Phyllis Kirk as his faithful, somewhat colorless wife who is constantly putting pressure on Nelson not to give into his ex-buddies; Jay Novello as picturesque alcoholic doctor-veterinarian also related to gang; Charles Bronson in prominent role as a snarling member of the ex-con gang. Solid *cinéma vérité* crime film that has Nelson and Kirk taken hostage by a couple of cheap crooks, Hayden putting pressure on Nelson to cooperate with the police, ending with an attempted holdup in a Bank of America branch in Glendale that is expertly foiled by the police. Remember, crime does not pay: the police are a formidable team with all the latest technology at their disposal (especially radio communications), not to mention a top notch investigator and men devoted to him, and they will get their men – you will end up dead or in custody. Film is tough and realist: virtually all scenes are filmed on location – in a LA gas station, a real LA bank, or other locations or in the streets of Glendale, giving the film a strong sense of immediacy and reality; dialogue is clipped reminding the older viewer of the ‘Dagnet’ tv series; mise-en-scène and editing is efficient and trimmed to the bone – not an ounce of fat, so that the film moves steadily forward. Opening sequence of the petty robbery of an LA gas station (leading to the shooting death of a police officer) is filmed in efficient and picturesque way. Camera work is simple and elegant: wonderful expressive close-ups; one scene has only a shot of the phone ringing, an arm reaching over to answer it, the voice of Kirk telling Nelson not to answer, and then the hand relaxing and letting go. The film ends with a couple of surprises: the police are able to foil the Bank of America robbery because (unbeknownst to the viewer) Nelson has left a message for the police in his medicine cabinet; and when Hayden picks up Nelson and Kirk and gives the impression that he is running them in to throw the book at them, he instead drops them off next to a bus stop and tells them to go home and to make themselves a good life. Small film is often gripping and expertly crafted; hard to classify it as a film noir. (2010)

Crimson Peak 2015 Guillermo del Toro 3.0 Visually arresting gothic romance cum horror film about a maiden in dire distress. Mia Wasikowska fetching and innocent as turn-of-the-century would-be writer from New York, the daughter of a prominent industrialist -- this Australian speaks American in careful, studied way; Jim Beaver bearded and gruff as her affectionate and protective father; Tom Hiddleston good-looking, romantic, and sensitive as scion of declining English aristocratic family looking for a wealthy American heiress to fertilize the family fortune; Jessica Chastain dark haired, severe, obviously harboring dark secrets as Hiddleston’s evil sister -- she struggles sometimes to achieve an English accent; Charlie Hunnam a bit callow as Mia’s jilted suitor, who comes looking for his endangered friend. Wasikowska accompanies Hiddleston back to his exceedingly bizarre and ugly gothic pile in “Cumberland” (Northumberland), where she is frightened by spectral apparitions from the house’s grisly past warning her of danger, she discovers numerous previous murders of former women by Chastain, she is slowly poisoned by the relentless Chastain, eventually rescued by Hunnam in a flurry of knife thrusts; Wasikowska and Hunnam are last seen trudging through the snow back to the nearest town after a bloody, melodramatic battle with the crazed Chastain. The narrative is a gothic horror romance patterned after the turn-of-the-19th century English novels such as ‘The Castle of Otranto’ and Matthew Lewis’ ‘The Monk’. One reason the story does not take hold better than it does is its domination by the sprawling, incredibly detailed baroque design: the forbidding northern bespired gothic mansion standing alone in a barren

landscape; the bizarre, chilled interior open to the elements (snow often falling in the great hall) with blood red clay oozing from the walls and up from the foundation; bizarre design of inner rooms and corridors; the author's fascination with vintage technology such as 1900 gramophone machines or the curious steam-driven multi-scooper that Hiddleston designs to get his family out of debt; Wasikowska's out-of-this-world satin and velvet dresses, dominated by the color yellow, buttoned up to the net with absurdly puffed out sleeves; the author's fascination with insects -- ants eating other bugs, the walls of the house's basement lined with disquieting grey moths; even the precisely and roundly rendered furniture and fixtures of the club bathroom where the father is brutally murdered by Chastain. Bloody brutality abounds -- the crushing of Beaver's skull, the long drawn-out fight between Wasikowska and the relentless Chastain punctuated with stab wounds (knife and pen) and slashing across the face and the fingers. The film is not particularly frightening, the transparent ghastly female specters notwithstanding; suspense and the tragic unrequited romance between Wasikowska and Hiddleston take priority. Enjoyable film mainly for the gloriously excessive imagery. (2016)

Crimson Tide 1995 Tony Scott 3.0 Gene Hackman, Denzel Washington, Viggo Mortensen, George Dzundza. High testosterone nuclear Armageddon thriller that is tense, suspenseful and entertaining. Excellent set for nuclear launch submarine. Acting first rate, especially between GH and DW, when latter (XO) decides to relieve former of command of sub when he threatens to launch premature nuclear Armageddon. Shades of 'Caine Mutiny' (relieve skipper of command), 'Dr. Strangelove' (madman intent on delivering nuclear weapons), etc. Tension is palpable all through, thanks largely to the high octane acting. Special effects, explosions, submarines gliding through the deep are mostly so-so. Ending is a whimper, big disappointment. Seems to be a Cold War story modified and rewritten to make it work for 1995 (nuclear threat to the USA from a breakaway Soviet republic that is working on access to nuclear weapons); same genre as Tom Cruise action vehicles. (2004)

Criss-Cross 1948 Robert Siodmark 3.5 Burt Lancaster as buff, not so smart intense kid hopelessly in love with...; Yvonne De Carlo, very pretty Lauren Bacall lookalike, who is no good and looking out only for herself, although she pretends to be in love with Lancaster; Dan Duryea in stereotypical role as thin, snide, cynical gangster boss dressed in light colored suits; Stephen McNally as police lieutenant friend of Lancaster who tries his best to protect him against De Carlo. Very good film noir that reads as a spinoff of 'The Killers' (1946) also directed by Siodmark, but with De Carlo replacing the ineffable Ava Gardner. Good script plunges us into an argument between de Carlo and Lancaster and then to the beginning of the armored car heist. The action is interrupted by an extended flashback that details the on-again off-again romance between Lancaster and De Carlo and how Lancaster's feelings for her leads him to propose the heist with De Carlo's bad guy husband, Duryea. After the script returns to the present, the heist goes awry amidst thick tear gas, and De Carlo somehow gets away with half the money and waits for Lancaster in Palos Verdes; Lancaster eventually rejoins her there after a stay in the hospital (a good tense sequence), and the two are then shot to death on a sofa in a house next to the ocean by Duryea before he is arrested by the cops. The film is part noir, although there are not that many darkly shadowed scenes (one exception is Lancaster's stay in a hospital room, where he is afraid that he is going to be murdered by Duryea's men); the hero is weak and entrapped by the wiles and the machinations of a self-seeking femme fatale; the story is told in flashback; and although it is not told in voice-over, there can be little doubt that the chump Lancaster is bound for destruction at the hands of his brighter ex-wife. There are however also elements of the realist film -- lots of bright outdoor shots that are done on location in natural lighting on city streets; and also of the heist caper film that will have successors in 'The Asphalt Jungle' 1951, 'Crime Wave' 1954 and 'The Killing' 1956. Many of the flashback scenes drag a bit because of De Carlo's slack acting and the lack of chemistry between her and Lancaster -- it is hard to accept De Carlo as cunning and passionate as she is presented. Some expertly directed scenes that create tension (waiting in the hospital room to be murdered), suspense, and excitement (the utter confusion of the heist scene in the tear gas). (2009)

Cristo si è fermato a Eboli 1979 Francesco Rosi (Italy) 3.0 Cinematic portrait of the Italian Southern Problem seen in Carlo Levi's sojourn in Gagliano (Aliano) in Basilicata in 1935-36. Gian

Maria Volonte in virtually every frame as the curious, simpatico Levi befriending peasants and Fascists alike; Paolo Bonacelli as the largely sympathetic Fascist mayor of Gagliano; Lea Massari as Levi's sister visiting him for a few days; Irene Papas as Levi's cleaning woman, who says she has to organize her housework so as not to disturb the angel that stands at the door watching over the house; Alain Cuny as eccentric Catholic nobleman that blesses him in his bed. The film is a cinematic reproduction of Levi's justly famous book; with a wistful symphonic score, the *mise-en-scène* is sometimes so faded that it is difficult to see what is in the frame. Levi is condemned to three years of exile for anti-Fascist politics (one wonders why they didn't throw him in prison), but he is released after one year as part of the amnesty celebrating the victory in Abyssinia. The film focuses on the condition of the peasantry in the South: gaunt, weather-worn, the women clad in black and hunched over, living in decaying apartments, scratching a bare living out of the hard, rocky soil. The locals are more or less immersed in Catholicism, which is integrated with various superstitious practices like covering the body of a dying man with pictures of the Virgin and saints; it comes across as an alternative world view to the modern world. The religious practice of the locals is colored by the parish priest, who is presented as a bad painter (Levi sensitively reserves comment) and a drunkard with a history of child sexual abuse. On several occasions locals talk about how the best of the local people move to America; one man shows the portrait of "the great President Roosevelt" on the wall; their best hope for the future lies overseas where most will lose contact with their homeland. Levi tells the mayor that the southern peasants despise and fear the state, which they see as an outside force bent on oppression. When they stand in the town square to listen to a rabble-rousing Fascist speech by the mayor, all maintain a stony silence except for a few men who are paid to applaud loudly. They express some interest in the Abyssinian War, since some see it as a substitute outlet for America (we are fighting for more land), but they are deeply skeptical and only one youth volunteers for service. The kind and attentive Levi is welcomed by all the townspeople, who care nothing that he is a political prisoner. They find that he is a competent doctor and eventually he is authorized to practice basic family medicine when the people demand it, saying that the two doctors in town are quacks and worse than useless. Levi's departure from Gagliano is sad, as the locals crown around his car to bid him good-bye. The film is a sincere, heartfelt portrait of a sad people. (2017)

Cronos 1993 Guillermo del Toro (Mexico) 3.0 Federico Luppi as rather elderly antique dealer with endearing white moustache and an affectionate connection to his granddaughter; Ron Perlman as bizarre, profane, English-speaking assistant to a wealthy industrialist (Claudio Brook) who is dying of cancer and is desperate to find a way to prolong his life, perhaps indefinitely; Tamara Shanath as endearing little girl of about 8 who is attached to her grandfather, and becomes even more so as the film progresses. Guillermo del Toro's eye-catching first film that is notable mainly for its baroque horror imagery and its bizarre events in contemporary Mexico. Luppi happens upon an uncanny "cronos" device made by a 16th century watchmaker in search of immortality: a oval-shaped, gold-colored mechanical device that fits in the palm of your hand, grasps your skin with six claws when you wind it up, and then plunges a hollow needle into your skin presumably to pump in some immortality substance; on several occasions the viewer is treated to an interior view characterized by rotating cogged wheels but with a fleshy creepy insect in the middle of it all. The device does extend your life, but it also turns you into a vampire with a craving for blood. Luppi becomes visibly more youthful (his wife is especially appreciative), but he has nothing but trouble: his craving for blood is so intense that he sneaks into a men's room at a New Year's Eve party and licks blood from a nose bleed off the floor; he also is brutalized by Perlman, who kills Luppi twice in his quest to find the device only to have him rise from the dead looking worse than ever from his skin peeling off his face. Creepy scenes include the bedroom of Perlman's boss, who hangs up multiple copies of the key angel sculpture wrapped in plastic (Luppi had found the cronos device in one in his antique shop) and places his surgically excised organs in formaldehyde filled bottles. Film has its improbable aspects (Perlman's stupidly brutal character!), but the intense imagery is memorable; it recalls the make-up and special effects of Sam Remi's "Drag Me to Hell", which seems to have been influenced by Del Toro. The inclusion of a child entirely devoted to her grandfather adds a touch of empathy and affection to the proceedings. In the end, Luppi recognizes that his life is causing suffering to his wife and grandchild, and he decides to end his life by crushing the cronos device, ending the film on a moving note of self-sacrifice. (2010) (2013)

Cross of Iron 1977 Sam Peckinpah (Britain) 2.5 International screen version of the Heinrich novel focusing on military action as the German Army retreats before the onslaught of the Russian offensive in 1943. James Coburn as hard-bitten, resentful German sergeant who nevertheless does his duty in combat; Maximilian Schell as Prussian aristocrat, Captain Stransky, recently transferred from France so that he can win the Iron Cross to please his family; James Mason as the sensible, humane commander, Colonel Brandt; David Warner as the gaunt, increasingly shell-shocked Captain Kiesel, staff officer to Brandt – he is sent back to Germany so he can help rebuild Germany after the catastrophe of the war; Klaus Löwitsch, Roger Fritz, Fred Stillkraut inter alia as soldiers fighting the Russians. This Peckinpah product relies mostly on well-mounted war scenes that go on for way too long: grimy, exhausted soldiers crouched in trenches, artillery and bomb explosions all around, officers cowering in dugouts, one scene featuring tanks that grind fallen bodies into the mud, machine gun fire slaughtering large numbers of Russian soldiers, but to no avail since there are always more behind them; toward the end of the film the action moves momentarily into a factory, a scene that occupied much of the novel. The scene between Steiner's soldiers and the fanatical Russian women soldiers stands out in its vividness. The viewer distinguishes the two sides by identifying the soldiers' helmets. Strikingly a complete lack of Nazi fanatics in the cast: the men support one another and complain about their fates as they sing traditional German songs, do their duty, and die; the officers are Prussian aristocrats devoted to their Fatherland, some of them honorable officers (Brandt), some of them opportunists (Stransky). Sergeant Steiner carries the cynical view of the enlisted men: he says he hates the German Army, he hates all officers: Will the Russians ever forgive us for what we have done? "I think God is a sadist, only He doesn't know it." He has long given up hope that anything good will come out of the war. The conflict with the officers escalates with the arrival of Captain Stransky, who, when Steiner refuses to support him for his Iron Cross, arranges for Steiner's unit to be caught behind Russian lines, and when Steiner and his men fight their way back to the German Front, Stransky and his acolyte Griebig have them mowed down; Steiner responds by killing and mutilating a couple of Germans! The film ends improbably with Steiner and Stransky striking up a kind of soldier's camaraderie to go off together and fight the Russians until their deaths. Film portrays primarily the destruction and war weariness of the final stages of the war on the Eastern Front; but the men do their duty for Germany until the bitter end. The viewer will get impatient unless he/she is addicted to combat footage. (July 2017)

Crossfire 1947 Edward Dmytryk (RKO) 2.5 Robert Young as avuncular, tweedy, pipe-smoking police captain with the gift of persistence; Robert Mitchum as a wise-cracking, rather philosophic army sergeant with no clear personality or motive who assists Young in his investigation; Robert Ryan as occasionally scary anti-semitic bigot with a serious rage problem (AA nomination). Higher 'B' movie – screed against anti-semitic prejudice in the guise of a moderately interesting murder mystery. The film is set in a fairly seedy quarter of LA (bars, apartments, police station) shortly after the end of the World War II; in the studio-bound streets of Los Angeles about-to-be-demobilized soldiers in uniform wander from bar to bar looking for some sort of excitement, and sticking together if one of them gets in trouble. Young must find the killer of a harmless Jewish guy who had been befriended by a group of soldiers in a trendy bar; although it is fairly obvious from the start that Ryan is the guilty party, the viewer is led through a couple of wild goose chase investigations (the most time-consuming being the trail of Mitchum and his troubles with his wife) before the revelatory climax. Ends with a classic 30s-style 'trap', where Young recruits a soldier to give Ryan false information that forces him to admit his guilt; although unarmed, he is shot down (in cold blood!) in the streets by Young when he tries to flee. The performances are generally good, and there are plenty of noir-style dark pools and shadows. The narrative however is not very compelling, and there are way too many sermons on the evils of prejudice, how we all have a lot to learn, how we can hope for a better day when we will all be treated equal, etc. Film made a big splash in 1947 as an anti-prejudice movie released a few months before 'Gentleman's Agreement', but it has faded without its shock value. (2008)

Crumb 1994 Terry Zwickoff 3.5 Extraordinary documentary about the weirdo underground comic book genius, Robert Crumb. Shot for several years before 1990, as Crumb and current wife prepared for departure to France. Focuses largely on his family (brothers Maxon and

Charles; sisters refused to participate) and his relationship with his brothers. Both brothers are heavily damaged people (Charles is suicidal recluse on psychotropic medication in terminally messy room in his mother's house, Maxon yoga style recluse, who admits that he is sex offender and sits for two hours a day on a bed of nails), but somehow, perhaps because of his art (?), Robert, although very bizarre, manages to be reasonably functioning – money, success, fame, keeps wives for a while, has two children, about whom he is fairly affectionate. Focuses on sexual hang-ups of three brothers; Robert is turned on mostly by his comics, by women's buttocks; he at one time apparently masturbated three or four times a day; sex with his ex-girlfriend was largely getting stepped on, she riding him piggyback (and he does it in Muller Gallery with a woman friend), etc. He is obviously quite hostile toward women, whom he depicts as birds of prey or voluptuous bodies without heads, always with large butts (callipygian). He is quite racist in his depiction of Negroes (is he being racist, or is he just expressing the hang-ups of American culture?). Crumb also has contemptuous, hostile feelings about his father, who was hard-nosed ex-Marine American male, who beat Robert and ruled over his family like a tyrant (obvious model of Whiteman in his 60s comics); he confesses that much of his anti-establishment stance is an extension of his rebellion against high school culture, where the bullies picked on him and Charles and the girls completely ignored them both. Author includes contradictory evaluations from different sides: Robert Hughes thinks he is the “Brueghel of the last half of the 20th century,” a great social critic and revealer of the unconscious underbelly of American civilization; the past editor of *Mother Jones* is shocked at his misogynistic and violent fantasies; the question becomes should he keep them to himself? The wonder is that R. Crumb was able to survive, given his background and his hang-ups (did his art make it possible?). He comes across as the best adjusted crazy sexual neurotic I have ever seen! The link between his psychological make-up and his creativity and success remains mysterious. (2009)

Cry Danger 1951 Robert Parrish 3.0 Noir-influenced LA drama about an ex-con trying to find the culprit of the crime for which he was wrongfully convicted. Dick Powell as the hard-bitten, but honorable ex con, still apparently in love with...; Rhonda Fleming looking more mainstream than her ‘Out of the Past’ viper as Powell’s ex-girlfriend that married another guy; Richard Erdman as alcoholic (the amusing variety), wise-cracking friend and trailer-mate of Powell; William Conrad looking just like Canon (1971-76) as the heavy that organized the frame of Powell; Jean Porter as pretty, blond playgirl that goes out a while with Erdman; Regis Toomey as decent, family-man cop that gives Powell some slack. Film has an intriguing beginning following a train arriving at LA Union Station, a walk into the sunny streets of Los Angeles, confrontation between Powell and two suspicious characters that turn out to be friendly, and setting up shop in a picturesque trailer park with a view of the LA City Hall. Sharp, scenic cinematography in the sun-drenched downtown Bunker Hill section of Los Angeles – streets, bars, trailer parks, newsstands, small grocery stores, etc. Plot is moderately twisty: when Conrad gets Powell some money that he owes him, it turns out to be hot money meant to get him in trouble (when he tries to figure out what happened, all the participants of the con of course feign ignorance); whereas Fleming is presented in most of the film as upright middle-class lady with a secretary’s job, it is revealed at the end that she is in cahoots with Conrad and has hidden half of the missing money in her apartment. Powell’s motivation and character are at first ambiguous – get his friend out of prison, get revenge on the people who put him there, get hold of the missing \$100,000 – but he ends the film as an honorable guy – he fends off Fleming’s irresistible blandishments and returns the money to his policeman friend; he is last seen walking stoically down the street. Despite the presence of a femme fatale, the film is not really noir: cinematography is light-filled, the cynical but decent Powell is no sucker, and the momentum of fate is absent. Enjoyable, well-made, and well-acted film with witty, natural sounding patter. (2017)

A Cry in the Dark 1988 Fred Schepisi (Australia) 3.5 Meryl Streep in another riveting, convincing performance as Lindy Chamberlain accused unjustly of murdering her baby; Sam Neil overshadowed but solid as her long-suffering and less stable husband. Almost a docudrama about the famous 1980 case in which a baby was apparently snatched from a tent by a dingo (“A dingo’s got my baby!”) in the shadow of Ayers Rock (Uluru) and in which the parents were subsequently pursued and prosecuted for the murder; Lindy is condemned to life imprisonment at her trial in Darwin, but is then exonerated within a few years, when further research shows that the forensic evidence used to put her

away was flaky. To a large extent, the two main performers carry the movie along: Streep is particularly convincing as the mother who is confident and brave in her rejection of guilt, but who also shows some arrogance, pride, anger and sarcasm in her treatment of others. The film never leaves us in doubt about the innocence of the principals – we see Lindy with her friends when the baby is taken, and we see the dingo exiting the tent (although we do not see the baby in his mouth) when Lindy runs to check what is happening. We are entirely on the side of the Chamberlains despite their personal shortcomings. The villain of the story is the press that is forever scrambling and pursuing to get the scoop, public opinion that argues about the case like the French did the Dreyfus Affair (the film cuts often to the guys arguing in bars or the elite doing the same on the bowling green), and the police who go to great lengths (including calling on a British forensic scientist of dubious reputation) to build up their case and secure a conviction. Much of the momentum against the accused comes from prejudice against Christian evangelicals like the Chamberlains, who are Seventh Day Adventists. The long trial sequence toward the end emphasizes the incomprehensible nature of the forensic evidence presented by the prosecution and cannot but make one wonder how they got the conviction from the jury, many of whom were weeping as Lindy was being sentenced to life imprisonment. The film has slack moments, but this melodrama with a happy ending is a powerful testimonial in favor of justice and the conviction that truth will somehow triumph in the end. (2007)

Cure 1997 Kiyoshi Kurosawa (Japan) 3.0 Koji Yakusho as Takabe, a Japanese police detective investigating a series of grisly murders; Masato Hagiwara as mysterious amnesiac drifter (Mayima drives his interlocutors crazy by answering questions with other questions) with apparently hypnotic powers (he works through the flame of a cigarette lighter or water dripping or running along the floor) – he pushes normal people into murder and mutilation of the victim’s body. Creepy, atmospheric, often riveting thriller about Takabe’s investigation of a series of grisly murders – the victims are dispatched in various ways, but their bodies are always mutilated with a deeply incised ‘x’ just under their throats. The film takes place in a “bleak urban landscape” of ugly buildings, rusting metal, oozing liquids, abandoned factories, where everyone seems full of despair. Narrative follows partly the detective’s investigation, as he slowly uncovers the pattern behind the murders after a slow and puzzling beginning; it also cuts to the actions of the perpetrator himself as he hypnotizes his killers into doing what he wants (“Tell me more about yourself!”) – each return to him gives the viewer a little more information than the previous one. Since we know early on who the perpetrator is, the film soon becomes a psychological thriller. The detective is now at the center of it: his wife, whose condition appears to torture Takabe, is mentally ill and she seems to get worse as her husband closes in on Mayima; the detective himself gradually falls deeper under the influence of Mayima, and the suspense now focuses on what will happen to him. About halfway through the film it becomes increasingly difficult to try to figure out where it is going, since Miyama is a blank slate and doesn’t respond to interrogation (he seems honestly to have forgotten everything) and everyone who has come into contact with him begins to experience hallucinations dealing often with the fate of a woman who murdered her children (?) a hundred years ago. Takabe’s psychiatrist friend appears to have strange visions and then he commits suicide; Takabe has to take his wife to a psychiatric hospital. The last scene is vague, suggestive and intriguing – Takabe is seated in a restaurant eating dinner; he is dressed to the T, well-coiffed, and he looks handsome, satisfied and perhaps smug as he smokes his cigarette. It would seem that he has been the latest tool of Miyama (or perhaps he has mastered Miyama and used the opportunity for his own purposes?); in any case, he has gotten rid of his wife and perhaps an irritating colleague.... The film is lot creepier than it is gory despite a couple of bloody scenes; the director builds a sense of dread as he shoots scenes dispassionately – from another room through the door and in long takes. Very interesting, often intriguing, perhaps too often confusing. (2009)

The Curious Case of Benjamin Button 2008 David Fincher (writer Eric Roth who did "Forrest Gump") 2.5 Brad Pitt playing a sweet, retiring, and reflective man who is born as an aged-looking baby and reverse ages until he presumably disappears as a baby (he never goes through the fetal stage?); Cate Blanchett convincing and endearing as the woman he falls in love with, marries, and then leaves for her sake; Tilda Swinton as a middle-aged lady Button falls in love with and has an affair with in

Murmansk; Taraji Henson one of the best things in the film as Benjamin's Black adopted mother. Fantasy film based supposedly on Fitzgerald's story about a man who ages in reverse, leading supposedly to touching and poetic observations about the mysteries of life. The first third of the film deals with Benjamin's infancy/dotage, in which Benjamin first meets the child Blanchett and the audience experiences chuckles of recognition and amusement at how childish the old looking man is; the second part is the most historical and dramatic -- Benjamin serves on a tugboat in World War II, travels around the world, has the affair with Swinton surrounded by snow in Murmansk, and returns rejuvenated; the last part where he marries Blanchett, leaves her to allow her to find a fit mate, and then returns to die in her arms as an infant (!). The concept is a stretch all the way through: to reverse time in a man's life does not make sense; it dehumanizes his life, since he cannot form a lasting commitment resting on expectations of growing old together and parenting your child; we are however challenged to admire Pitt deeply for his courageous decision to abandon his wife and child because he know that he cannot endure with either one of them. The film is set in a narrative frame in a New Orleans hospital in which an ancient Blanchett (in impossible aged makeup) has her daughter read Button's diary to her as she dies and Hurricane Katrina descends on the city. The flashback story begins with a silly fantasy about a clockmaker (Benjamin's father) who has the clock run backwards to bring back his son from death in World War I. There is much discussion about fate and inevitability, especially in an analytical sequence in Paris in which Blanchett is hit by a truck; but the theme does not seem to have much relation to the narrative. The film resembles "Forrest Gump" in that a mild and rather passive principal character traverses some of the great historical moments of the 20th century dispensing simple wisdom right and left. All the acting is good, and the lovers' chemistry between Pitt and Blanchett is touching and convincing. The film tugs on the heartstrings continually, never recording a key moment in the narrative without touching music and a view to a sentimental payoff. (2009)

The Curse of Frankenstein 1957 Terence Fisher (GB) 3.0 Peter Cushing as mad Victor Frankenstein bent on defying all laws of decency to create life; Robert Urquhart as his tutor and partner, who tries to convince Victor of the immorality of his actions; Christopher Lee jerking and stumbling around like a zombie with an oozing, blanched face with unhealed surgical sores (obviously designed not to resemble the Karloff Monster); Hazel Court as overly glamorous but pleasingly décolletée Cousin Elizabeth; Valerie Gaunt as sexy, buxom servant girl having an affair with her master – she is one of two persons murdered by the Monster. Famous Hammer remake of the Universal classic. Not many new wrinkles; plays it as straight horror with a lot (for the 1950s) of bright red gore and seasoned by ample décolletage from the two actresses. Victor, played ably by Cushing, is possessed by an unexplained thirst to push beyond the boundaries of decency (as expressed frequently with horror by the upright Urquhart), defy the laws of nature and of God, and produce life. His attempt succeeds in producing a live creature, but the product is a frightening failure: the monster is extremely ugly, even sporting at the end a partly shaved head from Victor's brain surgery; despite Victor's care to find a brain that is educated and brilliant (the elderly scientist that he murders in a spectacular fall from an internal balcony), the Creature lurches and stumbles and can barely grunt (was the Frankenstein gait the inspiration for Romero's zombies?). He seems to kill mostly at random and out of some instinct or unexpressed frustration; the only exception is his revenge-driven attack against Victor at the end – Victor had mocked and demeaned him in front of Urquhart after the brain surgery. The tale is framed by Victor's confession to a priest in prison, where he is awaiting execution by guillotine for having killed Elizabeth (!) and being held responsible for the death of the blind man in the forest and the juicy servant; it ends with his being escorted to the scaffold. The film is reasonably well-directed and well-photographed; good art direction for the interior of the castle (ambiguity – characters climb the stairs to access the laboratory and yet it is obviously in a basement), the colorful and rank woods, and especially the detailed laboratory filled with strange vials, coils and (too many) bubbling red liquids in glass containers. Entertaining with no pretense of artiness or significance. (2010)

Cutter's Way 1981 Ivan Passer 2.5 Jeff Bridges in late early role as hippyish, homeless, rootless, preciously dressed guy living in Santa Barbara; John Heard an over-the-top angry, in-your-face handicapped, raging alcoholic Vietnam vet who seems to hate most everything; Lisa Eichhorn in

incomprehensible, underwritten role as long-suffering also alcoholic wife of the ranting Heard; Ann Dusenberry even more incomprehensible as teenie-bopper-looking sister of murdered girl – in defiance of all credibility, she joins the flaky investigation of Heard into the murder of her sister. A mess of a movie with some good parts. In a self-consciously characterized Santa Barbara (stupid-looking mission parades down the main streets) Bridges is witness to the dumping of the body of a murdered teenage hitchhiker; he however refuses to get involved in Heard's obsessive investigation into the murder, and when Heard hatches one of the dumbest plots ever to catch J.J.Cord, the businessman culprit (tell him that he knows he committed the murder, blackmail him, then turn him over to the police), Bridges – Humphrey Bogart style ('Casablanca') – refuses to get involved, insisting that Heard cannot be sure that the businessman is guilty and in any case keeping his distance from the moral imperative. The viewer is never sure that the accused committed the crime, but Heard, who is filled with what appears to be rage against the Establishment, forges ahead especially after his wife is killed in a fire (did Cord do it?); dragging Bridges along he grabs his pistol and invades Cord's estate, and although he dies before he can pull the trigger, a converted and redeemed Bridges pulls the trigger while ensuring that only Heard's fingerprints are on the murder weapon; justice done. The film appears to have a political subtext: Heard's hatred of the US business elite, his determination to pursue the businessman regardless of whether he committed the crime, and his commitment to waking Bridges out of his moral torpor. The viewer senses bitterness about the passing of the leftwing political revolt of the 60s and 70s into the conservative and traditional culture of the Reagan 80s. The main problem in the film is an incoherent script. The female characters are extremely underwritten: e.g., Eichhorn in no way resembles an alcoholic, her patience in dealing with a ranting alcoholic husband and his buddy (Bridges) also living in the house with them strains credibility, her rant toward the end of the film about abandoning the purchase of alcohol and deciding instead to buy food at the super market is unintentionally funny; not to mention that one tires of the repetitive shouting matches between Heard and Bridges and of Bridges' fey attire (often bare-chested, tight pants often half unbuttoned, an unruly mop of blond hair). Marginally interesting as a record of the times, but a mess of a movie. (2011)

Cyclo 1996 Anh Hung Tran 1.5 Le Van Loc as teenager who tries to make a living in the teeming streets of Saigon; Tony Leung as the "Poet", apparently a member of a gang (but it is difficult to know until he murders a guy with a knife toward the end of the film). Modernist. 60s-style film -- Franco-Vietnamese -- that seems to be about the misery of the poor living in Saigon in the 90s. The workers' paradise is actually a place filled with gangs, drugs, exploitation of the poor and powerless, prostitution, and vicious violence. The most memorable scenes of the film are the ones with extreme violence, especially the one in which the gang boss torments a poor fellow tied to a chair with clear plastic tape, and then -- finally -- pierces his jugular with a switchblade knife and we watch the victim writhe in terror as the blood spurts in a stream on the wall. Loc has his cyclo (sort of rickshaw with which he carries freight and passengers) and he increasingly falls under the domination of the local gang mistress, who has him perform increasingly vicious deeds -- torch a bicycle repair shop with a Molotov cocktail, and finally murder someone with a gun -- although it appears that Loc never does perform the latter, since we see him at the end back in the streets pedaling a family in his cyclo. In the meantime we meet a lot of characters, about whom we learn very little -- either by the author's intention or just confusing incompetence. Cinematography is pretentious with a lot of very arty, extreme close-ups that are held for a long time for presumably painterly effect; when there is action, the camera wobbles and swoops. There is practically no dialogue, as the characters stare, walk, sit, lie without using speech to enlighten us about their thoughts. The narrative (what there is of it) is periodically broken by a poetic interlude, in which, say, two lovers walk in a beautiful sylvan setting while an off-camera voice (probably Leung) recites a lyric poem. Film is so modernist (?) and confusing that the viewer loses interest. No doubt that there are beautiful shots and that the misery of the young and poor are vividly portrayed; but that is not enough. (2009)

Cyrus 2010 Jay and Mark Duplass 3.0 John C. Reilly is funny and endearing as hapless, lonely, often confused divorced man looking for a mate; Marisa Tomei very pretty as (overly!) devoted, clueless mom who responds to men who expose their member to pee in a bush; Jonah Hill as seriously

large immature son determined to hold on to his mother at all costs; Catherine Keener charming as Reilly's friendly and helpful ex-wife. Kind-of romantic comedy set in Los Angeles. Reilly is one of the world's loneliest men when he meets Tomei at a party; she takes to him, they have sex (he is so grateful!), but when he moves into her home, he runs up against the under-current opposition of Tomei's son, Cyrus, who will use any sly emotional trick to keep his mom from attaching to the rival male. Tomei is more the clueless, easily manipulated mother than a real character. For a long while, this cheaply shot film (lots of TV-like wavy camera and swish pans from face to face) oscillates between creepiness and awkward comedy. Hill seems just overly friendly at first, but soon the viewer realizes with a thrill of surprise that he is a calculating creature pulling out all the stops to banish Reilly to where he came from: he steals his shoes and hides them in his closet, wields (innocently) a large knife in the kitchen, moves out, moves back in, threatens Reilly with total defeat in private, while he acts like an angel in the presence of his mother; and he even attacks him violently in a men's room when he gets drunk at a party. One wonders whether the story will turn into a horror film. The ending is a disappointment – rushed and superficial. Because of the bathroom confrontation, Tomei and Reilly split up, are miserable apart from one another since Tomei still can't take any step without her son's permission; finally Cyrus has an unexplained change of heart, comes to Reilly's door (he has moved into a cheap apartment) and begs him to return to his mom. When Reilly demurs, Cyrus resorts again to manipulation to place him in front of Tomei's house so that she can walk out on the front porch and beckon him in; he smiles, and end of film. We presume that Cyrus loves his mom enough to let go and to promote her happiness, but there are a lot of future problems unaddressed! Film succeeds because of good comic acting against Marisa Tomei's straight man and because of the effective exploitation of the ambiguity between comedy and disquieting drama. (2011)

D.O.A. 1950 Rudolf Maté (famous cinematographer) 3.0 Edmond O'Brien, Pamela Britton, Luther Adler, Beverly Garland as pretty secretary, Neville Brand as fun-to-watch psycho killer who can't get enough hitting O'Brien in stomach ("he's weak in the stomach!"). Famous film noir about a guy who leaves regular life with pretty girlfriend to live it up a little in San Francisco, and is punished big time for his transgression. His vacation in SF is pretty corrupt – carousing with drunk salesmen and women on convention, ogling girls, hanging out in jive bar, where there are lots of shots of sweating black musicians. He is poisoned ("luminous poison" -- there is no cure and he has only a week or so to live) for having notarized a bill of sale, and he spends the rest of the film first in San Francisco and then in Los Angeles looking for his killer; he shoots him at the end and then turns himself into the police station. Movie framed by his initial confession to police captain, who listens to his flashback account of how he tracked down the guilty parties. Story is largely linear whodunit with aggressive, wise guy, tough guy O'Brien acting as his own private detective finding out who murdered him; complexities of what he discovers reminds one of 'The Big Sleep,' and challenges the attention span of this viewer. Good atmospheric shots of the two big California cities. O'Brien is good, although we wonder why he is so hyperactively driven to find his killer and why, when he knows he is going to die? Pamela Britton ok as devoted girlfriend who adores him and thinks only of marrying him; they have a heavy romantic scene toward the end that is a little too 'Hollywood.' Direction is straightforward and effective with no expressionist flourishes (unlike 'Kiss Me Deadly'). There are some obviously bad women in the criminal underworld of the West, but no 'femme fatale' that leads our hero to destruction; O'Brien seems morally responsible for his own fate since he decided to leave his respectable situation in Banning (desert town) to live it up in the evil town. Fate appears to play a part, since story is told in flashback; but overall the 'pi' aspect of the story trumps the film noir. (2005)

The Da Vinci Code 2006 Ron Howard 2.5 Tom Hanks quite familiar and earnest as the Harvard "symbologist" following the treasure hunt to solve the initial murder, Audrey Tautou is cute, peppy and smart (as usual) as a French policewoman who happens upon the scene and has a more intimate connection with the proceedings than is at first apparent, Ian McKellen as manic expert on the secret – he also has a more intimate connection with the story than we initially think (another coincidence!), Jean Reno suitably menacing as cop who is actually an unwitting agent of Opus Dei, Paul Bettany frankly not menacing enough as the viciously murderous albino monk who is controlled by Opus

Dei, Alfred Molina as a bishop high up in the Opus Dei hierarchy. Well-directed adventure movie about a murder in the Louvre, posthumous clues communicated to Hanks and Tautou, and then their plunging into the treasure hunt, encountering mind-bending puzzles and riddles, solving them, and then moving on to the next one; they encounter several serious surprises – McKellen, who appears first as a quirky conspiracy theorist, turns out a free-lance moral crusader who is trying to uncover the evil workings of all religious organization; and Tautou herself turns out in the penultimate scene to be the surviving descendant of Jesus Christ and Mary Magdalene. The historical background: Jesus was married to Mary Magdalene and had children with her, the Church repressed the true cult in favor of its own patriarchal interpretation (the feminist aspect of the story is not emphasized in the film); the Priory of Scion however has preserved the secret up to the present day to avoid being obliterated by forces within the Church; the pope and most Catholics are dupes and have no idea what is going on, but there are a small number of conspirators in the Church – particularly in Opus Dei – who are devoted to either snuff out the Scion line or to keep it hidden (hard to tell). Film has its interesting aspects – those exotic locations, all those puzzles solved, and those sudden revelations – but its impact is blunted by the preposterousness of the story (if you know anything at all about Christian history, you are constantly objecting to the film’s revelations), the excessive complications of the plot, the non-stop cascade of revelations that inundate the viewer with barely digestible information (including reenacted historical sequences in pale color to set them off from contemporary goings-on). At the end you are just glad it is over, especially since the movie is too long for its thin plot. The ending is ludicrous – Hanks cuts himself shaving, the blood makes him think of the true bloodline, he then rushes over to the Louvre pyramid (seems to have some magic power), and the camera then penetrates downward through several stone and glass layers to – the tomb of Mary Magdalene looking contemporary and pretty in her effigy. We don’t care where her tomb is, do we? And anyhow how did his bit of blood make Hanks think of the tomb and the Louvre? Howard did the best he could – individual scenes are often gripping, and his expository sequences (McKellen’s slideshow, the interpretation of Newton’s tomb, Hanks’ initial PowerPoint lecture) hold our attention. (2006)

Daddy Long-Legs 1919 Marshall Neilan (Arctcraft; wr. Frances Marion) 4.0 Mary Pickford, who is 27, plays a 12-year-old girl in an orphanage – she successfully looks her age. Charming, poignant, and amusing meditation on what it is to be an orphan. Mary is smart, gay, lively, bold, impertinent, maternal (she comforts the smaller children), free (moves rapidly through the house wherever she wants), resourceful (cuts the arm off the doll so she can give it to the sick orphan), doesn’t mind if she gets in trouble; when older she is sensible and kind. Soulful close-ups of Mary, and the adorable, beautiful children of the orphanage. Extensive titles that tell the audience the (often drippily sentimental) moral, help with the progress of the narrative – sometimes the visuals seem to be just illustrations of the story told in print —, and introduce the characters; they are humorous, sometimes a little poetic; but they also report a fair amount of dialogue. Initial picture of life in boarding school: the headmistress (shades of Miss Minchin) tyrannizes over the children, although the star children make fun of their superiors: she burns Mary’s finger on the stove and then kicks her when she is on the ground. Children have to eat prunes, but they dream about good food. The older children take care of the little ones; a large section on Mary acting as a most adoring mother to the small children. Slapstick gag – accidentally drunk children swing on trapeze and knock headmistress’ assistant into a well; an apparently drunk dog walking unsteadily on his hind legs, and then the two children walk equally unsteady into the school building and tell the other children in the pantry to eat all the jam they want. Story contrasts Mary who was found in an ashcan with the spoiled rich girl who comes to visit the school – the orphans are good, the rich kid is bad. Mary then grows up (about 18-19 and her hair is now rolled in a bun) and goes to college with the support of a rich man (only a wall shadow of his long legs are shown, hence the title of the film). She is very affectionate, and writes him charming notes about her experiences in the company of the rich girls. A bit of fantasy as the cupid organization – composed of toddlers – decides it is time for her to fall in love, but they pierce two suitor hearts by mistake, and she is pursued by them both, the one apparently a businessman, the other a callow student, but both “have ancestors”. Mary looks very small standing between them – which will she choose? A nice quiet edited sequence when she reflects on love, her novel, and her future. She decides to become a novelist in order to pay back her benefactor, but her

first attempt is rejected; when she writes from experience about life in the orphanage, she is accepted. Some pathos when she graduates with honors, but she is sad because she is alone – no family and Daddy Long Legs does not come. When she is presented to the rich bitch girl, Mary very fetching in her rather unsuccessful attempt to smile and be polite. When she receives her marriage proposal, the icy stare of her enemy freezes her and she imagines herself in the orphan garb; again social snobbery paralyzes a good and gifted person – she refuses her blue-blood suitor because she is ashamed to tell him about the orphanage. A marvelous ending: Mary goes to DLL’s house; completely adorable close-ups of her face as she speaks to him (he has been sick but is recovering) and then discovers ... Daddy Long-Legs is the fellow she has turned down for marriage! She then is angry (“You brute!”), but (with the camera still shooting the back of DDL’s chair) he grabs her arm, pulls her into his lap; at first we see her two feet kicking in protest, then they are still, and then pumping happily (he is kissing her) – “The End”. Marvelous collaboration of writer, director, and star. (2010)

Daisy Kenyon 1947 Otto Preminger 3.0 Joan Crawford emoting fiercely as an independent fashion artist torn between two men; Dana Andrews, a wealthy, powerful, arrogant lawyer as her devoted lover; Henry Fonda difficult-to-figure-out as ex-serviceman wounded by the loss of his wife and his war experience as Crawford’s other suitor; Ruth Warwick overacting as Andrews’ emotional wife. Hollywood women’s picture about Crawford’s romantic dilemma, notable for its all-star cast and its complex (and perhaps indecipherable) psychology. The narrative challenges the Hollywood Code a bit: Crawford has a married lover (Andrews) whom she hopes to wed, but he is reluctant to break with the cushy life he shares with his wife and two daughters. Crawford then meets the laconic Fonda, who burns with a brighter passion than is his wont, whispering ardently in her ear. The two marry and settle down in small Cape Cod village where Fonda resumes his boat designing profession. Not used to defeat, Andrews is soon back courting Crawford and divorcing his wife in a courtroom confrontation after his love for Crawford is revealed in a dramatic phone conversation. Engaging in a curious buddy friendship with Andrews, Fonda plays it cool going along with Andrews’ plans for him to divorce Crawford so Andrews can marry her. In a crisis of indecision Crawford drives off at high speed and has a serious traffic accident that somehow clears her head. The script labors mightily to keep the viewer in suspense when the three meet in a Cape Cod cottage to resolve the dilemma. Crawford rejects Andrews, and when Fonda is about to get in the car to accompany his buddy Andrews back to New York, he tells Andrews he is staying with Crawford; back in the cottage he tells Crawford that by waiting and seeing, he has followed a classic military strategy to get his wife back. Andrews is off to an uncertain and lonely future in New York, and the strictures of the Hayes Code are preserved by having one of the adulterers stay faithful to her husband and by condemning the other to a life alone. The film is interesting for its semi-noir cinematography, for Preminger’s film style featuring long takes and a moving camera with cuts only at key moments, and for the complex psychology of its characters. The script however labors so much to make its characters interesting that it introduces annoying ambiguities: Is it realistic at the beginning of the film that Crawford could be dating two men without either one objecting? Although he seems crass and arrogant, the script makes much of Andrews’ defense of a Nisei veteran who has lost his farm to swindlers during the war. Fonda’s passive attitude about Andrews’ divorce plan is puzzling, as is his claim to have used a tested military strategy in doing so. With her angular face and wide band of lipstick, Crawford is not to every viewer’s taste; too old (early 40s) for the role, she is perhaps not an attractive romantic figure for the male viewer. (2013)

Dallas Buyers’ Club 2013 Jean-Marc Vallée 3.0 Matthew McConaughey (AA) frighteningly thin (not as bad as Christian Bale in ‘The Machinist’) as in-your-face, womanizing, profane, defiant rodeo bull rider with a lust for life; Jennifer Garner as epidemiologist doctor who has a conscience (willing to challenge the FDA) and – rather incredibly – falls for McConaughey (relationship remains Platonic); Jared Leto (AA!) tugging mightily on the heart strings as pretty, drug-abusing transsexual infected fatally with AIDS; Denis O’Hare as unattractive epidemiologist boss of Garner – clearly the villain of the film, he seems to be in hock to the FDA. Rather overrated film about the struggle of a courageous, although unattractive, AIDS victim, who challenges the FDA establishment, founds a profitable business importing unapproved drugs mostly from Mexico, and with his own treatment manages to survive seven years,

much more than the six months accorded him by O'Hare. McConaughey is the obvious center of the film – hyperactive, aggressive, foul-mouthed, struggling for his life. The film focuses on the medical and human issues of the AIDS crisis: the suffering of the infected (the main one of which is heterosexual); the question of the best treatment – the FDA and the medical establishment are putting their eggs in the AZT basket, despite its obvious toxicity, whereas McConaughey and his fellows use a less toxic anti-viral combined with supplements that build up the body's immune system to focus on longevity rather than a cure. The FDA is usually presented negatively: the officials are bureaucratic and in cahoots with the research medical doctors, and they do all they can to shut down McConaughey's operation as illegal, even though it is apparent that it is doing some good. The ultimate outcome of the process is reconciliation: although McConaughey survives seven years, he eventually dies, as does the drug-abusing Leto, and a postscript informs the viewer that eventually the FDA combines McConaughey's approach with a lower dose of AZT as the approved treatment. Some of the episodes are repetitive: just how many foreign doctors do we have to watch McConaughey visiting? Hollywoodisms creep in: the good guy battling against crippling odds, McConaughey going through a redemptive transformation, wherein he learns to be sensitive to a young woman and to abandon his homophobia, and the credibility-defying platonic romance with the mainstreamer Garner, who seems often at a loss how to show her attachment to such a man. McConaughey certainly leaves a lasting impression; but one has to ask the question – is the awarding of two Academy performance Awards justifiable in a mediocre film? (2014)

Les dames du Bois de Boulogne 1945 Robert Bresson (France) 3.0 Paul Bernard as rather effete-looking lover persistently pursuing Labourdette – l'amour fou; Maria Casares (from 'Enfants du paradis') as malicious-seeming upper class woman with a sly smile who as an act of revenge encourages her ex-lover Bernard to pursue the disreputable Labourdette; Elina Labourdette as pretty ex-dancer walking around in the same Robin Hood hat and soiled trench coat; Lucienne Bogaert as her mother, who promotes the relationship like a go-between. Somewhat bizarre film about a woman (Casares) jilted by her lover; to get even, she concocts a plan for him to fall in love with a dubious-reputationed girl with a complaisant mother; the developing relationship see-saws back and forth since Labourdette is uncertain what to do; but finally the Bernard and Labourdette marry, much to the triumph of Casares; in touching (over-the-top romantic) final scene, an expiring Labourdette (she has a weak heart!) almost dies, but because Bernard proclaims that he doesn't care about her background, that he will love her always, and pleads with her to stay with him, she revives to say softly "I will stay". With a repetitive string soundtrack, the film is often rather dull; the scenes which could have been dramatized cinematically are filmed in matter-of-fact way with a dissolve after the final statement (end of paragraph). All the main actors are competent – Casares stands out with her under-the-surface maliciousness – but the often stylized lines (written by Jean Cocteau) never evoke a dramatic gasp. The theme – a woman plays heartlessly with the amorous emotions of others in order to wreak revenge on the man who jilted her – seems derived from the far more complex vengeance machinations of 'Les Liaisons dangereuses'. Some unexpected expressionist outbursts – at one point Labourdette dances a peppy peasant dance in her apartment to celebrate some personal victory; in the final scene while Casares is crowing to Bernard in his parked car about the success of her plot, he keeps putting the car in forward and reverse to get away from her, but each time he returns to a point where she is lording it over him through the driver's side window, thus establishing her superiority. Understanding the film depends on familiarity with the values of the French upper classes and the degree to which they would be shocked by one of their own marrying a former "grue" (slut or hooker). The film could have developed more graphically the conflict inside the heart of Bernard, who seems like an inconsequential weak-willed playboy, but who turns out to be a true lover. (2011)

Damsels in Distress 2011 White Stillman 2.5 Greta Gerwig appealing as well-spoken, Queen Bee girl at the head of a do-good group of girls in an East Coast college; Carrie MacLemore as one of Greta's faithful followers who doesn't talk much; Megalyn Echikunwoke as another acolyte but this time with a British accent; Analeigh Tipton as pretty, willowy, bow-mouthed understudy that sometimes competes with Gerwig; Ryan Metcalf as brain-challenged fellow in one of the Roman Letter fraternities on campus; Adam Brody as cute but nondescript boyfriend of Gerwig. Indecipherable, surreal, kind of

romantic comedy that takes place in a preppy, private East College; it is set sometime perhaps in the 50s or early 60s, where there are no cell phones, no Facebook, virtually no sex or drugs, and all the girls dress in prissy Eisenhower outfits – carefully coordinated colors, usually skirts or dresses, everybody clean and neat as a whistle. The four girls in the main group are unusually public spirited: under Gerwig’s leadership they dress in perfect taste, date only guys of subnormal intelligence and achievements in the college’s fraternities because they can rouse them to greater achievements in their lives (the girls call them “doufi”; one guy, who has never learned the colors of the rainbow, takes classes to remedy his problem but makes little progress); they staff a suicide center, where they distribute donuts to clients, recommend jazz dancing and performing 30s show tune numbers, and push hard for better hygiene for the evil-smelling male undergraduates (the girls pass out free bars of soap). All the shapeless narrative takes place on an idyllic, verdant campus featuring an ensemble of Greek Revival buildings (the film was shot at the Snug Harbor city park on Staten Island). The girls talk non-stop exchanging opinions and observations about many subjects; they purloin one another’s boyfriends; Tipton strikes up a relationship with a French (?) guy that claims he is Cathar and that he is thus against “procreative sex” and will have to do it from the “back” and not the front; when they hear about it, all of Tipton’s friends of course wrinkle their noses in extreme distaste. The film ends with a spirited, if not particularly well-performed rendition of a Gershwin song in the college’s lush gardens and the beginning of a dance craze called the “Sambola!”, which includes steps from practically every other dance form. There are some funny, semi-satirical scenes, e.g., the girls complaining about the guys’ body odor, the stupid Education guys pretending to commit suicide by jumping off a one-floor balcony, the frat guys not even being able to recognize the basic colors (the traffic light is blue). Charming, whimsical film featuring attractive young people, especially the women. But the film floats in a fantasy world of pretend perfection with a weak narrative line and no apparent point. (2012)

Dan in Real Life 2007 Peter Hedges 3.0 Steve Carell as newspaper advice columnist who is single parent of three teenage – or almost—daughters; Juliette Binoche as elegant and charming lady that he meets in a book store somewhere on the Atlantic Coast (shore of Maryland?); John Mahoney as the avuncular dad of Carell and his two brothers; Diane Wiest as the equally level-headed mother; Dane Cook rather annoying as the brother of Steve – his girlfriend is Binoche; Brittany Robertson as teenage daughter in love who makes some waves. Down-the-line romantic comedy that has widower Carell meet Binoche, then be inhibited in pursuing her since she is his brother’s girlfriend staying with them all in the family house, but finally breaking out, overcoming all misunderstandings and hesitations and wedding her in the end. Film takes place in a culture reminiscent of a Woody Allen – beautiful home with lots of fireplaces, craftsman furniture, and lawns sloping down to the beach, well populated family gatherings, charming, attractive, and sophisticated individual characters, analysis of affairs of the heart, etc. Family has rules about permissible topics of conversation, but is happy and playful – teasing one another, competitive crosswords, touch football, amateur night, etc. Some tension and humor generated by Carell’s inability to tell his brother that he is in love with his girlfriend and then the two potential lovers exchanging soulful and knowing looks. Film is funniest and most observant about the relationship between the single dad and his three hormone-influenced girls: Robertson is particularly good at showing the ravages wrought by teenage love. Carell as always is lovable and understated in dealing with his dilemmas, perhaps the least of which was his continual run-ins with a local policeman. (2007)

A Dangerous Method 2011 David Cronenberg (Canada) 3.0 Michael Fassbender as elegant, composed version of Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung; Viggo Mortensen sharp, charismatic, somewhat avuncular, and unrecognizable as Sigmund Freud; Keira Knightley out of her element as wild, hysterical Jung patient who later becomes his lover and a psychiatrist in her own right; Vincent Cassel as wild man therapist who thinks psychological salvation comes from release of all sexual inhibitions; Sarah Gadon elegant and beautiful as Jung’s wealthy, aristocratic wife. Confusing, although often interesting, film that can’t decide what its theme is. Set mostly in Switzerland, the film’s environment is relaxed, beautiful, and serene – airy, sun-filled, aristocratic lodgings set in leafy parks, book-lined studies of elegantly dressed professionals, conversations on board an graceful pleasure boat on Lake Constance (it appears), etc. The most interesting aspects of the film are the psychological issues raised in the interactions of the

four psychoanalysts and the relationship between Jung and Freud. Jung starts off as Freud's acolyte and heir-apparent, but they have a progressive falling out through the film over Jung's lack of candor about his sexual relationship with Knightley (an obvious no-no among psychoanalysts), over Freud's objections to Jung's dabbling in "mysticism" (the subject is undeveloped), and over Freud's concealed arrogance – his unwillingness to agree to disagree with Jung apparently because he doesn't want to "lose his authority". The essential theoretical difference is what to do with the human sexual instinct: Freud is of course the conservative who believes the id has to be contained in order to serve the interests of the species and of civilization, while Cassel advocates complete liberation of the id at whatever cost, and Jung seems to represent a middle ground – he remains married to Gadon, valuing her money and the domesticity of marriage and his children, while finding moderate outlet in having a mistress (usually a female student). Knightley's performance is very distracting, in fact coming close to ruining the first part of the film: she debuts with wild spasms, shrieks, and jaw-jutting grimaces, presumably to convey the degree of neurosis caused by sexual dysfunction – she was sexually abused by her father; during her affair with Jung, she asks for a little masochistic pleasure, which Jung delivers by first spanking her and then paddling her, both of them a little ridiculous if they are meant to convey sexual savagery; Jung tells her later that she was the deepest love of his life, but then all calms down in the last scene where she appears contentedly pregnant and married to some Russian. A beautiful, seductive actress would have better served Cronenberg than the slender body, bulging eyes, and vampire-like teeth of Knightley. The film ends suspended ambiguously: Freud is out of the picture, Knightley returns to Russia with her husband, and Jung continues married to his wife, enjoying his young girlfriend, and destined to a brilliant future as psychoanalysis' brightest star. One supposes we will never decide exactly what to do with that pesky id. (2012)

The Danish Girl 2015 Tom Hooper (Britain) 2.5 (Excessively) exquisite drama about a man – Einar – that stops at nothing to become a woman – Lili – and about the wife that loves and supports him. Eddie Redmayne pulling out all the stops to convince us that he is feminine; Alicia Vikander (AA supporting (?) actress) moving as Redmayne's wife, who remains painfully true to her beloved as he leaves her; Amber Heard gleeful as Vikander's friend; Ben Whishaw as rather colorless Henrik, who falls in love with Lili; the dreamily handsome Matthias Schoenaerts, who becomes Gerda's new male anchor when Einar leaves her. Film is set in 1920s Copenhagen, where the artist couple – Einar is a landscape painter and Gerda a figure painter – is set in the midst of repressed early-20th-century bourgeois society. The film is exquisitely photographed – soft colors reflecting the pale light of Copenhagen, lovely, mildly Bohemian costumes, gorgeous sweeping views of Paris and Dresden with the rivers always flowing, with every piece of furniture, every fold of every costume tastefully arranged. Einar and Gerda have a happy marriage: no children, alternately supportive and rival artists, playful sexual relationship. The scenario convincingly charts Einar's transition from male and husband to a different person, a woman that insists that her new identity is irresistible and that she must leave her male self behind and embrace her femininity. Sorry, Gerda, I cannot stay; the force is too powerful. Vikander eloquently evokes the pathos of her situation – supporting Lili's emergence, but still loving her husband and much grieved by her abandonment. Redmayne's performance is a kind of technical exercise in artificial femininity – eyes cast down, head turned to one side, the eternal Mona Lisa smile on her lips, sashaying gait that she learned from observing other women; he makes an attractive woman. His performance bears some resemblances to his award-winning take on the severely handicapped Hawking in 2014's 'The Theory of Everything'. Despite the danger, Lili insists obsessively on a complete sex change operation – the first ever – that causes her death at the end of the film. Gerda however will not have to grieve for long, since she has found her comfort in Schoenaerts, with whom she pays a sentimental tribute to the memory of Lili in the film's last scene perched high above a very un-Danish fjord with Lili's silk scarf flying off in the wind. The film certainly appeals to proponents of gender transformation, although some are annoyed by having a "cis"-gendered guy play Lili. The emphasis on poetry and visual beauty drains much of the energy out of the film, as if the author is trying to make the difficult subject more generally acceptable. (2016)

Dans la maison 2012 François Ozon (France; based on a Spanish play)) 2.5 Fabrice Luchini as frustrated lycée professor interested in stories and the writing of his only gifted student, Claude; Kristen Scott Thomas as also frustrated wife of Luchini – she runs a failing art gallery; Ernst Umhauer as

manipulative 16-year-old drawn to adventure and role-playing in the affairs of others; Emmanuelle Seigner as bored housewife interested only in interior decoration but possibly open for sexual adventure. Intriguing, often confusing film set in a French lycée and in middle class surroundings about a French professor who encourages one of his students, Claude, to write about the experiences he is having with a fellow student, Rapha, and his family: the father, who is his son's "friend", and his mother, who according to Claude, has "the odor of a French middle class woman" and whom he is interested in pursuing. The film progresses with visualizations of the episodes that Claude has written and that Luchini is now reading to his wife. Because Luchini is interested in writing (his own novel was unsuccessful and "worthless" according to the author) and he encourages Claude to branch out and shape the story according to good writing principles, it is difficult to know whether the viewer is witnessing the actual experiences of Claude and his family or whether Claude has invented much of what we see; it is sometimes one and sometimes the other. As the story progresses, Claude (in actuality or in fiction) becomes more arrogant and presumptuous in his interfering in the lives of others, spying on the private lives of Rapha's family, aiding in the public humiliation of Rapha, and eventually seducing Seigner to save her from the boring brute of her husband; the story line of the film gets a bit out of hand when Rapha worms his way into Luchini's and Thomas' household, seduces Thomas (very difficult to see why she would yield), motivating her to leave her husband, certainly an unexpected decision despite the frustrations in her life. Meanwhile, Luchini's life goes completely to ruin when he loses his teaching job for helping Rapha cheat on a Math exam. The last scene has the temporarily estranged friends meet on a park bench, where they reconcile, and looking at an apartment block with exposed picture windows, they observe the different instances of suffering and comical humanity that they can manipulate presumably for more fun in creating stories. The film has an interesting mix of comedy (e.g. the picture of Rapha's jock- and China-obsessed dad or of the twins that own Thomas' failing art gallery), creepiness (Claude's manipulation of other people, Luchini's precipitous decline), and interesting issues (what goes into creating an effective piece of fictional writing). It works well until near the end, when some developments defy credibility. (2014)

Dark City 1998 Alex Proyas 3.0 Nightmare future dystopia with décor reminiscent of 'Bat Man,' 'Metropolis,' and 'Blade Runner.' Strangers, dying out because they have only collective memories, have taken over earth; obvious prototype for 'The Matrix.' Has thriller elements with Rufus Sewell trying to figure out who he is and pursued by the white faced 'Nosferatu' Strangers. Strangers want to find out about human 'souls;' they trade memories among subjects in human experiments (mad scientist Kiefer Sutherland) and watch results. Rufus doesn't know who he is. Rather thrilling as he stands up for his species against evil. Turns out his wife really isn't (lovely Jennifer Connelly); but end Rufus uses his acquired powers to create his beloved 'memory' 'Shell Beach,' and places Jennifer there to meet him for the first time, so that they can live together as man and wife, just as he had 'remembered.' Moving. (2004)

The Dark Corner 1946 Henry Hathaway 3.0 Lucille Ball in straight, humorous, wise-cracking role as faithful supportive good girl secretary of Stevens; Mark Stevens as not too smart p.i. in New York with a checkered past in California – he often doesn't seem to know what to do; Clifton Webb fresh out of 'Laura' as witty, snide, snobby upper crust art dealer who is very jealous of his pretty young wife; William Bendix as tough guy we think is working for Kreuger but actually for Webb; Kurt Kreuger as pretty, blond, hunk boy who is stepping out with Webb's wife; Cathy Downs as pretty, fairly glamorous wife of Webb (she will be Clementine in Ford's film the following year). Effective action thriller with noir elements set in New York. One story line has Stevens aware that he is being framed for something . . . , and he sets out to find out what it is with the help of the ever loyal Ball; the other plot line has Webb plotting revenge against Kreuger for his affair with Downs; he wants to trick Stevens into murdering him and have him take the fall. The narrative cuts back and forth between the two story lines: Bendix murders Krueger, pins it on Stevens, but then the vicious Webb pushes Bendix out of a 31-story window to his death; the film ends with Stevens confronting Webb and narrowly escaping death when a revenge-bent Downs shoots her husband several times; Stevens and Ball will live happily ever after. The film is not really a pure film noir – there is little feeling that the protagonist is doomed to destruction – after all, there is a happy ending, there is no *femme fatale* – both Ball and Downs are pretty and positive,

and there is no flashback or voiceover narration. The cinematography however is very noir – plenty of dark rooms, dark streets, deep shadows, especially around Stevens’ office and in the apartment where Kreuger is murdered. The restoration print is crisp and clear. The film often borrows from Hitchcock – an innocent protagonist and his girlfriend are in trouble and they pursue their own investigation without the help of the police until they emerge in the clear. Stevens and Ball are easy to like and to cheer for, and the snotty and violent Webb is easy to hate, even with his Waldo Lydecker-like learned witticisms, e.g., “The enjoyment of art is the only remaining ecstasy that is neither illegal or immoral.” Lightweight, but thoroughly enjoyable fare. (2011)

Dark Horse 2011 Todd Solondz 2.5 Justin Bartha as overweight, superficially cheery but fundamentally angry, foul-mouthed loser nerd that lives with his parents and wanders around town in his yellow Hummer collecting toys (appears twice in *Toyz-R-Us*); Selma Blair taciturn, forgetful, depressive young woman zonked out on medications also living with her parents; Mia Farrow as passive, vacant minded woman that dotes on her son (Farrow seems to have had a lip job); Jordan Gelber as clueless relative that provides a nice body for cougar Murphy; Donna Murphy as dad’s secretary, who comes across initially as conservative, but turns out in what might be a fantasy sequence to be a swinging cougar that drives a Porsche; Christopher Walken apparently non-responsive but subliminally angry as Richard’s blank-faced dad; Aasif Mandvi as Blair’s toothy friend Mahmoud. Disappointing film from misanthrope Solondz but without the over-the-top excesses of his earlier films. Richard is a loser with anger problems blaming everybody else for the bad things that happen to him; he meets a girl with her own severe problems (Is this acting?), and they make a spontaneous decision to get married (which however never happens in the film). The interest in the film lies in Solondz’s unique misanthropic observations: Richard – “Life’s a cesspool. Everyone cares only for himself.” Blair – “My friend Mahmoud says I should try to stop cutting my wrists.” When a character decides to be sincere, she becomes brutal, as when Mom says to Bartha: “Everybody knows: your brother turned out to be a success and you’re a failure.” Bartha’s parents are passive and non-responsive, Walken filled with angry disappointment about his son, and Farrow desperately clinging to him and protecting him in her co-dependence. They are able to deliver an amusing sequence when Blair’s parents make the obligatory pre-wedding visit and – in Claude Chabrol style – the two couples can think of no subject aside from traffic and freeway construction to talk about. The end of the film becomes completely non-sequential and difficult to follow: Bartha meets Murphy, who pursues men cynically in her impossibly chic home with a view (the character has two lives or is it a fantasy sequence?); then back to *Toyz-R-Us* where he asks the gay-acting clerk where he can find his wife; then to a hospital room where Bartha, who apparently has lost both legs in an auto accident (huh?), lies near comatose in a bed, but he is able nevertheless to grab Murphy and give her an aggressive erotic kiss...; before the scene switches to a cemetery where Bartha is being buried; and then finally back to Walken’s office, where Murphy is sitting blank-faced but there is no trace of Bartha. It is difficult to know if there is some hope for change or will things just continue as before. Without the trademark outrageous excesses (masturbation, child molestation, etc.) the film fails to make much of an impact. (2013)

Dark Knight 2008 Christopher Nolan 2.5 Latest blockbuster super hero movie with an attempt at theme and existentialist Angst shot in dark and shadowy tones. Christian Bale calm but beset by *Zerrissenheit* as Batman torn between his positive and base instincts and ready to get out of the game; Heath Ledger literally steals the show with his sneering, slurping, mugging campaign to bring utter chaos to Gotham; Aaron Eckhart photogenic and cleft-chinned as the district attorney of Gotham determined to bring decency to the city and to become a hero himself in the process; Gary Oldman unrecognizable as police lieutenant in charge of autonomous investigation unit determined to nab the mob leaders and the Joker; Maggie Gyllenhaal as not-very-glamorous assistant to Eckhart and who is the love interest torn between the DA and Batman and over whom we cry when she is killed toward the end of the film. Overwhelmingly loud and hyperactive sixth installment to the Batman series. The Joker reappears and provides much of the color. Script benefits from Batman’s inner suffering, Eckhart’s ambiguous ambition, and the Joker’s cackling and sneering love for excitement and fun (he can’t do without Batman because he loves the competition so much) and his Hitler-like determination to bring chaos and destruction to Gotham. Batman would like to retire and settle down

with Gyllenhaal, but unfortunately she is in love with Eckhart (or is she?); he also is seen as a kind of out-of-control vigilante, and he is torn by his devotion to virtue and his desire to rid Gotham of the Joker and the mob, so that when he catches up with Joker, he cannot bring himself to kill him. Any attempt at thematic development and psychological penetration, is deafened and battered however by the stentorian soundtrack (how many explosions, car crashes, and fist thumps is it possible to cram into one film?) and by the non-stop, lengthy action sequences, which are admittedly expert and exciting (the best is the high-tech rescue of Batman and his prisoner from atop a skyscraper in Hong Kong), but which take up too much of the 2:32 running time and batter the viewer to a passive, unresponsive pulp. Seems such a shame to put so much talent and money into a film intended only to excite adolescents in every known culture on the globe and to rake in mounds of money as big as the one the Joker burns (with the Chinese money launderer tied to a chair on top). The film seems to suggest a country/city beset by a serious crisis of corruption and lawlessness. (2008)

The Dark Mirror 1946 Robert Siodmark; writer Nunnally Johnson 2.5 Thriller about investigating which twin murdered a doctor in his New York apartment. Since the quality of the video was poor, it was difficult to track visual touches in the cinematography. Olivia de Havilland plays both the twins – Terry the more outgoing of the two, and Ruth the quieter and more passive; Lew Ayres as a psychologist, a kind of avuncular George Sanders personality; Thomas Mitchell in typical role as good-humored police detective commissioned to investigate the crime. Film has interesting premise, since a witness clearly placed de Havilland at the scene of the crime, but another witness placed her in another part of New York. Mitchell discovers that she is twins; the legal conundrum is that although he knows that one of the twins committed the crime, he cannot figure out which one, since the twins refuse to testify against one another; he thus cannot arrest them and prosecute the crime. When Mitchell is stumped, he turns to psychologist Ayres, who conducts psychological tests on both of the twins – Rorschach ink blot tests and word association. In the process he falls in love with Ruth and decides that the more aggressive Terry is the murderer; she is paranoid and dangerous, extremely jealous of her sister, and she murdered the doctor when she imagined that Ruth was moving in on her relationship with him. The film plays with the ambiguity of the twins' identity; often the viewer loses track of which is which. The confusing finale plays with the confusion of identity. Apparently interviewing Ruth, whom he has kissed, Ayres identifies her as really Terry; a phone call from Mitchell at Terry's apartment reports that Ruth has committed suicide; when back at her apartment, Terry histrionically accuses the (apparently dead) Ruth of the murder; but looking through the "dark mirror", the viewer sees Ruth entering the room; Mitchell has lied and set up a trap; the mystery is solved. An unrealistically happy ending, as Ruth, apparently not disturbed that the twin sister to whom she has been attached for decades has been led to jail and probably "the chair", snuggles up to her newfound love Ayres. An entertaining, if sometimes confusing and frustrating, Hollywood studio thriller in the style of 'The Spiral Staircase' (also directed by Siodmark). (2016)

Dark Passage 1947 Delmer Daves (Warners) 3.0 Humphrey Bogart his usual laconic, sympathetic self as escapee from San Quentin prison – he undergoes plastic surgery to escape detection; Lauren Bacall, relaxed, a little sultry as idealistic young woman that picks him up in Marin County and then helps hide him from the police; Bruce Bennett as Bob, one of Bacall's suitors; Agnes Moorehead as Madge, unsavory woman, who, it turns out, is guilty of the murder for which Bogart is sent to prison; Houseley Stevenson as shady doctor that operates on Bogart's face. Mediocre thriller enlivened by the presence of two (connected) stars and thanks to a marvelously clear print by a fabulous tour of Marin County and San Francisco in the late 40s. Film is filled with "lame" elements: a plot that starts off intriguing but is not developed – Madge, who ends up guilty for the murder of Bogart's wife (why he went to prison) and Bogart's friend, has murky and confusing motives for the killings; a scene in which Bogart tries to wring a confession from Moorehead rings radically false; a subplot featuring a young guy in a convertible (Clifton Young with the crooked smile) turns dull when he reveals that he is just trying to shake down Bacall for part of her fortune; the two lovers ending up united in a Peruvian coastal town is treated like an afterthought. Bright and vivid shots of San Francisco – on and under the Golden Gate Bridge, in the Presidio, up and down streets leading straight to the bay, Bacall's trendy one-bedroom apartment, climbing steps up what appears to be Telegraph Hill – all remind one of 'Vertigo': Hitchcock's screenwriter must have consulted this film extensively when writing his screenplay. The scene in which Bogart is led to Stevenson for the surgery –

craggy face and disquieting manner about his being kicked out of the local medical society – is intriguing, as is Moorehead's plunge out of the 10th-story window of her apartment and the twisting fall of her body to the pavement below. Interesting that Bogart's character is not viewed by the camera until his facelift – Daves indulges the 40s' interest in first-person camera allowing us to see only the subject's sleeves and hands – but as soon as Bacall takes off Bogey's bandages, voilà! There he is and Baby is hopelessly in love. Script – plot and characters – need serious reworking, but still an enjoyable classic film. (2014)

Dark Victory 1939 Edmund Goulding (Warners) 3.0 Bette Davis in usual show-stopping performance afflicted with cancer and – unusual for Hollywood – dying in the end; George Brent as little jowly (but wearing good tweedy suits) as her noble brain surgeon who falls in love with her and marries her to comfort her and to help her die a good death – brave and contented; Geraldine Fitzgerald as Davis' faithful friend supporting her throughout the movie and promising Davis in the end to stay with Brent for the rest of his life (?); Humphrey Bogart in pre-1941 role as horse trainer with an Irish brogue adding a little working class color to the film; Ronald Reagan as wealthy hanger-on (great slicked back hair!) who doesn't have much to do and is drunk much of his screen time. Classic Bette Davis soap opera set among the horse-loving idle rich in the East. No doubt that Davis is terrific as she first tries to avoid the subject of her illness (obvious brain tumor), and then struggles with how she is going to handle her own death. The film's treatment of cancer reflects the values of the era: the word 'cancer' is never mentioned, just phrases like 'reoccurrence inevitable' and 'prognosis negative'. The progress of the disease leaves no physical trace – she remains just as fresh and pretty as ever – except for a few hours of blindness just before she dies. When the high-spirited Davis first suspects that she has a problem, she refuses to talk about it or face it; Doctor Brent chooses not to tell her she has cancer when he finds out; when the two live together in Vermont, they agree never to mention the disease, and when the time has come to die, Davis insists that Brent not be with her so that she can die in acceptance and dignity (as she passes into sleep, Max Steiner's music, usually low key in this film, breaks out with harps and heavenly female choirs). Some nice poetic passages in the dialogue, such as Davis' remarks about the passage of time when she hears a song about it, and her statement at the end that, despite her growing blindness, she and Brent have won a 'dark victory' in their trip toward the light. Despite the over-the-top soapy manipulateness, the film's emotions are genuine, and it is fun to see Reagan play the society drunk and Bogart the Irish horse trainer in his pre-'Falcon' role. (2008)

Dark Water 2002 Hideo Nakata (Japan) 3.0 Hitomi Kuroki shy, pretty and frail as recently divorced mother trying to survive in a haunted apartment in Tokyo; Rio Konno adorable and vulnerable as her five-year old daughter; Yu Tokui as hand-wringing, ineffectual real estate agent; Isao Yatsu as incompetent, disquieting building manager. Atmospheric, often scary ghost movie set in run-down apartment building in large Japanese city. Kuroki is recently divorced and battling her insensitive ex-husband for custody of her endearing little daughter; they take an apartment in an ugly, run-down building; their own apartment is comfortable enough, but the corridors are empty, bare, discolored, and deserted and there is a water tank on top of the roof, where Konno often goes, that is constantly leaking and described as "disgusting"; a large leak spot appears on the ceiling of Kuroki's apartment and her requests to have it repaired are sabotaged by the incompetent maintenance staff; meanwhile Kuroki has glimpses of a little girl in a yellow raincoat and carrying a red shoulder bag who is peering at her and apparently sometimes playing with Konno; Kuroki alternates between panicked and running to protect her daughter against this unnamed menace; the climactic scene occurs in the bathroom where the bathtub spontaneously fills with black (dark) water, and discolored arms attempt to pull Konno in; she survives. But when Kuroki is subsequently attacked by the corpse in the building elevator, she unexpectedly responds with maternal tenderness for the abandoned (although severely decomposed) child and is then carried off by the runaway elevator; a postscript has 16-year-old Konno returning to the old apartment, where she discovers her mother, who tells her that she still loves her but that they cannot live together, as the ghost girl in the yellow raincoat flits in the background; Konno walks away disconsolately. Film is well made and fun to watch. It moves quite slowly and expends a lot of energy establishing situation (the struggle with the divorced husband for custody of the child) and environment (the run-down apartment building, the constant rain and the leaks inside the building). Kuroki is at the center of almost every scene; her pretty face and slight figure make for an effective focus of vulnerability and sympathy in the viewer, as does the charming little Konno. Kuroki is the embodiment of maternal love and

concern, and the end of the film unexpectedly – and somewhat cruelly – transfers the object of her affection to the dead ghost girl, whom she apparently decides to protect for the rest of eternity. The ghost girl appearing briefly in several scenes dressed in the yellow raincoat is reminiscent of Nicholas Roeg's 'Don't Look Back', in which Julie Christie and Donald Sutherland try to track a child in a red coat through the byways of Venice. An attempt to connect Kuroki's experience to her own abandonment as a child and to suggest that she is mentally ill is not sufficiently developed. A good show whose slow pace could try a viewer's patience. (2011)

David Copperfield 1935 George Cukor (MGM; produced by David O. Selznick sometime after Thalberg had been demoted from production chief to the head of his own production unit) 3.0
Freddie Bartholomew his usually annoying, overacting, excessively cute self as boy David; Frank Lawton scrubbed squeaky clean as the adult David who barely cries when his wife dies; Basil Rathbone deliciously stern and villainous as the stepfather Mr. Murdstone; Edna May Oliver stern-faced and charismatic as the kind-hearted, no-nonsense Aunt Betsy; Lionel Barrymore pretty much wasted as the fisherman brother of Peggoty; Jessie Ralph as the kindly, although limited Nurse Peggoty; Maureen O'Sullivan as the pretty, bright and vapid Nora who seems more attached to her lapdog than her husband David and who really doesn't mind dying – because she was such an unsatisfactory wife (?), perhaps Davey is better off without her...; Roland Young as a dull and ineffective Uriah Heep, who pronounces “‘umble” too many times and just doesn't arouse the required anger and humor from his audience; W.C. Fields entertaining and attention-getting as Micawber wearing his distinctive ill-fitting clothes, using hundred-dollar word such as ‘peregrinations’, ‘machinations’, and augury’, and getting a lot of comic mileage out of unpaid debts. An often entertaining, but generally too cleanly scrubbed version of the Dickens classic. The film maintains its popularity probably because of its impeccable production values (acting, script, cast) and the endearingly memorable performance of W.C. Fields. Obviously no expense was spared – costumes, sets, even special effects (the sea storm scene), top MGM stars – but the film lacks genuine feeling and drama, since all remains on the cheerful surface. Rathbone and his sister (Violet Kemble Cooper) are effective in their inexplicable cruelty à la Dickens; Edna May Oliver always livens up a scene; and W. C. Fields successfully adapts his manner to the character of Micawber. But overall hard to get caught up in the rags-to-riches melodrama since so many scenes are dull, maudlin, and sentimental – Davey is so mistreated by his stepfather; Micawber has such a kind heart; Dora is the perfect little wife and she is so pretty on her deathbed (with soft music playing on the soundtrack); and against the backdrop of a beautiful sunset David makes his declaration to Agnes, who reports to him that Dora had given her permission to marry David after her death. You can just hear the late 30s MGM factory cranking this one out, this time commanded by D.O. Selznick. Cukor does a good job making the memorable Dickens characters come to life. A disappointment with some memorable moments and performances; and historically noteworthy as an outstanding example of the crowd-pleasing well-financed MGM Hollywood style with a happy ending. (2008)

A Day at the Races 1937 Sam Wood 4.0 Groucho as Dr. Hackenbush, who is really a horse doctor; Chico, and Harpo; Allan Jones with cloyingly sweet tenor voice spends most of his time smiling; Maureen O'Sullivan cute, pretty shallow with fake accent as owner of the Florida sanitarium; Margaret Dumont as foolish wealthy hypochondriac patient in the sanitarium, as usual in love with Groucho (with her clueless smile); Douglas Dumbrille as the heavy putting pressure on O'Sullivan to sell the sanitarium; Sig Ruman as Viennese doctor with bulging eyes. One of the very best Marx Brothers comedy; perhaps they benefited from the first-class MGM treatment that Thalberg gave them. Takes place in a sanitarium and on the race track under the sunny skies of Florida. Plot is a throwaway: will the lovers, Allan and O'Sullivan, get over their spate and live happily ever after (of course they do), and will the couple with the help of the Marx Brothers and the horse Hi Hat be able to save the sanitarium from the clutches of the evil Dumbrille (of course they do). The Brothers are of course the stars of the show; they have funnier and better developed long comedy sketches than in their other films. 1) The long horse in code gag, in which Chico persists in selling code book after code book to Groucho, is subtle and long, but ingenious and funny, depending on Chico's trickster/con man and Groucho's (a bit incredible) gullibility and long-suffering patience. 2) Phone call gag is hilarious depending entirely on Groucho's silly imitation of various voices (with Southern accents) and the gullibility and frustration of the sanitarium's business

manager. 3) The seduction scene with sexy Esther Muir is perhaps the funniest with Groucho's put-down of distinguished pronunciation ("Thank Yah!"), Harpo and Chico jumping on the girl, Groucho's good-humored frustration that seduction is getting nowhere, chaos introduced by the dogs and then Chico and Harpo hanging the wall paper. 4) The physical examination of Margaret Dumont where the boys return several times to sterilize their hands, they attempt to shave the woman, they confuse the words "pulse" and purse" (Harpo takes Dumont's purse instead of her pulse) and also the words "x-ray" and extra", and they finally ride out of the examination room on their horse. 5) The horse race scene, which is more exciting than it is funny (Hi Hat jockeyed by Harpo must win the race in order to save the clinic): the boys fill the racetrack with parked cars, they change the fence to make the horses run off the track, and they encourage Hi Hat (who cannot abide the sight of Douglas Dumbrille) to run faster by putting the voice of the Dumbrille on the loud speaker. A lot of irrelevant music, some of which is bad – although smoothly performed, Allan's extremely drippy ballads, the ballet, the song by the white vocalist –, and some of it pretty good – the long number featuring Harpo on the flute and the performances of the African-American Ivie Anderson and the Crinoline Choir who stomp around with a rousing version of "All God's Chillun Got Rhythm". Groucho's and Chico's one-liners, bad puns, and insult humor don't seem up to the quality of some of the previous films; Harpo's horny, hyper-excitable pantomime remains amusing. A delightful viewing experience in which the Marx Brothers continue to play on their subversive demolition of American behavior and institutions even within the tamer confines of the MGM studio. (2010)

The Day the Earth Stood Still 1951 Robert Wise 3.0 Michael Rennie, Patricia Neal, Hugh Marlowe, Sam Jaffe. 'A' pix about fellow from another planet, Klaatu, who comes with his fearsome robot, Gord, to earth to warn us about our ways: having entered the atomic age, we need to stop bickering among ourselves and learn to live in peace with others. Final session with all leaders of the world in which Klaatu tells us we must solve our issues or we will be destroyed; and then he flies off. Seems to suggest a kind of United Nations with enforcement power. Performances generally good; Klaatu as solemn and Patricia Neal as sympathetic and helpful, and becoming disillusioned with boyfriend Marlowe as he fails to show sympathy for Klaatu's mission. Sam Jaffe as obvious Albert Einstein figure, wise scientist who instantly understands what Klaatu is driving at and decides to help him. Lots of public shots of people worried, all cars stopped in cities across the world, policemen and soldiers staked out looking for aliens, etc. Special effects pretty primitive – basic, Ed Wood-type flying saucers, Rennie wears cheesy suits, soldiers look stupid as Gord dematerializes their guns in their hands, etc.

The Day of the Jackal 1971 Fred Zinnemann 2.5 Edward Fox strikingly handsome, thin, with blond hair and bad teeth as a natty would-be assassin who somehow manages never to smile or frown; Michael Lonsdale as expressionless as everyone else as the French police inspector put in charge of tracking down the Jackal; Delphine Seyrig as a French baroness living in a charming chateau, the Jackal's bed partner, and one of his murder victims. Rather dull, documentary-style film that chronicles step-by-step the minute preparations that Fox makes to assassinate DeGaulle and the equally exacting efforts of the French and British police to stop him. Zinnemann recounts in deadpan style almost everything Fox has to do – do research, procure false papers, buy a special concealable rifle, evade the French police on numerous occasions (involving changing cars several times, murdering several people, and staying one step ahead of the authorities); when he finally positions himself in an upper-story window to shoot the president during a Liberation Day celebration, he misses DeGaulle's head when the latter bends down to kiss a medal recipient on the cheek (a little puff just beyond the target shows that the mission is failed), and then the Jackal is shot dead by Lonsdale who bursts in before he can reload and take another shot. The film reads like a straightforward chronicle with virtually no acting – since everyone just walks and drives through the frame, the viewer never elucidates questions such as why Seyrig has sex with Fox and appears to like him, what were the latter's feelings when he murdered her (!), what were the feelings of the French official who committed suicide because he leaked information to his traitor mistress, what happened to the informant at the end, etc. Seyrig as the only female character in the film is there to provide only a little sex and glamor. The funniest line of the film comes when someone

says of De Gaulle: "At ten he rekindles the eternal flame" (Vincent Canby), which someone must have extinguished before the film began. The film is somewhat interesting as a kind of how-to manual on performing a political assassination. It is shot in picturesque color; and the shots of the different European locales – Britain, Italy, the French countryside, and Paris – are spectacular and beautiful. With a more imaginative use of mise-en-scène and dialogue, the film could have been a lot more interesting. (2011)

Days of Heaven 1978 Terence Malick 3.0 Richard Gere only mildly annoying as rather sophisticated migrant worker with a quick temper, Brooke Adam elfin, not conventionally pretty as his lover (poses as his sister) who marries another man for what she hopes will be his money, Sam Shepard as the shy, lonely wheat farm owner who falls in love with Adam, Linda Manz as early teenage sister of Gere – she narrates the movie in folksy manner reminiscent of Sissy Spacek in 'Badlands'. Very arty, cinematography intensive drama about a love triangle between Gere, Adam, and Shepard that ends in the death of Shepard (a screwdriver in his chest) and of Gere face down in a Montana (?) stream after being chased down by the police. Film has a dramatically artificial feel throughout. We focus on ravishing views of the environment – (Canadian) wheat fields rippling in the wind, ecstatically beautiful sunrises and sunsets, trains cutting across the prairie looking as if they had just come out of the computer, handsome migrant workers sitting on top of the freight cars and jumping off when they arrive at their destination, Shepard's gothic house sitting existentially alone on top of a hill surrounded by open space and the fields, sudden arrival of two biplanes buzzing over the house and containing two clowns who entertain the natives (one automatically asks what is the symbolism of their visit), countless shots of wild turkeys, other birds, rabbits skulking in the wheat fields, coyotes, dogs, unfettered horses, and then the locusts munching on the wheat stalks, special effects scenes of swarms of locusts and then long sequence of the fields burning as humans try ineffectually to stop the invasion – all done in ravishing color and detail. The drama seems placed artificially in this self-conscious environment; but the images are extremely beautiful and the drama holds your attention. Film has an open ending with Adams pursuing her love of dancing and Manz escaping from a boarding school and going off down the railroad tracks God knows where. The mixing of genres and styles in the film can confuse the viewer. The film's consideration of the condition of immigrant labor and migrant farm workers seems artificial, since the emphasis is on beautiful scenery and personal tragedy.

Day-Time Wife 1939 Gregory Ratoff (20c Fox) 3.0 Tyrone Power handsome, debonair, and a bit clueless; Linda Darnell very young (16), cute as a button (she guffaws quietly like a teenager when she laughs) with long, dark hair, completely in love with her handsome husband; Warren William as lecherous businessman (he has dropped the word "should" from his vocabulary) who hires Darnell as secretary – he is however relaxed and willing to chat and move slow; Binnie Barnes as Darnell's nosy, realist girlfriend many-times married; Wendy Barrie as Power's secretary who is having an "affair" with him; Joan Davis humorous as William's secretary; Leonid Kinsky; Mildred Gover as African-American maid Melbourne. Frothy, often clever and inventive Fox comedy about (pseudo) adultery between hyper-charming young people; all of course ends well. Darnell and Power live in impossibly beautiful and monumental New York apartment with a view of the city; the young married couple sleeps in separate beds, Darnell's hair completely perfect when wakes up! He is spending time in the evening with his secretary (it turns out of course that they are not having sex); Darnell decides to get hired as a secretary to see how the boss-secretary thing works. Since she is working for William, who is one of Power's customers (he is a roofing specialist), amusing and complicated situations ensue based on which character knows what about whom while having a drink in a nightclub. All of course ends well with the young marrieds kissing at the fade out. A women's movie in which a charmingly aggressive and intelligent Darnell sets out to rope in her potentially straying husband, who most of the time seems confused and naively silly. Darnell is a natural at the age of 16: quite beautiful with wonderfully controlled adolescent stares, making it clear that she is the one in charge: never displayed better than the nightclub scene in which she dances teasingly and flirtatiously with her husband (she is there as the date of her boss William!). Film is surprisingly frank about straying husbands: William says that after "a while the wife gets to be like a solved crossword puzzle." But the wife is forgiving: Darnell says several times that if a

husband is straying, then it's the wife's fault and she has to use every trick in her woman's bag to get him back. "There's a little bit of wandering minstrel in every man. And if you don't hold his interest, he is bound to go whistling under other people's balconies." Sophisticated, Lubitsch-style sex comedy without the sex. (2011)

Dazed and Confused 1993 Richard Linklater 3.5 Jason London as nice-guy senior-to-be in Austin, Texas high school – his dilemma about whether to sign a no drugs summer policy for his football coach is the pretense for the film's thin plot; Rory Cochrane as Slater; Adam Goldberg as Mike; Marissa Ribisi memorable as the serious girl Cynthia; Wiley Wiggins in first step toward putative acting fame (he didn't make it) as naïve freshman Mitch, who ends the film with a sweet first kiss with...; Christin Hinojosa, another freshman aching for her first boyfriend; Ben Affleck funny and over-the-top in early role as O'Bannon, a sadistic senior whose only ambition is to beat the daylights out of freshmen with his specially decorated paddle; Parker Posey hilariously over-the-top as senior girl dedicated to making life miserable for incoming freshmen girls (they have to suck on pacifiers and tell senior guys that they will do anything for them); Matthew McConaughey as macho ex-student (cigarette pack rolled up in the sleeve of his t-shirt), who gives the impression of an accomplished ladies' man. Linklater's touching and amusing depiction of a day in the lives of a bunch of incoming seniors and freshmen in the bicentennial year of 1976. The film is obviously inspired by Lucas' 1973 'American Graffiti' depicting an evening in the lives of some Modesto, California graduating seniors in the mid-1960s. The film has a very thin narrative line; it aims primarily to catch the culture of average high school students in the 1970s, none of them having serious behavioral or personal problems; it seems to draw an intentional comparison with the more mainstream, goal-oriented kids that fill 'American Graffiti'. Here the characters seem lost in life, unsure where they are going, unsure of whether they have any future ("If I ever say these were the best years of my life, remind me to kill myself."), whereas the 60s kids still had faith in their society, but were just unsure about where they fitted. Linklater's kids smoke a lot of marijuana, seeming to lose themselves in the haze of smoke, camaraderie, joking, relaxed seeking after sex and connection with the opposite sex. There is no drug use, relatively little use of alcohol, and the sex stops with kissing, in one case heavy but not going any further. In contrast to most high school movies, jocks are more or less marginalized. The extensive hazing of incoming freshmen seems anachronistic and sadistic, more common in the 50s than the 70s. Entertaining, thought-provoking film. (2015)

De battre mon coeur s'est arrêté 2005 Jacques Audiard (France) 3.0 Romain Duris in charismatic performance as enforcer for shady Paris real estate deals caught in an existential conflict with his artistic side, Emmanuelle Devos in small role to establish the sexual activity of Romain's father, Neils Arestrup as the wreck of Duris' father who is murdered by a Russian mafioso at the end of the movie, Aure Atika as not very pretty but sensually heart-stopping wife of Duris' womanizing partner; she has an affair with Duris. Rather bizarre movie about a man torn between an acquisitive, self-indulgent, nervous, violent life style (he cruises through the streets of Paris listening to loud techno music in his earphones and pumping his fingers and his fist to match the rhythm) and his artistic side – his desire to become a concert pianist like his mother, who died many years ago. His father, a bloated, rundown man, who is no longer able to pursue his crooked real estate dealings and who wants to marry a fetching young woman (Devos), is his bad angel compared to his good mother. The camera cruises with Duris through the night streets of Paris; we follow him planting rats and tearing up run-down apartments to keep immigrant squatters from staying in them. Quite a bit of bloody, disfiguring violence, culminating in the shooting (?) death of the father, and then Duris' beating the Russian mafioso to a pulp on the stairs of the concert hall; also pretty steamy sex – in the heavy flirtations with Devos, and then the affair with Atika. The movie is about the existential dilemma of Duris: he is firmly caught in the lowlife lifestyle of the Paris real estate mafia, and yet he somehow wants to redeem himself by taking piano lessons from a quiet Chinese woman, and then audition for an impresario who had previously handled his mother. A fair amount of piano playing, and since Duris lacks the inner calm and firmness to play effectively, it usually causes frustration and anger (slapping the piano with his hand); when he finally gets his audition at the end, he freezes up and can barely start. The ending is ambiguous – he takes bloody revenge on the Russian for killing his father, and yet he can't kill him; it also turns out that he is now (apparently)

married to his former teacher, who has become a great concretizing success. We don't know whether it is possible to redeem him; we do know it is an uphill battle throughout the movie. (2006)

The Dead 1987 (Ireland) John Huston 3.5 Donal McCann as highly responsible, dark-haired Dublin man married to Anjelica Huston; Anjelica Huston as his reserved-acting wife; Donal Donnelly as lovable disheveled drunk Freddy; Cathleen Delany as fragile old Aunt Julia; Helena Carroll as smiling, lovable Aunt Kate; Dan O'Herlihy as the older heavy drinker, Mr. Browne (he is the only guest who is a Protestant). Endearing and sensitive, if sometime slow-moving faithful adaptation of famous Joyce short story. The first three-quarters of the short (1:16) film is essentially a dispassionate recording of a Christmas party held at the house of the two sisters, who are music teachers; only in the last 10-15 minutes does the narrative turn poetic. The party is recorded lovingly and in detail: we as viewers meet and get to know all the participants, from the heavy drinkers (including Freddy and Mr. Browne) to the man who gives a dramatic recitation of a poem that no one seems to understand and to the young woman who plays a stormy romantic piece competently on the piano, to nervous McCann nervously scanning his notes for his after-dinner speech; Aunt Julia sings a Bellini aria in a quavering, reedy voice. The beauty is in the details: the sensitive close-ups of the good-humored characters; the camera moving around the dinner table to follow the conversation and the movements of the characters (Freddy drunkenly insisting that Aunt Kate sit down and quit fussing over everyone); the bright, warm holiday lighting inside compared to the soft snow falling in the cold night when characters step outside the door; the use of music to suggest the kind-heartedness and warmth of feeling of the gathering. Only a few references to the past and to a sentimental Irish folk song suggest that something more intense is to follow. The guest with the Irish counter-tenor sings the song nostalgically and captures the attention of Anjelica Huston; and the camera follows her and her husband back to their hotel. The song has recalled her adolescent love with a young man in the West of Ireland, who was sickly and died when she was sent away to convent school; Huston is overcome with grief at the memory and confesses it willingly to her husband. The film ends with the McCann's monologue replacing the third person comment of Joyce: he feels distant from his wife, as if he hardly knows her; the snow falls over all of Ireland, cold and still; life is a sad business, with love being rare and usually in the past, and death – being placed in a cold grave – just around the corner for us all; Aunt Julia will be the next one and we will soon be standing around her dead body next to her bed lit by a votive candle; the camera focuses on the gently falling snow.... Moving apotheosis. The difficult part of the film would seem to be the lack of continuity between the party and the scene in the hotel room, but the connection is that the last soliloquy is about the human condition, and that means everyone. Wonderful set of Irish actors, and Anjelica Huston's Irish speech is flawless. Moving tribute by the dying Huston to life and his Irish roots. (2009)

Dead Again 1991 Kenneth Branagh (Britain) 3.0 Kenneth Branagh in dual role as tense composer, Roman, in 1949 Los Angeles and chirpy private investigator Mike Church in the present day; Emma Thompson also in dual role as Roman's wife, Margaret, in 1949 and an amnesiac woman, Grace, in the present; Derek Jacobi delightfully eccentric as antique dealer specializing in regressive hypnosis (but always looking for a bargain in the scenarios he invokes in his patients); Robin Williams as a defrocked psychiatrist giving Mike second opinions when he thinks he needs one; Andy Garcia; Hanna Schygulla; Wayne Knight. Baroque, over-the-top, hyper-dramatic romantic thriller dealing with the possible re-incarnation of a murderer and his victim 40 years ago. The narrative defies summary. Church is called in by a Catholic priest to determine the identity of the amnesiac Thompson. Jacobi provides regressive hypnosis, which leads to some shocking twists – Grace is the reincarnated version of a woman that was murdered apparently by her husband in 1949 in a fit of jealous rage, but then it transpires that Mike was actually Grace in the previous dimension. The suspense builds as Mike and Grace appear to fall in love, but the script tells us that Grace is here to murder Mike (Margaret) again, so that both parties are being encouraged to kill the other one before he/she gets it first. Another big twist at the end when it transpires that Jacobi is the grown-up version of a boy in the old story who actually committed the murder (shown of course in lurid flashback; Roman took the blame for the murder apparently because he wanted to be reincarnated with his wife). The final absurd scene has Mike and Grace confront one another in her apartment that is filled with pictures and sculptures of scissors; a slow-

motion depiction of the final struggle culminates in the villain Jakobi impaling himself on a scissors sculpture, and Mike and Grace clutching in a karmic embrace: they have overcome evil and jealousy and will play out together the interrupted love of Roman and Margaret several decades ago. The film is engrossing, although the viewer is always aware that the goings-on are overblown and a bit absurd. It begins with portentous Herrmann-style music as the camera pans over newspaper clippings announcing the original murder of Margaret by (supposedly) her husband. Most aspects of the film are pushed to pulpy extremes – the melodramatic soundtrack, the twists that don't seem to have an effect on the story, the constant (twelve times?) focusing on the scissors McGuffin, the puzzling plot developments (Mike and Grace both being pushed to murderous extremes by characters in the story), the bizarre final scene where there is some form of scissors in every frame, etc. Many nods to Hitchcock – from 'Rebecca' the trapped woman and the suspicions of reincarnation, from 'Psycho' the sharp-edged murder weapon wielded by "mother", from 'Family Plot' the eccentric medium (played by Julie Harris), from many films the edgy, impatient relationship between mother and son, from 'Vertigo' the lush score, dwelling on the face of the mysterious woman, the belief in the possibility of reincarnation, etc. The film is enjoyable: one senses that Branagh set out to make a lurid parody of a romantic thriller by pulling out all the stops of the medium. He succeeded. (2013)

Dead Alive 1992 Peter Jackson (New Zealand) 3.5 Timothy Balme constantly terrified and challenged as dutiful son; Diana Peñalver as his girlfriend of Hispanic origin; Elizabeth Moody as snaggle-toothed dominating mom with a dark secret in her past; Ian Watkin as the slobby Uncle Les, who actually enjoys fighting zombies. Absurdly over-the-top gore-fest zombie movie that includes satire on 50s New Zealand society and on motherhood. Mom is bit by a zombie monkey at the zoo (poorly animated) and gradually all hell breaks loose; Balme, a nerd under the thumb of his mom (shades of Hitchcock) who is beginning to fall in love with neighbor Penalver, does his best to protect his mom, even when she is infecting other people and becoming more disgusting and monstrous by the minute; matters build to a gargantuan climax when the revolting Uncle Les returns to the house with partiers (all shallow New Zealand 50s geeks), who are attacked by the zombies producing a gaggle of about 25 of them, all of whom are gradually dismembered, chopped into small pieces with their gore and blood splattered all over the walls and the floor by Balme and Penalver in the last epic 30 minutes of the film; the house then catches fire and consumes the remains in flame. Some of the first part of the film is silly – Balme taking the zombie baby for a walk in the park is a prime example (again wooden animation), and the Catholic priest going after zombies to "Kick ass for the Lord!" (he is bitten and turned into a zombie) – but as soon as the zombie combat goes into full gear, there is no holding the director back! Film is always on the cusp between laughter and utter disgust. Is it possible to experience nausea and hilarity at the same time? An original question. In the final sequence: fists are constantly thrust clean through the bodies of the victims, one zombie is turned into a ghoulish light bulb by being hung up on a light fixture on the wall, Balme is constantly pursued by a disgusting heap of intestines that crawl and wind their way inexorably toward him, severed heads sit on the floor rolling their eyes and moving their upper lip in frustration (can't move to get to the bastard!), and mainly Balme bursts into the room with a rotary lawnmower (anachronism for the 50s?) and reduces all the remaining zombies to smoking gore and quivering limbs (one can defeat the zombies by dismembering them so radically that they can no longer bite or move). Uncle Les adds to the hilarity of the scene by actually enjoying battle with the zombies – he challenges them to combat and outdoes himself in ingenuity in his choice of weapons. Humor in the film is promoted by a snide satire of provincial 50s New Zealand society (recalling 'Heavenly Creatures' of two years later): 'Back to the Future' type clothing, cute streetcars cutting through the streets, the cult of motherhood, geeky partygoers, etc. The basic plot plays on the cult of motherhood: Balme can't commit himself to his girlfriend because of the domination of his emotionally monstrous mother, and it is not until she metamorphoses into an enormous, truly hideous physical monster (that tries to suck him back into her womb) that he is able to "kill" her, liberate herself, and in the denouement commit himself to Penalver. An ingenious, original film apparently inspired by the Sam Raimi trilogy. (2009)

Dead Ringers 1988 David Cronenberg (Canada) 3.0 Cronenberg psychological drama that turns toward horror at the end (but no exploding heads). Jeremy Irons plays both identical twins Bev and

Elliot; Genevieve Bujold attractive and cool as needy actress who wants to get pregnant. The twins are both Toronto gynecologists utterly dependent on one another; no one can tell them apart. They take advantage of their identicalness to share women: the more outgoing Elliott seduces his female patients and then passes them on to the sensitive Bev, who can of course have sex with them without his lover becoming aware of the difference. Things begin to go south when they have sex with Bujold. When Bev falls in love with her, tension arises between the brothers and she passes her drug habit to him. Chaos besets the film at the end: their relationship is undermined by the presence of the woman (sexual object), both brothers become drug addicts, they live in filth; in the end there is no way out but death – Bev mutilates Elliott’s body with the disquieting surgical instruments the guys have invented and then lies down with him in death in a final frame reminiscent of a Pietà. Amazing that Irons is able to distinguish clearly the personas of the twins; as Bujold says to Elliott: “Beverly is the sweet one and you’re the shit.” The twins are able to play in the same scene with the help of a lot of single-shot editing and computer technology (1988) that enables the director to place the two in the same frame. The twins have a negative obsession with female reproductive organs: when depicted as boys in the first scene, they agree that they would prefer to reproduce like fish underwater rather than through penetrative human sex; Bev rhapsodizes about the beauty of the inner body and not just the surface; one of them (always a little difficult to know which one is on screen) creates a set of creepy, alarming gynecological instruments that serve no medical purpose but are intended to correct what they see as the deformed sex organs of many women; whenever one of the brothers operates, he and the attendants wear lurid red gowns and caps. The film deals with the psychological interdependence of twins and how it might deform their relationships with women. It must be upsetting for women viewers, who are existentially familiar with gynecological examinations, stirrups, invasion of body cavities with steel instruments, etc. Clear, crisp cinematography and first-rate acting perhaps raise the impact of the film above its slow pace and uncertain theme. (2017)

Deadline U.S.A. 1952 Richard Brooks 3.5 Hard-hitting newspaper drama celebrating the civic indispensableness of the free press. Humphrey Bogart as Ed Huteson, energetic, fast-talking editor of crusading big city newspaper – he has received two Pulitzer Prizes; Kim Hunter as his divorced wife, who proposes to marry another man despite still loving Bogart; Ed Begley as short-fused assistant editor standing constantly next to Bogart; Martin Gabel convincing as mafia boss Rienzi; Ethel Barrymore speaking decided mid-Atlantic accent as widow of paper’s founder – she wants to save her husband’s legacy. Ernest Borgnine in tiny role; Jim Backus as one of the senior reporters; Paul Stewart, Warren Stevens as a variety of verbal, wise-cracking, hard-working, underpaid reporters. The movie is filmed on location in a newspaper office, including the press room when the going gets really tough. The narrative boasts several plots: Bogart wanting to get together with his divorced wife, who is about to marry another (nice, wealthy) guy; the plans of the two daughters of the paper’s founder and his living wife (Barrymore) to sell the crusading Day (name of the paper) to a big circulation gossip sheet that intends to close it down; when one of his reporters is beaten to a pulp by the local mafia chief, Rienzi (note the foreign name), the relentless, energetic Bogart sets out to expose him and incriminate him. The three plots advance simultaneously. The paper’s fate is followed in a courtroom proceeding, in which the awakened Barrymore – encouraged by Bogart – tries unsuccessfully to head off the sale. Bogart pursues Rienzi by interviewing, bribing, intimidating potential witnesses; after the setback of having one of them murdered by Rienzi’s thugs (the body of the dead man falls melodramatically into the printing presses), Bogart’s luck turns when a surprise witness appears to spill the goods on the villain. The ending is effective melodrama: while an obviously well-intentioned Hunter lurks eagerly in the shadows, Bogart rejects Rienzi’s final feverish threat, and sets the presses in motion. Rienzi asks what the noise is and Bogart replies that it is the sound of the free press, which will get him no matter how hard he tries to escape. The film is extremely well written and energetically directed by Brooks. A good example is the confrontational interview between Bogart and Rienzi in the back seat of the latter’s limo, in which Bogart starting off ironic, trades fearless confrontational challenges with the crook. The movie delivers an eloquent defense of the free press, Bogart’s statements often delivered to the strains of the Battle Hymn of the Republic: “The free press like the free life is always in danger.” “Without competition there is no freedom of the press.” An appropriate document for 2017. (2017)

Dear Murderer 1947 Arthur Crabtree (Britain) 3.0 Eric Portman as pertinaciously vengeful husband; Dennis Price as one of Gynt's lovers murdered toward the beginning of the film; Greta Gynt as serially unfaithful glamorous wife of Portman; Jack Warner as persistent, methodical, low-key police inspector investigating Price's death; Hazel Court as pretty sister of murdered man Price, who was jilted by Reed for Gynt; Maxwell Reed as boyish lover of Gynt who is framed by Portman for Price's murder. Pleasing, interesting English murder mystery that is short on character development and theme and long on plot twists, some of them compelling; adapted from a long-running London stage play, thus recalling 1951's 'Dial M for Murder'. Portman returns from America knowing that his wife is being unfaithful; in a long scene in which he methodically murders the lover, Price, through gassing, he discovers accidentally that there is a second lover – Reed – and he rearranges the evidence at the murder scene to incriminate him. The plan works, but meantime Gynt persuades the conscience-stricken Portman to go to the police to exculpate Reed, to whom she is still attached; the charade does not convince the inspector. In an ironic twist, Gynt persuades her husband to leave the country leaving behind a note suggesting suicide, a procedure duplicating the one that Portman used on Price; she then gives him an overdose of sleeping pills, and he dies after telling the police what has happened. The film is fuzzy and indistinct and in dire need of restoration; it reminds one of the experience of watching old films on television back in the 60s and 70s. Gynt and Portman give good performances, she very glamorously dressed (exotic jewelry!) and narcissistic constantly looking in the mirror, he single-minded in his determination to dispatch his wife's lovers and then remorseful when he considers that he is sending an innocent man to the gallows. The twists and turns of the English murder mystery are the chief pleasures of the piece. Psychology is often weak: both Price and Portman write what amount to suicide letters when any reasonable person would have been suspicious; Gynt and Marshall inexplicably visit Price's apartment while Portman is watching from the gas-filled kitchen; the revenge-obsessed Portman abruptly changes from hatred to remorse and pity about the possible execution of Marshall, etc. Very entertaining in a slow-moving way. (2009)

Death in Brunswick 1990 John Ruane (Australia) 3.5 Sam Neill, Zoe Carides, John Clarke (Dave), Yvonne Lawley (Mom). Offbeat black comedy about immature, down-on-his-heels short order cook in working class suburb outside Melbourne. Environment is gritty and unattractive, reminiscent of "Sweetie;" populated by Greek and Turkish immigrants, weirdos, other offbeat characters, and small time hoods. Neill is maddeningly immature man of 32, who is dependent on his mother, cannot make up his mind, is passive and lets others take the initiative and solve his problems; he has some good luck – his mate Dave, who gets sick of bailing him out at the end – and a real passion for Sophie (Carides), the only daughter of a well-off Greek immigrant who wants to marry her to someone respectable. Bizarre goings on: the kitchen where Neill works is infested with cockroaches and filled with rotting vegetables; Dave helps Carl deal with accidental death of Mustafa by burying him in grave in same coffin as another corpse (he makes room in the coffin by stomping on the corpse's putrefied body and head); mother, who has menacing look, is crippled from reaction to her medication, and then pees on the ground in her wheelchair when Carl takes her to meet Sophie's mother. The one positive thing in Carl's life is his passion for Sophie, with whom he has noisy sex in the beginning; he finally enters redemption territory when at the end of the film he overcomes her father's objections (he is unattractive, usually dirty, poor and passive) and marries her at Greek wedding. Always on the edge of bad taste, but that is the fun of the movie! (2006)

The Death of Mr. Lazarescu 2005 Cristi Puiu 3.0 Strictly "realistic", hyper minimalist account of the odyssey of a dying man from his home through four hospitals in Bucharest, where the camera abandons him while he is awaiting brain surgery. Ion Fiscuteanu old (62) and in obviously poor health as the dying man (the actor actually dies in 2007); Luminita Gheorghiu as the attentive ambulance paramedic who sticks faithfully to the sick man throughout the film; a variety of Romanian actors, who play Ion's neighbors, nurses, and doctors in the various hospitals that he visits. The film style is of course striking: editing kept to an absolute minimum; takes are very long recording the actors' every move, e.g., long stretches lying on hospital stretchers, recording Ion's journey in great detail – riding in the ambulance, being wheeled out through the doors of the hospital and into the examination room, etc.

(wheeling in and out of the hospital doors is skipped toward the end of the film). Little use of cutting to continuity. Although the film has the reputation of criticizing the Romanian hospital system, Ion is actually treated pretty well; he had liver cancer from excessive drinking and a subdural hematoma apparently from a fall, and he would have died within a few days even with the best of treatment. His two neighbors in the beginning are critical of him (he drinks too much, he stinks, his apartment smells of cats), but they are attentive and call the ambulance. Gheorghiu comes promptly, does everything she can for him, and sticks with him through his hospital visits, even arguing with nurses and doctors in his behalf, urging them to pay attention to him and operate on his head – all with little friendliness or encouragement from the sick man. His treatment in the hospitals overall is dilatory, but he is seen promptly in the ERs, the doctors are attentive; he is shunted from hospital to hospital in part because a catastrophic bus accident on the same night filled the emergency rooms. Most scenes are (low-key) entertaining because of pungent characters: the neighbor couple bickering, the doctors flirting with the nurses, a doctor borrowing another doctor's cell phone to call his wife, the doctors lecturing Gheorghiu because she didn't show enough deference, Ion's mental confusion. Romanian doctors are depicted as competent and informed, but they all seem status-anxious – curt with their subordinates and very concerned that they recognize their superiority. Film is rather fun to watch, since as it moves so slowly the viewer doesn't have to puzzle out the narrative. (2017)

Death on the Nile 1978 John Guillermin (Britain: wr. Anthony Shaffer) 3.0 Peter Ustinov very entertaining and with excellent Belgian accent playing fussy Hercule Poirot who happens to be on a Nile cruise with a bunch of people who hate...; Lois Chile wooden acting as American heiress married to...; Simon MacCorkindale also of marginal acting skills as pretty boy British fortune-hunter (too many views of his upper bridgework) who apparently dumps Mia Farrow to hook up in glorious romantic passion with Chiles; Mia Farrow emoting strongly as apparently jilted sweetheart of MacCorkindale; Jack Warden speaking with German accent (not bad) as Swiss doctor who is suspected of being a quack; David Niven looking very thin and glamorous in surprisingly passive role as Poirot's sidekick in the inevitable investigation; Angela Lansbury a bit over the top as sex-obsessed, alcoholic, word-slurring writer of romantic novels; Olivia Hussey very pretty and competent as Lansbury's devoted daughter; Bette Davis mostly silent as American dowager along for the ride; Maggie Smith as her ill-tempered companion. Typical Agatha Christie vehicle whose major virtues are to be photographed gloriously and brightly on the Nile, to have a star-studded cast of British and American actors, and to give the viewer the chance to watch the talented Peter Ustinov. The boat itself is a star with its semi-rustic first-class staterooms, traditional furniture and beautiful views of the Nile and the dunes around it off the sun deck and from the stateroom windows. The plot is entirely predictable: set up the action and identify the characters gathering in Egypt for the cruise -- focusing on Chiles, since practically every character has a stated motive for killing her; the murder, which ends up being five, since the guilty couple ends up committing suicide when unmasked (calling into question the sleuthing capabilities of a man, Poirot or not, who allows such mayhem during his investigation); then the long investigation, the continued murders, the final explanation a la 'Thin Man' in the ship's saloon, and -- almost the only surprise of the film -- Farrow's and MacCorkindale's suicide when their plot is discovered. The plot that Poirot uncovers is fairly ingenious (although guessed by this viewer) -- Farrow and McCorkindale plot the latter's marriage to the wealthy Chile, then plan to murder her so that he can inherit her money, and the two principals will live happily ever after. Film has no dramatic depth, but it is charming with its Nile cruiser, its scenic views, its star-studded cast, and its puzzling conundrums. (2010)

Deathtrap 1982 Sydney Lumet 3.0 Michael Caine as intense, bitter failed playwright; Christopher Reeve handsome, sexy (sometimes bare-chested), angry and aspiring playwright; Dyan Cannon hysterical (sudden bone-rattling shrieks); Irene Worth as Dutch-accented medium that doesn't seem to belong in the scenario. Very enjoyable screen adaptation of Ira Levin play. Emphasis clearly on plot, misleading the viewer, hitting him with a shocking surprise, raising chills with all the tricks in the book. Caine is over the hill playwright who plots to steal play from Reeve; or at least we think until we find out that he and Reeve are in cahoots to scare wife Cannon to death (she has a heart condition and is nearly always hysterical; the way of killing her recalls the final murder scene in the bathtub of 'Les

Diaboliques') and get her inheritance; then Reeve and Caine settle down as gay lovers. After mutual recriminations over who gets credit for the play, loopy neighbor Irene Worth outfoxes everyone, and against every indication, steals the play from Caine and Reeve as they murder one another! Most improbable. Caine is fairly interesting character, an older man, who is losing his touch, is afraid he is over the hill, has contempt for his wife (although we don't know it until he murders her), and is rather desperate, so much so that he finally gets foxed himself. Reeve is one of Caine's former student frequently referencing the lessons Caine had given him in a seminar – stick close to reality, get physical in a pinch (gives Caine the opportunity to try to murder Reeve), etc. Caine has an arsenal of antique weapons on the wall, revolvers, knives, crossbow, etc., many of which are put to use in the film. Reeve is shockingly amoral and prone to mocking American TV culture and to sudden high-decibel fits of anger. Mise-en-scene is stagy – almost all inside Caine's house, intentionally so, with fake-looking lightning and thunder and lights out when things get tense. Without the surprises of the first viewing, the script seems extremely manipulative – e.g., Worth's character is so random that you have to expect a surprise from her at the end. Ends in a virtuosic fillip cutting suddenly from the mill house, where Reeve is about to stab Caine, to the theater, where actors are performing the same actions; and Worth is watching triumphantly from the audience. The two men are dead and she gets credit for the play! Overall entertaining if not very profound. (2005) (2016)

Deception 2008 Marcel Langenegger 2.0 Sometimes entertaining, but tricky, often incoherent thriller about a nerdy New York accountant who becomes an enthusiastic seducer of women and then gets caught up in a thriller plot. Ewan McGregor plays the wide-eyed accountant; Hugh Jackman miscast as an apparently harmless guy who soon turns into a mean-as-a-snake gangster; Michelle Williams beautiful woman starting off (incredibly) as a sex club participant but then becomes McGregor's true love; Charlotte Rampling as only mature member of the sex club; Maggie Q as memorably sexy club member. The first part of the film offers possibilities – Jackman introduces McGregor to the pleasures of an anonymous sex club; if you receive a phone call asking if you are free tonight, then you are off to a luxury hotel to have sex with as beautiful stranger. The plot soon turns into a run-of-the-mill thriller with Jackman forcing McGregor to embezzle tens of millions of dollars from a hapless major corporation, which obediently cables permission to a Spanish bank to disburse the cash to the embezzling duo. Jackman gets his confederate to cooperate by apparently kidnapping and threatening to murder Williams, for whom McGregor has developed tender feelings after a strictly sexual beginning to the relationship. The viewer suspects from the start that Williams may be in the plot with the repulsive Jackman, but McGregor goes along with the con without hesitation. The plot is engineered to deliver the maximum number of unexpected twists – Jackman's sudden threatening appearances, Jackman's abortive attempt to murder McGregor with a bomb blast after the money has been transferred, the discovery that Williams is in cahoots with Jackman (the camera first looks at her from the back, and then she turns her head), McGregor's unexpected reappearance after the attempted murder, etc. The screenplay is filled with incoherence: although Williams is later explained to be part of Jackman's plot, McGregor's first meeting with her is obviously random on a subway platform; Williams' seraphic countenance is not convincing as a sex-committed woman; the ending, which leaves McGregor and Williams separated on two continents, is seriously muddled (Where did Williams get the gun she kills Jackman with? Why does McGregor abandon the \$21,000,000 after Jackman is dead?). The film is superficially entertaining, but its incoherence and improbability betray studio changes of mind about marketing: the max thriller jolts along with soul-saving romance. (December 2017)

Decision before Dawn 1951 Anton Litvak 3.0 A cross between a World War II film and a spy thriller focusing on scenes inside Germany just before the end in 1945. Oskar Werner pretty and sincere as German medic POW sent by the US Army back into Germany to collect military information; Richard Basehart rather silent, good-looking as Army communications officer also sent behind enemy lines (doesn't seem to speak a word of German!); Gary Merrill no-nonsense, tough officer in charge of the spy missions; Hans Christian Blech as hard-bitten, opportunistic German soldier also scrounging for information in the Munich vicinity; Wilfrid Seyferth as SS non-com that turns out to be a Gestapo operative; O.E. Hasse as tough but touchingly human German colonel that depends on Werner to remedy

his angina, but who also orders the execution of a German soldier for desertion. The great majority of the film takes place in the ruins of Germany in late winter 1945 – much confusion as the Wehrmacht scrambles to delay the inevitable by scraping up odd soldiers for replacement and rigidly enforcing discipline (deserters hung from trees by the roadside), trucks criss-cross bombed out cities with ruins burning, soldiers running through the interiors of gutted theaters and churches, trains puffing down restored tracks, locals huddling in the basements of buildings to avoid the bombs, P-47 Lightnings racing over troop positions. The filmmakers had extraordinary access to the bombed-out ruins and the vehicles and other equipment of the Wehrmacht in the years following the war. The film provides a realistic vision of German morale at the end of the war: the mixture in the German population of fanatical Nazis and ordinary Germans trying desperately to survive, and yet maintaining their good humor and a stiff upper lip; the determination of the Wehrmacht to fight to the bitter end, despite everyone realizing that the war is lost. The mission of volunteer German POWs parachuting into Germany to spy never seems realistic. The film focuses on the issue of spying against your own side in wartime: a seemingly senseless activity, since the Germans consider you a traitor and if they catch you will execute you on the spot, and the Americans also have disdain for you even though you have given them some serviceable information. Werner is an attractive cinematic object; the script goes to great lengths to manufacture and maintain suspense until the conclusion, when trying to swim across the Rhine at Mannheim, both Tiger and Werner are killed; Basehart is the only one to return. Interesting mainly as a sort of documentary of the spy issue and the condition of Germany in spring 1945. (2016)

Decoy 1946 Jack Bernhard 3.0 Jean Gillie as terminally glamorous, ruthless and violent femme fatale who is interested only in money; Edward Norris, good-looking assistant who unknowingly plots alongside her not suspecting what fate awaits him; Robert Armstrong as Gillie’s boyfriend on death row for robbery and murder – only he knows where the target loot is buried; Herbert Rudley marginal, annoying actor as sucker doctor who does what Gillie tells him; Sheldon Leonard as well dressed and persistent police sergeant with a soft place in his heart for Gillie, but who is on her trail. Marginal B-level film noir (Monogram) that stand out mainly because of the presence of the most ruthless and heartless of femme fatales and the over-the-top performance of Jean Gillie: she cares only about the money that Armstrong knows about; she murders several men without the least compunction (one of them she runs over three times, although the extant print only shows her doing it once); she is dressed in a tight-fitting, low cut dress with well-shaped breasts and flashy jewelry; she cackles wildly like a hyena when she finally gets hold of the strong box in the eucalyptus glade and pumps bullets into her last victim, the doctor; she cackles and sniggers at the end when Leonard responds to her invitation to kiss him. The narrative begins with a bravura sequence in which the doctor washes his dirty hands in a filthy sink, and then stumbles into Gillie’s apartment and when the door shuts, we hear the shot that mortally wounds the woman; the film has the usual film noir flashback frame with Gillie telling her story to Leonard – an uncharacteristic action for such a cold and ruthless schemer – while dying on the sofa of her luxurious apartment (she has a maid). The plot sometimes is utterly fantastic, e.g., Gillie and Norris succeed in reviving Armstrong with an antidote, respirator, and high tech heart monitor a couple of hours after he is executed by poison gas – the scene reminds one more of the laboratory scenes in ‘Frankenstein’ than a film noir. Otherwise, the film moves slowly with a lot of scenes of characters walking across rooms or riding together in an automobile. Hardly a great film, but no film noir has a more pitiless and cold-blooded femme fatale. (2010)

De-Lovely 2004 Irwin Winkler 3.5 Kevin Kline, Ashley Judd, Jonathan Pryce. Excellent musical biography of Cole Porter. Focuses on performance of his music, its relationship with his life, especially his wife Linda, and his personal life. He comes across as a temperamental artist, bisexual, loving only his wife (they never had children, although they tried once) but having constant affairs with pretty young guys (never one of mature age and never with a woman), and needing this sexual freedom in order to have the inner freedom to create. Despite his childish impulsiveness (“Let’s hope he doesn’t misbehave.”), Kline comes across as very sincere in his attachment to his wife, and sincerely pained when he hurts her (was Porter really so nice?). Judd elegantly beautiful, and does good job as Linda, who is from the beginning aware of Cole’s bisexual orientation and who does her best to accommodate it; she

says she doesn't want all of him, just all that is left after his escapades with men. Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous with everybody perfectly dressed and coiffed in the most stylish 20s and 30s costumes. Since he started with a lot of money, and obviously made a lot, he and Linda were able to live in beautiful places, -- the last one being the magnificent house Linda found for them in Williamstown. His clothes (designed by Giorgio Armani) are pretty fantastic – traditional and elegant; Kline's makeup is extreme and convincing when he reaches later middle age and old age. Porter's musical inspiration was partly sincere sentiment based on his deep attachment to Linda, but also witty, urbane and ironic commentary on contemporary popular culture; no one else composed such witty lyrics. Performances of his music are top-notch -- Alanis Morissette who does a great vocally rhythmic rendition of 'Let's Fall in Love' as Cole prepared his first Broadway show 'Paris,' Sheryl Crow, Natalie Cole, etc., with Kline performing credibly as Porter singing. His songs are often performed ironically – e.g., "What a Swell Party this is" during a dull salon party in Paris, "What is this Thing Called Love" as Cole, admitting his confusion about his sexual orientation, leaves his and Linda's palazzo for an assignation with a gorgeous male ballet dancer. Very amusing to watch him progress through the decades, and then intentionally compose super sappy songs for movie at the request of L.B. Mayer, when he finally (postwar?) went to Hollywood (but then Hollywood score 'Kiss Me Kate' (1952) was one of his best scores. Whole film set as flashback, in which Jon Pryce is apparently a producer designing a show based on Porter's life (or is the frame some sort of retrospective of his life after he died?); works well until the end, when it gets a little sappy ('Blow, Gabriel. Blow'). Movie works mainly because of the music; the showbiz environment is very entertaining. But you have to ask whether Porter was as nice and sincere as film depicts. (2006)

La demoiselle d'honneur 2004 Claude Chabrol (France) 3.0 Benoit Magimel as calm and sensible middle class guy working for a bathroom contractor in the Loire region; Laura Smet (daughter of Johnny Hallyday and Nathalie Baye) sexy and memorable in a kind of tomboy way as apparently psychotic young woman Senta who bamboozles Benoit; Aurore Clément as Benoit's (overly) doting mother. Another Chabrol mixed genre film based on a novel by the same writer that provided the story for 'La Cérémonie'; it is set this time in a bourgeois environment in the Loire Valley. Benoit still lives with his mother and three sisters although he is adult and has a good job. He allows himself to be seduced by the intriguing (and disquieting) Senta, who has an insatiable need to dominate him, flinging off her clothes for him and then repeating lines that might worry some less obsessed guy – "You and I are meant for one another by destiny"; "You and I are one and will never part"; she massages his mouth with sensual kisses every time they meet, and she objects every time he indicates he has work or family obligations. She is thoroughly psychotic – a habitual liar who spins outrageous tales about her romantic and adventurous past; and a murderer who tells Benoit that murdering someone (anyone) is the ultimate proof of true love. The film focuses increasingly on their runaway relationship (an extreme case of French *amour fou*?) and the two murders she commits (the body of one is discovered in grisly fashion in the abandoned upstairs of her mother's spooky house). It ends with apparently the police getting ready to arrest Senta for something.... The other half of the film focusing on Benoit's quietly dysfunctional family is sometimes more interesting. Benoit is attached to a stone bust of a goddess that resembles his mother; he even takes it to bed with him. The camera's lingering on the eye movements and the physical touches of especially the mother and Benoit reinforce the theme of excessive attachment between the two. Benoit's older sister gets married to a respectable although quite nerdy kid who works in the city hall; his younger sister stays out late at night (unexplained) and toward the end of the film is arrested for shop-lifting – a rather lengthy scene with a sympathetic police inspector fails to take the story anywhere. The two halves of the film seem disconnected: what does Benoit's relationship in his family have to do with his vulnerability to a *femme fatale*? Low-key, mood-setting music is by Chabrol's son, Michel; Chabrol's wife, Aurore, is the script supervisor. Interesting moments with some suspense. A middling Chabrol film. (2007)

Les demoiselles de Rochefort 1967 Jacques Demy; musique de Michel Legrand (France) 3.5 Catherine Deneuve smoking with almost imperceptible breasts but a huge shock of blond hair; Françoise Dorléac (Deneuve's sister killed that year) as Deneuve's freckled twin sister, gifted pianist and composer; Georges Chakiri as Etienne, always dressed dorkily in coordinated pastel shades and pants tight in the

crotch; Jacques Perrin very pretty-handsome as dreamy, straw-haired artist-sailor Maxence looking for feminine ideal; Daniele Darrieux as Yvonne, the mother of Deneuve; Jacques Riberolles as Guillaume, Deneuve's boyfriend, who is not romantic enough for her; Michel Piccoli looking young as M. Dame, proprietor of a music shop – a soft-eyed romantic who acts as Dorleac's Cupid; Gene Kelly (!) as mysterious man that Solange meets in the street – he speaks French himself in dialogue, but appears dubbed when he sings; Genevieve Ténier as pretty waitress in Darrieux's café. Brightly colored and cheerful tribute to the MGM color musicals and to the power of love. This is the ultimate romantic movie: everyone is yearning for love, the ideal mate; love is all that matters; and in Demy's world it usually works out – Dorleac meets her mystery lover Kelly by accident in the street (the rencontre is of course predestined), and at the end of the film they finally dance a romantic Cyd Charisse-style duet (much inferior technically to the original!); the love-lorn separated lovers Piccoli and Darrieux finally meet in front of the local school, and when they recognize one another and kiss, we know they will live happily ever after; only Deneuve and Perrin miss each other by a few seconds at the end of the film, but we feel assured that they will follow their romantic star and eventually be united. The perfectly restored color film has an almost surrealist feeling of happy fantasy: the narrative takes place during a festival held in the sun-drenched streets of Rochefort: everyone is smiling, they almost always dance through the streets rather than walk; the characters are dressed in color-coordinated pastel-shaded costumes – the girls in short skirts (1967!), the guys in tight-fitting pants; there are a lot of sailors in the streets with their cute pom-pom berets; the main female characters usually wear broad-brimmed Easter hats when they walk in the street. There are a lot of musical numbers. Music sometimes jazzy – big band sound (girls mention the American jazz greats and then play music in their studio derived from their work), sometimes soft romantic strings, usually not very melodious or memorable. Lyrics by Demy are wonderfully characteristic, informative, informal, and sometimes lyrical. Dialogue is sometimes natural and unaccompanied, but sometimes highly stylized, e.g. in a scene toward the end where several of the characters speak in Moliere-like rhyming couplets! The film does not perhaps have the polish and perfectionism of the MGM musicals. Dancing in general is not outstanding – often unimaginative choreography and dancers are not synchronized to Hollywood standards; the exception is the Gene Kelly numbers, which are crisp, jazzy, and Kelly! Almost all the singing is lip-synced and it is often awkward; the synced singing voices are often too distinct from the genuine spoke voice of the character. Very enjoyable, unique take on the musical genre. (2010)

The Departed 2006 Martin Scorsese 3.5 Jack Nicholson excessively pulling out all the stops and playing his over-the-top self as a crime boss, Matt Damon low-key and reliable as Nicholson's mole in the anti-crime unit of the Massachusetts state police, Leonardo DiCaprio now truly Scorsese's new De Niro as a police academy wash-out recruited by the state police to infiltrate Nicholson's crime organization, Mark Wahlberg owns every scene he is in with his hostile, in-your-face, violently profane performance as Martin Sheen's second man, Martin Sheen as the head man of the covert operations unit of the state police, Alec Baldwin is large and also profane, also owning his scenes as the head of the anti-crime unit, Vera Farmiga works valiantly to make something out of her nothing role in this strictly man's movie. Blockbuster police yarn with a very complex plot (the two moles in each other's organization finding out at more or less the same time that the other exists – who knows what at what time; what are his motivations, etc.) that the viewer doesn't worry too much about since the movie is so entertaining. Terrific performances by everyone with the possible exception of the over-the-top Nicholson: Wahlberg rivets our attention every time he is on screen; Damon is quietly creepy; DiCaprio is moving since he is so sincere, determined to do good, and afraid that Nicholson is going to find him out and kill him; and even the lonely Nicholson makes for his own undoing by trusting too much in the young men that he treats as sons (as DiCaprio tells him – you've done a lot of fucking and drinking, but so far no sons!). The editing is very fast with a lot of hyper crisp cross-cutting between the two moles' activities; it would seem that the editor is trying to sweep us along in the momentum of the plot. The film is extremely violent: it seems that almost everyone is killed, and when they go, it is usually at close range with the bullet exiting the back of the skull and spraying brains and gore all over the wall. The ending is amazingly compelling: Sheen is thrown from the top of a building by Nicholson's men; Nicholson himself is killed when caught in a drug deal by the police (he was betrayed by DiCaprio); DiCaprio

captures the traitor Damon, cuffs him to make the arrest (he is too decent a person just to kill him), and then his brains are spattered over the back of the elevator by another (surprise!) mole in the police – he in turn is shot in cold blood by Damon who is afraid of being discovered; then just as we get used to the idea that Damon may escape (no one now knows the game he has been playing), when he walks into his upscale Boston apartment with groceries in his arm, he confronts Wahlberg clad in surgical slippers (he had previously resigned from the police force in disgust), and after Wahlberg hesitates about where to shoot him, he then blasts Damon through the head, of course splattering gore on the apartment door. It may be a violent ending outside the law, but it packs a powerful wallop of vigilante justice done. The setting is urban Catholic Mean Streets with most of the dramatis personae being either Irish or Italian. The film is in the line of ‘Mean Streets’, ‘Goodfellas’, and ‘Casino’; perhaps it most nearly resembles ‘Goodfellas’. There is little of the obsession with themes of guilt, violence, religion and redemption present in his films through ‘The Last Temptation of Christ’ (1987). More of the thrill and happiness of being able to make a movie, to move and shock his audience, to demonstrate his mastery of all aspects of filmmaking – in the final analysis, like ‘Goodfellas’, a well-constructed crime yarn with the Scorsese signature on it. (2006)

Departures 2008 Yojiro Takita (Japan) 2.0 Masahiro Motoki as sincere, soulful, low-key young man who has to abandon Tokyo and his cello in order to work in the funeral industry in rural Japan; Ryoko Hirosue as his little wife, eternally childlike, good humored and smiling; Tsutomu Yamazaki as Motoki’s wise and soulful boss. Terminally sentimental film about a young Japanese couple facing the first tests of life; they go through tough times, especially when Hirosue returns to Tokyo without her husband when she learns that he is an “encoffiner” (apparently a taboo in Japanese society), but everyone earns his lesson, she returns, he becomes a better man, is reconciled with his father, and the young couple turns toward the future with emphasis on the child that Hirosue is carrying; somehow being surrounded by death promotes an appreciation of the little pleasures and rewards of life. The first half of the film is entertaining and engaging: the director extracts good comedy out of the nonplussed Motoki’s surprise and cluelessness when confronted with the facts of death and the execution of the rites of death – his job. But the film soon abandons its light-hearted approach to the subject and inundates the viewer with cloying, heart-tugging, western cello music, which is often paired with ravishing shots of distant snowy mountains (somewhere in the north of Japan?) and – much too often – swans coursing through the pure mountain air, apparently a metaphor for the voyage of the dead souls after death. The film’s depiction of death is sentimental and candy-coated: death is presented as a gateway to something else (probably better); according to custom, the dead are treated with reverence – Motoki washes and dresses them carefully and respectfully before gently placing the bodies in the coffin; almost all the corpses that he treats are beautiful young women or children who have died before their time – the one exception, a severely decomposed corpse of an old woman, is introduced in the beginning for comic effect. Motoki’s salvation comes with the return of his pregnant wife and his own officiating at the encoffinement of his dead father, with whom he had not spoken for thirty years – another undertaker was treating the body with rushed disrespect. Motoki turns to his wife, whose lip is trembling at seeing how noble he has become, and through their exchanged smile they vow to be faithful to their child, who will presumably be raised to the accompaniment of cello music. Film is overly long, slow-moving, and egregiously sentimental; rather sad commentary on the Academy Awards, who declared this the best foreign film for 2008. (2009)

The Descendants 2011 Alexander Payne (wr. Payne et al. AA) 4.0 George Clooney genuine, puzzled, tortured by the impending death of his wife, Elizabeth, and the behavior problems of his two daughters; Shailene Woodley sensitive, accurate portrayal of a teenage girl torn between anger at her parents and support for her dad; Amara Miller as ten-year-old daughter already confused even before entering puberty; Nick Krause outspoken and outwardly obnoxious as Woodley’s ubiquitous boyfriend but who ends up being sensitive and supportive; Beau Bridges convincing as Clooney’s scruffy Hawaiian haole cousin; Matthew Lillard bemused and remorseful as the lover of Clooney’s dying wife; Judy Greer as Speer’s betrayed wife. Outstandingly genuine and sensitive film about a wealthy Hawaiian haole who finds that his wife is dying in a coma in the hospital; he then finds out that before her boating accident,

she had fallen in love with Lillard and was planning to leave Clooney; Clooney also has to deal with the angst and misbehavior of his two daughters and with whether or not he and his numerous (mostly greedy) cousins will sell the large plot of land on Kauai that they inherited from their 19th century ancestors (both haole and Hawaiian). Clooney is affecting as the guilty guy (he had ignored his wife and children for a long time) who somehow has find a way to survive the crisis. The film has an original tone: although dealing with tragic issues and complicated dilemmas, it is constantly and surprisingly funny: Elizabeth's irascible father (played by a barely recognizable Robert Forster) suddenly punches the obnoxious Krause in the eye; a tortured Clooney confides in the callow Krause, since he has no other male to talk to; when Clooney finds out from his daughter that his wife has had an affair, he runs flat-footedly through the rain several suburban blocks to get more information from a couple of Elizabeth's friends. The film is flawlessly directed by Payne. It is set picturesquely and credibly on three of the Hawaiian Islands – beautiful beaches, eroded mountains, mist hanging over the landscape, lovely old houses, photos and reminiscences of the King family, planes taking Clooney and his children from one island to another. The director creates a realistic spacious environment like the interior of Clooney's roomy house in which the main characters explore their options and dilemmas freely; the narrative does not control the characters' actions; the viewer does not know what will be the outcome of the drama, but we root for everyone to find their way through crisis and sadness. The film ends beautifully: Elizabeth is disconnected from the respirator to let nature take its course; the wife of Elizabeth's lover arrives to shout her forgiveness and her anger at the unconscious woman; when Elizabeth dies, Clooney and the girls dump her ashes respectfully in the ocean off the coast of Oahu; and in a postscript the three of them sit on a sofa eating ice cream and watching television while they adjust a blanket so that it covers all three sets of legs. The conclusion asserts that the three have reestablished a family togetherness that will get them over the hump, even if, as Krause said at one point, things might get tough after the mom's death. A poetically and credibly optimistic film, in which all the characters have virtues that get them through the tragedies of life. (2012)

The Desert Fox: The Story of Rommel 1951 Henry Hathaway (Britain: screenplay Nunnally Johnson) 3.0 James Mason dignified and understated as Erwin Rommel; Cedric Hardwicke as anti-Hitler plotter Dr. Strolin, the mayor of Stuttgart; Jessica Tandy low-key as Frau Rommel, who gently encourages Rommel to join the opposition against Hitler and his gang; George Macready as German general; Leo G. Carroll a bit droopy as the fatalistic Von Rundstedt; Luther Adler looking a bit too calm as Hitler (who wouldn't when compared to Bruno Ganz in "Niedergang"); Richard Boone in small role as Rommel's adjutant; Everett Sloane as Burgdorf, the general who brings the death sentence to Rommel. Docudrama in the style of '13 Rue Madeleine' about aspects of the life of the much-admired German general Erwin Rommel. Despite the title, very little coverage of his famous North African campaign, but focusing on his growing disillusionment with Hitler, the failure of the July 20 plot, and then the Burgdorf mission that resulted in his death. The film is shot in a dry style with Michael Rennie intoning the narration and intercut with a lot of newsreel battle scenes from North Africa and France. Mason does an excellent job on Rommel: conscientious, straight-laced and traditional, he insists that prisoners of war be treated decently; he is decisive and aggressive in military operations; he appears to be close to Hitler and is apolitical, blaming the crimes and bad decisions of "the corporal" on the group of bad actors surrounding him; under the influence of Strolin (who confronts him his "chicken-hearted willingness to march straight to hell with a beast you loathe and despise") and von Rundstedt, he gradually becomes convinced that Hitler is a menace to Germany, and despite his extreme reluctance to get involved in politics, he finally gives his quiet tacit support to the circle plotting the Führer's demise; hence the final scene in which Sloane shows up and in oily diplomatic phrases persuades Rommel to commit suicide – he makes it clear that if Rommel chooses to stand trial, he cannot guarantee the safety of his wife and son, Manfred. Hitler is presented as an angry incompetent who consults astrologers before he makes major decisions, which usually amount to not ceding one millimeter of territory, victory or death! Or raving about imminent victory by means of the secret weapons he has developed. Film has an unreserved admiration for Rommel, who is presented as an honorable, decent opponent (voiced by Winston Churchill), while overlooking the damage he did to the allied cause and the implications of his close relationship with Hitler; all redeemed by his last-minute support of the assassination plot. (2010)

Design for Living 1933 Ernst Lubitsch 3.5 Miriam Hopkins as young woman who falls in love with both Cooper and March, Gary Cooper pretty tight-lipped as artist and best friend of..., Fredric March, a writer who catapults to success when insulted by Miriam Hopkins, Edward Everett Horton as advertising executive, a pillar of morality and a total bore, Franklin Pangborn in cameo role as limp-wristed London impresario. Somewhat lesser of a Lubitsch sex comedy, not holding a candle to "Trouble in Paradise," perhaps because of the presence of the low-key Cooper, perhaps because Ben Hecht's writing and scenario don't work for Lubitsch. Subject is ménage à trois – Hopkins falls in love with both Cooper and March, who are best friends and share a starving artists' garret in Paris; they decide to live together the three of them, but as Hopkins says, "No sex;" this holds for a while until Cooper and Hopkins are alone, at which time Hopkins flops onto a day bed and says "It's true we have a gentleman's agreement [not to have sex], but then I am no gentleman.;" the jealousy between the two men drives Hopkins off and she marries the insufferably boring businessman Horton, but she returns to them when they sneak into her palatial house and disrupt a major social engagement where Mr. Eaglebower, one of the most important cement manufacturers in New York, is singing a pretentious art song; last scene is in a cab, like "Trouble in Paradise" –they decide to go back to Paris where they can have some fun; Hopkins kisses both men using the words "rotten" and "encore;" she says "One thing we must understand..." all nod their heads, put their hands together and say "Gentleman's Agreement," laughing, it would seem, at the expense of middle-class morality. Obviously this movie would never have made it in 1934. Hopkins is delightful with her measured timing and pronunciation, e.g., Horton on their wedding night, "Do you love me?" She "People shouldn't ask that on their wedding night. It's either too early or too late." March is believable and sympathique; only Cooper seems out of place. Lubitsch touches are rare and partial – twice through closed doors: e.g., Hopkins/Horton wedding night, Hopkins sneaks out of bedroom to tend to double-phallic tulip flowers that the guys have sent her as a wedding gift; she closes the door behind her; camera holds in the dark; transition to light (morning), and Horton emerges bedraggled; he walks over to the flowers and kicks them. Delightful moments separated by some long dull passages. Restored print is close to excellent. (2008)

Designing Woman 1957 Vincente Minelli (MGM) 2.5 Lauren Bacall sharp-featured, sharp-tongued, lively, and always the center of attention as New York fashion designer who falls for Peck at the Beverly Hill Hotel in Los Angeles; Gregory Peck too handsome, reserved, and elegant as New York reporter (his boss is the usual hyperactive, loud-mouthed guy we see in 30s newsrooms) that doesn't rise to Bacall's comic level; Tom Helmore ready for 'Vertigo' as Bacall's British-accented ex-boyfriend; Dolores Gray, wide-mouthed, brassy belter of song as Peck's ex-girlfriend; Mickey Shaughnessy as very stupid, brain-addled ex-prize fighter; Chuck Connors in brief appearance as hood beating up Peck. Typically frothy, superficial MGM romantic comedy of the late-1950s, memorable only for its bringing together Bacall and Peck. Entertaining to see the two interacting at the Beverly Hills Hotel (the wallpaper hasn't changed in 55 years). But the romantic farce that ensues after the couple's impromptu marriage (meeting Peck when he was hugely drunk must have been a big turn-on for Bacall) failed to keep this viewer awake. In the complications that result eventually in the couple becoming resigned to one another we encounter the world of fashion (models strutting in impossible glamorous dresses), boxing (punch-drunk ex-boxers, the control of boxing by underworld bosses that threaten Peck when he writes muckraking articles about them), modern dance (Jack Cole winding his way through Bacall's apartment making Peck think he is gay and then using his dance kicks to flatten some thugs), and some narrative items that span the distance between silly (Bacall is insanely jealous of Peck's ex-girlfriend that he clearly has no further interest in) and objectionable (the ending involves Peck coming up with yet another lie to convince that he never had a relationship with Bacall and the latter deciding the best thing is to accept it rather than insist on honesty). The film is heavy in 'Mad Men' type of glamor – cigarettes everywhere, everyone drinks to excess, women's clothes are extremely expensive-looking in their bright colors and enormous quantities of material. Perhaps inspiration from the Tracy-Hepburn comedies and providing a bridge to the more interesting Doris Day comedies immediately following. The stars deserve much better; Peck should stay in drama. (2012)

Desire 1936 Frank Borzage 3.0 Marlene Dietrich, Gary Cooper, William Frawley, Alan Mowbray, John Halliday (looks like Charlie Ruggles). Fairly amusing, sophisticated Euro-comedy conceived by Lubitsch, and directed – without Lubitsch touches – by Frank Borzage. He does make Dietrich look terrific, which I suppose was his commission. Dietrich pulls off fairly clever pearl heist in the beginning, and then encounters Cooper on back roads on the way to Spain. They fall in love – Dietrich falls for Cooper’s boyish charm – Dietrich becomes disillusioned with her confederates and the two lovers get together in the end. Lubitsch manages to get around the production code somewhat – Cooper appears in Dietrich’s bedroom; it is apparent after their big Hollywood kiss that they have had sex; and Dietrich manages to get off scot-free at the end (the jeweler forgives them and they are married in the last scene). Film shines through the charm of the two stars (especially Dietrich), and the first class production values (good exterior scenes, wonderful costumes, interiors, crisp photography, glamour shots of Dietrich, etc.). Prologue under the titles has some very risqué shots of women’s décolletage as they manipulate long strands of pearls. Dialogue and plot is pretty ordinary; pleasant and amusing rather than really funny or outrageous; has things in common with ‘Paradise,’ but not nearly as sly or suggestive. (2005)

Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame 2010 Jark Tsui (Hong Kong) 3.5 Almost mind-blowing spectacular amalgam of detective story, flawless, dynamic special effects, colorful mise-en-scene, and sumptuous art direction. Tony Leung in small role as Dee’s former ally and now adversary Zhong; Chao Deng as an albino Jedi-style warrior with formidable martial arts abilities; Bingbing Li very pretty and delicate as also highly skilled fighter who is an apparent ally of Dee; Andy Lau as the charismatic Detective, who combines flawless deductive logic with lighter-than-air fighting moves; Carina Lau as cool and ruthless empress. Set at the beginning of the 8th century, the story deals with the Empress, now the first woman to ascend the throne of China, hiring Detective Dee to solve several curious murders, in which men associated with the construction of a huge pillar statue of a woman Buddha are suddenly incinerated from within their bodies. Dee’s investigation is a bit difficult to follow; he works through several suspects, including the Empress herself who might be trying to rid herself of political opponents, and the Empress’ imperial chaplain (who often appears as a Delphi-oracle-style talking deer), until he finally hits upon Zhong, who as a former political opponent of the Empress is seeking revenge for having his hand cut off by order of the sovereign. There is a little bit of romance in the passive-aggressive relationship of Dee and Li, who at one point almost make love before they are interrupted by a rain of clanging metal arrows; she at one point falls under suspicion and then is assassinated by Zhong after she rescues Dee from danger. The focus of the film however is on the martial arts combat taking place in varied environments – in underground chambers with scaffolding falling all around, in the monastery inhabited by the chaplain, in a sylvan glade with soldiers rushing in from all sides, and always with lighter-than-air acrobatic moves conveyed through quick editing. Special effects artistry abounds in views of the Chinese capital city, the interior and exterior views of the 80-meter statue of the Buddha, in the movement of the fire beetles that cause the grisly burning deaths of the victims, in the vast assembly of courtiers waiting upon the Empress, in her varied outlandish and elaborate headdresses. Dee is decidedly Holmesian in his refusal to accept supernatural explanations for unusual occurrences and to insist on natural causes and rational explanations (e.g., the grisly burnings are caused by the fire beetles and not by black magic and the talking deer is really a trained animal whose voice is provided by a ventriloquist). Beautifully entertaining film. (2012)

Detour 1945 Edgar Ulmer 3.5 Tom Neal, Ann Savage. Shot in six days in Poverty Row studio with only backdrop process shots (no locations) for a road movie! Follows Neal’s journey hitch-hiking from New York to LA for reunion with his girlfriend, who is trying to break in with the movies. “Fate” drags him down, according to his narration (narrator -- “fate can put the finger on you or me with no reason;” “no matter what way you turn, fate will be there to hit you in the face”); he can’t seem to get a break. His downfall (arrested for murder) in the end comes from a combination of very bad luck (“fate;” how unlucky can you be when you strangle someone by mistake!) and weak character – he makes bad decisions and can’t say ‘no!’ He makes decision to run with the money and the car when Haskell dies (of heart attack?) on the road, whereas he could have easily waited for the cops to come. He picks up Savage

near the California border, having the bad luck to pick up a person who knows that he is not Haskell (she had previously hitch-hiked with Haskell!), he hands over his fate and the money to her when she demands it, and then, after he resists her hare-brained plan to pose as the dead Haskell and collect his inheritance, he strangles her by mistake with a telephone cord in a dingy motel room, when she tries to call the police on him. Movie's outdoor location is convincing despite the process shots. Some 'noir' lighting, especially in close-ups of Neal as he narrates the story in the diner. Essentially a two character film. Neal is reasonably good at enlisting the sympathy of the audience, since he is not a bad person. He is weak and wimpy next to the hellion, femme fatale Savage, who loses her temper at the drop of a hat, often spits her words at him in anger in her sharp, nasal voice, and generally dominates him; her sudden outburst – sideways snarls and dagger eyes -- in car with Neal is particularly striking. Pretty amazing that such low budget offering achieves respectability – good script and good direction. (2005)

Le deuxième souffle 1966 Jean-Pierre Melville (France) 3.0 Lino Ventura as Gu, a murderous criminal with honor who has escaped from prison after serving many years; Paul Meurisse (the victim in 'Les diaboliques') as witty, intelligent Paris police inspector pursuing Gu; Christine Fabrèga as Manouche, Gu's girlfriend – she plays only a small decorative role in the plot; Raymond Pellegrin as the crook (honorable?) who organizes an armored car heist near Marseilles; Michel Constantin as Alban, a friend of Manouche. Intricately plotted heist film by Melville that does not live up to expectations raised by many of his other films, although the heist sequence along a spectacularly scenic road near Marseille is compelling. Having escaped from prison, Ventura is waiting to get out of France; but since he needs money, he agrees to be part of the plot to steal platinum from an armored car; the plan includes killing two policemen; the heist is a success, but Meurisse is on his heels and tricks him into a confession by pretending that he is a member of a rival gang; Gu is humiliated for having inadvertently squealed on his associates; he escapes from the hospital where he is recovering from wounds, murders a bunch of men, some of whom were part of the heist, and then dies as the cops ascend the stairs toward him. Although the basic story line is clear enough, the details of the narrative dealing with the interrelationships of various gangs is much too complex to be untangled in a single sitting. Melville directs in a matter-of-fact style: the actors speak their lines in a staccato and often expressionless fashion and the camera simply records dispassionately the actions and conversations of the participants. The treatment of the police is often parallel to the gangsters: both are violent and somewhat disreputable, just as both have their respectable sides: the police recognize the need to gather evidence to present to the judge, and certain of the criminals have a code of honor and loyalty among themselves: e.g., Gu joins the heist team because he trusts Pellegrin to treat him fairly, and when Gu says good-bye to one of the team members, he shakes his hand and thanks him for his help. The focus of the film is on Gu's divided character: on the one hand, he is extremely violent (he murders two men who have been terrorizing Manouche, he does not hesitate to shoot the policemen during the robbery, and he kills several men in the shootout in the end); on the other, he has a genuine affection for Manouche, who obviously love him in return, he wants to be associated only with gangsters with a sense of honor among themselves, and the thought that his associates might think he ratted them out is a searing humiliation for him. However, perhaps because of the plot complications, perhaps because of the contradictions in Gu's character, the reach for poetry is not as successful as in some other French gangster films. (2011)

The Devil and Daniel Webster 1941 William Dieterle 3.5 Edward Arnold as jovial, avuncular, statesmanlike Daniel Webster, the man of the people defending farmers from loan sharks (?) and preaching the salvation of America through moderation, freedom, and union; Walter Huston leering, fast talking, amusingly and quietly sarcastic as Mr. Scratch – but he likes a challenge and he is a good sport who doesn't mind losing to a worthy opponent; James Craig as dorky, clean-living Jabez Stone who falls under the dominion of greed; Anne Shirley very pretty and wholesome as his decent wife, Mary Stone – but she has moral indignation and fight in her when necessary; Jane Darwell as Ma Stone dispensing wisdom – and a huge peach pie – right and left; Simone Simon as Belle, feline, seductive, foreign-acting servant girl sent by the Devil into the household to work her wiles on Jabez; Henry Warner as the ghostly judge of the final jury. A direct derivative of the Faust story set in New Hampshire in the 1830s and 1840s. Jabez has huge financial problems – he is about to lose his farm to a loan shark

(turns out he has made a pact with Mr. Scratch); Jabez makes a deal with the Devil, and the power of money and of the seductive Belle corrupt him to the point that he is close to foreclosing on the property of the upstanding citizens of the town (apparently they are not very good farmers); a dramatic and amusing trial scene at the end gets him off the hook and turns him back to the path of virtue so we can have a happy ending. This is moralistic agrarian Americana reminiscent of Capra, where the good is kind, Bible-fearing people who help others in the community and the bad is men in league with the devil and eaten up by egotism and greed with no pity for their fellows – “All I think of is money, money, money!” The film ends on a positive note when Arnold convinces the jury of malefactors that they should be ashamed of being eaten up by greed. The film is very patriotic: the movement over the Alleghenies toward the West is described as unstoppable; if Daniel Webster can’t win the trial, then we should give America back to the Indians; the traitor to America, Benedict Arnold, is the only member of the jury challenged by Webster (he hides his head in shame); America is a place to realize justice, freedom, and virtue in this world, mainly as seen in hard-working farmers, who will be saved by organizing themselves into a cooperative organization, the Grange (the film must not have pleased Republicans). The film is sometimes very creepy – the square dance filled with flashing light contrasts and quick cutting where Jabez is seduced by Belle in a frenzy of movement; the fancy ball where only ghouls – dead souls – attend and the old usurer is embraced by Belle in a dance of death; the final trial scene where judge and jury are presented as indistinct ghostly images. A studio production par excellence: many of the scenes take place in detailed sets that look obviously unreal. Interesting as an extension of the New Deal films of the 1930s. Filled with memorable imagery. (2010)

The Devil is a Woman 1935 Josef von Sternberg (Paramount) 3.0 Marlene Dietrich as comically fickle Spanish *femme fatale* Concha, Lionel Atwill as army officer hopelessly in love with her but who sacrifices himself for her in the end, Cesar Romero as young revolutionary (!) who pursues her despite strong warning from Atwill, Edward Everett Horton as comic relief governor (along with all the policemen) who is also pursuing Concha. Another great triumph of Sternbergian style about extremely fickle woman who wraps men around her finger and never gets her comeuppance despite her transparent betrayals and double-crosses (Joe Breen slipped up?). Dietrich has lighter touch than previous films – she is beautiful, dressed in outrageous imaginative dresses and hats (she is in stark white with a large fan-shaped hat when she visits Romero in prison! She is also in contrasting white in the rain-drenched duel scene where all the other characters are in black); she is emotional, fickle and changes her mind constantly; she is headstrong, petulant, and unpredictable; a con woman who has fits when they suit her needs; her heart appears to be made of ice. All the men around her are captured fools – even when completely betrayed, they forgive her and make up with her at the drop of a hat – quite unrealistically. The film’s strong points are Dietrich, her wardrobe, and the extreme baroque decors that recall ‘The Scarlet Empress,’ but without the torture and dark-side psychology. Film takes place in Carnival time in southern Spain – Paramount back lot sets are teeming with people dressed in Carnival costumes emphasizing dwarfs and grotesque masks with huge, phallic noses and confetti falling everywhere; the buildings are in baroque style with gargoyle masks and shapes reminiscent of ‘Empress;’ lots of balconies and gates with ornate ironwork, one spectacular twisted staircase and ramp for a brief scene, the interiors with their usual crooked, broken slatted windows and screens, Dietrich sitting in wicker Huey Newton chair while fog lurks outside the window, mural of bullfight with suffering, upended *picadores* when Atwill opens the door to the room where Dietrich and Romero are having a tête-à-tête, the duel in the heavy pouring rain as the principals walk behind bare, gnarled branches covered in black moss. The ending is mixed: Dietrich double-crosses Romero, who thinks she is going to take the train with him to Paris; but she seems to be partly “redeemed”: she appears now to appreciate Atwill, who has almost let himself be killed for her, and she sacrifices her (apparent) love for Romero in order to return to Atwill (rather improbably given the number of times she has shown her contempt for him!). The Breen Office’s suggestion that she die in the end was rightfully rejected by Paramount – noble deaths can play no role in this rather comic treatment. (2007)

The Devil Wears Prada 2006 David Frankel 2.0 Meryl Streep as haughty, dictatorial, and yet soft-spoken editor of New York fashion magazine – everyone scurries around the office scared of her

least expression of displeasure, and she never has to raise her voice to get what she wants; Anne Hathaway toothy, willowy, and big-boobed as would-be journalist who gets the job as her assistant and then has to survive (she manifests a lot of jiggle as she runs down the street performing errands for Streep); Emily Blunt as Streep's first assistant with a British accent (also at time looking very glamorous in her low-cut gowns), who is still there after Hathaway leaves. Hesitant rags-to-riches story set in middle of New York fashion industry – one is surrounded by bitchy people, pressure to look glamorous, great pressure to perform. Hathaway shows up on her first day looking decidedly Plain Jane, but every American female breathes a sigh of relief and pleasure as she gets made over after about 20 minutes with long bangs and extreme high heels. After about half of the movie just immersing the viewer in the excitement of being there with the rich and powerful, the plot kicks in: will Hathaway, just a simple, good girl who really wants to be a journalist (she graduated in Journalism from Northwestern University) and who has a cute boyfriend who is a chef's peon in some (cool) restaurant, allow her soul to be warped by buying into the values of the fashion industry and just doing the will of Streep, who after a chilly reception in the beginning has taken a liking to Hathaway, even to the point of inviting her to Paris in place of the crestfallen Emily? Since this is Hollywood, Hathaway of course sees the error of her ways toward the end; she quits her job, gets a poor-paying job as an entry level writer for a newspaper (the office is old-fashioned and frumpy) and goes back to her boyfriend who has recently been promoted to sous-chef of a restaurant in Boston! Streep, who has been threatened by a palace coup, manages to keep her job and she continues in her ways. Whew! Hathaway just missed personal perdition! The movie is the female version of Spielberg's 'War of the Worlds'. (2006)

Les diaboliques 1954 Henri-Georges Clouzot (France) 4.0 Paul Meurisse as sadistic, tyrannical, womanizing head of private school; Vera Clouzot as meek, humble, abused and pretty (especially in last scene when she stumbles toward her death in sheer nightgown) wife of Meurisse with a heart weakness; Simone Signoret as icy, unsentimental, goal-oriented mistress of Meurisse who organizes most of the "murder" plot; Pierre Larquey as foolish, loquacious teacher serving as Hitchcockian-style comic relief; Charles Vanel as frumpy, nosy, "retired" commissaire de police who seems related to Simenon's Maigret and surely served as a model for Peter Falk's Colombo in famous TV series. Outstanding manipulative thriller with classic twist ending: through most of the movie we believe that Clouzot is plotting with Signoret to murder the sadistic schoolmaster; they drown him, dump his body in the filthy swimming pool, wonder what has happened to the disappeared body, sense his presence all around them (we never see him); and then in *tour de force* ending we discover in a shock that the whole time we have been dealing with a plot to murder Clouzot by frightening her to death. Expertly choreographed most of the way through. Particularly impressive is use of water imagery in murder: Meurisse is originally drowned in a bathtub while he is drugged – his head bobs up and we see only the whites of his eyes (again); in finale Clouzot is lured down the hall by the sound of her husband's typewriter; she then returns in a panic to her own bathroom where...she sees her husband lying underwater in the bathtub; he slowly rises until his head is out and you see only the whites of his eyes, Clouzot dies gasping, then the camera cuts back to Meurisse, who carefully removes the eye covers from his eyes. Very perverse: the ex-nun and still very religious Clouzot (she prays to Jesus and the Virgin on her private altar) plots to murder her husband, although she considers it a mortal sin; water, the symbol of baptism and purity, is used "twice" as a murder weapon, and in any case with the camera focusing on the dirty swimming pool we should know from the beginning that water will be put to nefarious uses. Compared to Clouzot's previous films, the influence of Hitchcock seems apparent. The ending is fixed up by the rather inexplicable presence of a "retired" police inspector, who seems to sign on as a voluntary detective to help Clouzot find her husband, and then arrests Meurisse and Signoret at the end for murder (and this despite his being on the school's premises at the time of the murder of Clouzot!); and there are several quirky, amusing, folksy characters, such as the two ineffective teachers who patiently bear up under Meurisse's tyranny, the two renters of Signoret in Niort – the man builds erector sets and listens to quiz shows on the radio, and the drunken soldier who pesters and makes nervous the two women while they are transporting the body back to the school. From the first rainy scene with the Deux-chevaux entering the rusted gate of the school, the film is imbued with a sense of creepiness, decay, and foreboding: begins with run-down school with plaster peeling everywhere, and the filthy weed-infested

swimming pool that hasn't been drained and cleaned in ages; all the interiors are worn-out and decorated with dilapidated furniture (Signoret's bathtub is creepy and makes a lot of noise!); director makes us sit through a whole meal in which Meurisse makes his wife and everybody else eat some semi-rotten bargain fish; all the traveling is done in a dilapidated Deux-chevaux panel truck; everyone except for the three principals wear frumpy, sloppy clothes. As in "Corbeau" film takes place mostly in a schoolyard, although compared to the well-organized communal school of 'Corbeau,' this one is dilapidated and poorly run; lurking in the background is the same sense of incipient anarchy represented by male school kids straining at the bonds of oppressive authority (vide "Zéro de conduite" de Jean Vigo). After death of Clouzot, film ends with little joke: the kid Moinet, who had previously (truthfully) reported that he had seen Meurisse (no one had then believed him), again breaks a window pane and tells the teacher that Clouzot had given him back his slingshot; he is sent *au picquet* and walks slowly away from the camera – author seems to be teasing us with the possibility that also the death of Clouzot was staged and there is a possibility of another twist! A couple of minutes of eerie sounding music in the beginning, but the rest of the film is completely without music! Despite a few inconsistencies, film is a masterpiece of thriller manipulation and misanthropic drama. (2006)

Dial M for Murder 1951 Alfred Hitchcock (Britain) 3.5 Ray Milland's urbane dryness is very convincing as husband plotting to murder his wife and then maneuvering desperately to avoid being caught when the plan goes awry; John Williams excellent as "typically" snooty but witty and smart British police inspector who hounds Grace Kelly and then, much to our surprise, works equally hard to exculpate her at the end of the film; Grace Kelly, the intended victim, cool, expressionless and humorless, who kills hired attacker with a pair of scissors in self-defense and then narrowly escapes the noose at the end (the audience does not always sympathize with her); her role is pretty passive; Robert Cummings as Kelly's former lover who remains loyal and devoted to her (his performance is mediocre). Rather atypical Hitchcock product – it is mainly a filmed version of a play, relying heavily on competent presentation of dialogue and acting rather than the directorial camera, all filmed in two room apartment; Hitchcock makes his cameo appearance in black and white photograph. Story takes place in London upper middle class – ex-tennis star Milland married to wealthy Kelly and depending on her money; she has had an affair with Cummings, American mystery writer; Milland blackmails old school chum to murder Kelly so he can have her money, but when murder backfires, he is maneuvering to save his own skin and in the process he incriminates Kelly. Very plot intensive film, a twisty whodunit that surprises us several times – when Kelly picks up a pair of scissors and kills her attacker, when she is convicted of murdering her blackmailer because of the incompetent (?) maneuvering of her husband, when the Inspector turns up at the last minute trying to save Kelly from the hangman's noose. Kelly's stabbing of murderer in back not credibly lethal at first, but Hitchcock adds his falling on his back with a thud, which drives the scissors in deeper. Plot is very intricate without being annoying; often we are working away trying to process new information or a new twist, and thanks to good direction – e.g., good close-ups of key objects -- we usually have enough information. Hitchcock has field day with his McGuffin, the key – the final clearing of Kelly at the end depends on Milland having put the dead man's key and not Kelly's back into her purse by mistake and his recalling this at the end when "her" key does not open the lock to their apartment's door; he then incriminates himself by reaching for the key he originally hid under the stairway carpet for use by the murderer, etc. Entertaining, but one misses the flourishes of the Hitchcockian style and his thematic obsessions. (2008)

Diary of a Chambermaid 1946 Jean Renoir 2.5 Unsatisfying version of the Mirbeau novel with most of the sex, perverseness, and French character muffled. Paulette Godard pretty and cute but not sexy and scheming enough as a lower class girl, Celestine, looking for a man with money (voice is also ungallicly shrill); Judith Anderson as the conniving, dominating "bourgeois" woman that hates the liberal tradition of the French Revolution – she hires Celestine; Reginald Owen as her submissive, foolish husband; Burgess Meredith (co-writer) as the loony next-door neighbor, Captain Mauger, who has an ongoing political feud with monarchists Owen and Anderson; Francis Lederer as the evil family valet Joseph, a ruthless social climber and disquieting man that kills geese with a long needle through the brain so that they will die a slow death; Hurd Hatfield as George, Anderson's son, an incompetent weakling.

The film shows the difficulties of adapting a French work in traditional Hollywood and the reasons for the failure of Renoir's career in the USA. In place of the perverse goings on of Buñuel's version (1964), Renoir's is in part a romance, in which the scheming, supposedly ruthless young woman falls in love (with George), and although still tempted to run off with the evil Joseph to found a café in Cherbourg, remains attached to her true love, and in the railroad carriage in the final scene writes in her diary that she will be faithful to her man until "death do us part". It is also a kind of thriller, in which the disquieting Joseph reveals himself as a bitter social climber and swindler (he gets his hands on Anderson's hereditary silver) and a murderer (he murders Mauger and almost kills Celestine's beloved, George); Joseph is unmasked at the end and shot to death by the townspeople. Hollywood intervenes to banish any sensationalism or cynicism: almost no sex or sexiness – a few surrogate kisses and everybody talking about getting married; the script downplays of course the bitterness of the divide between the townspeople (and Joseph) loyal to the French Revolution and the right-wing Reactionaries that refuse to attend the July 14 festivities; the saucy maid becomes a down-to-earth American gal that ends up falling hopelessly in love and accompanies her husband-to-be to Paris for a lifetime of wedded bliss; and of course there has to be a villain to blame for the bad things that happen to good people and he is punished in the end. Tone shifts strongly between the farce of Captain Mauger and Owen and the stern business of the social climbers and the lovers. The whole work filmed on an obvious, although expertly constructed and presented, set. (2016)

Diary of a Lost Girl (Tagebuch eines Verlorenen) 1929 G. W. Pabst (Germany) 3.0 Louise Brooks as young innocent seduced and impregnated by a womanizing cad, Edith Menard as her cute friend that escapes with her from the reform school. Interesting silent film about the fall and more or less redemption of Brooks. After giving birth, she is sent to a sadistic reform school (run by a leering head-shaved giant); she escapes from the school with Edith, gets set up in a brothel since she has nowhere else to go, regains some of her self-respect, but she is brought inexorably back into the milieu of her parents; after her father dies, she decides to marry the aristocratic wastrel who spend much of his time with the girls; he commits suicide, and Brooks marries his uncle who is conscience-stricken for having abandoned his nephew; she uses her new influence to rescue her old friend from the reform school, walking out the door defiantly with her. Thematically film is a kind of indictment against upstanding bourgeois mores with its emphasis on virginal purity, family honor – a big contrast between the hip, cute members of the younger generation and the stern old puritans of the old order, always stern-faced and dressed in some shade of black! Brooks is plucky after she matures a bit, and she fights back against the old folks with the help of her noble sugar daddy husband. Pabst's direction tells the story clearly enough with not many title cards; he is awfully fond of close-ups that he uses in great profusion, to the point of distraction; repeated intense close-ups seem to take the place of dialogue, which was then coming into play in German movies. Brooks is sexy and beautiful – rather solid body with smallish breasts, very dark hair bobbed above her ears, broad face with dark eyes and eyebrows, broad smile with perfect teeth; nothing very delicate about her. She acts quietly and with restraint. Film has poignancy since the anti-bourgeois message seems overemphasized for a country that is about to get the Nazis. (2005)

Diary of a Teenage Girl 2015 Marielle Heller 3.0 Bel Powley pudgy, cute, precocious, horny as Minnie, 15-year-old "hormone bomb" living in free-wheeling San Francisco during the 1970s; Kristen Wiig in first dramatic role as her liberated, drug- and alcohol-abusing mother trying to find her way after spending her youth in a hippie environment; Alexander Skarsgard as Monroe, Mom's genial but flakey boyfriend who has a lengthy affair with her daughter (!). Interesting, original take on a girl's coming-of-age based on a semi-graphic novel by Phoebe Gloeckner published in 1978. Obsessed with sex at 15, Minnie is exultant when she loses her virginity to her mom's boyfriend; the affair continues, until she decides to broaden her horizons – sex with teenage boyfriends (she has to instruct one of them what to do), group sex with her girlfriend and Monroe, lesbian sex with the girlfriend, posing as a prostitute one time. The first three-quarters of the film have the rhythm of a pornographic movie – moving on to ever more risqué involvements – although the film is frank and matter-of-fact rather than sexually exploitative. The last part of the film guides us toward a sort of redemption as Minnie develops remorse for her life style, struggles with the distinction between sex and love, breaks up with Monroe,

discovers that she has a gift in graphic arts, and states that she doesn't need a man in her life (?). She seems to emerge unscathed from her experiences with a dawning familiarity with the experience of love and of the risks she is exposing herself to. The film bowdlerizes the experience of premature obsessive sexual activity: not much bad happens to her. No mention of masturbation, what orgasms feel like (she apparently loves them), birth control, sexually transmitted diseases, violence, rape, involvement with the police (the book was apparently a bit more frank). The viewer sees a lot of Minnie's body, especially in the scene when she is examining herself critically in front of her bedroom mirror; but sex organs are pictured only in the Aline Kominsky-style drawings that Minnie displays to the camera, and in the imaginative, Disney-like color animations that portray Minnie's feelings and imagination throughout the film. Skarsgard does a good job of toeing the line between exploiting an underage girl (after all, what they were doing was illegal) and living his laid-back, good-humored, aimless life. Wiig is excellent at eliciting sympathy for a bemused woman in early middle age that often treats her daughter more like a sister – at one point, not suspecting what was going on, she advises Minnie to get out and enjoy herself with guys, to use that body since she won't have it forever. A bit troubling that the film suggests that screwing like a rabbit will help you grow up. Very promising first film by Marielle Heller – interesting, frank, sometimes moving. (2016)

The Dictator 2012 Larry Charles 2.0 Sacha Baron Cohen as macho, brutal, but ridiculous dictator of Wadiya, a small country in East Africa; Ben Kingsley mugging and very unamusing as Tamir, the dictator's treasonous brother; Anna Faris as Cohen's vegan, environmental activist girlfriend in New York; and a cast of hundreds including six or so busty virgin guards. Ridiculous, mostly not very funny, Cohen vehicle, in which he stars as a brutal dictator (constantly ordering people he is mildly unhappy with to be executed) who is ordered by the U.N. to draw up a constitution for his oppressed country; he goes to New York, meets the contrasted Faris, and in an unconvincing courtship agrees to marry her, and then returns with her to Wadiya where he blithely breaks all his promises for reform; John C. Reilly has unexpected appearance. There just isn't enough happening to support a feature-length film. The first 15 minutes or so are the most amusing. Film is quite short (maybe an hour and 15 minutes), and unlike his previous films, is completely scripted – no fooling innocent interviewees and taking them by surprise. As a result, the film lacks the hilarious spontaneity of the earlier films – the viewer is not allowed to indulge the pleasure of laughing at the triumphant success of Borat's scam of his stupid interlocutors. A great number of the jokes are scatological (the Dictator sitting on a throne-like potty) and sexual (jokes at the expense of the underarm hair that the "natural" Faris allows to grow). Cohen's Arabic-like pronunciation of English is often the subject of hilarity, particularly in the anti-Dictator café in New York, where Cohen reads of signs on the wall (e.g., "maximum occupancy 120") unintelligibly in order to avoid giving his true name. His narcissism also provides fodder – Megan Fox refuses to cuddle with him when they sleep together, he wins every event in Olympic-style games he organizes (he shoots some of the competitors), etc. Although there is some satire, Cohen manages to steer clear of most controversial subjects like Arabs, the United Nations, world political figures; the exception to the latter are of course Mammour Khadafi and Saddam Hussain. If Cohen intends to make another scripted feature film, he needs more heft in his scripts. (2012)

Dinner at Eight 1933 George Cukor 3.5 Lionel Barrymore, John Barrymore, Billie Burke, Wallace Beery, Jean Harlow, Marie Dressler, Lee Tracy. Wr. Frances Marion. Famous 'Grand Hotel' type film adapted by MGM from Edna Ferber, George Kaufman play. Focus -- introduce several piquant characters invited by Billie Burke to dinner party with British nobility (who beg off at the end); we get to know them all, there is a bit of tragedy, and the survivors (John Barrymore has committed suicide) converge on the party in the final scene, apparently a little bit wiser – Beery decides not to take over Lionel's company; some hint that Beery and Harlow may get along (they both are rough and a little low-life!); Burke decides that from now on she will pay attention to her dying husband and not worry so much about successful dinner parties. Famous line – Dressler tells Harlow in final scene that she will never have to worry about being replaced by a machine. Play is filled with good lines, e.g., BB on JH, "He smells of Oklahoma!" Characters are generally engaging: Lionel is dying of a heart ailment and is worried about the potential loss of his company; Harlow, who is a good comedienne, is having an affair

with her doctor, but they break up; John Barrymore is a washed up old actor (“The Profile”), broke, and alcoholic, but he still has a big star’s ego and is having a love affair with Burke’s daughter; the inimitable Dressler is true *grande dame* former stage actress, whose glory has faded, but who is aware of it, and retains a sardonic and honest sense of humor. Script obviously adopted from a play with its long scenes and almost exclusive focus on conversation; but thanks to great star cast, appropriate adaptation, and Cukor’s touch with actors, it works wonderfully. (2006)

Diplomacy 2014 Volker Schlöndorff (France) 3.5 Niels Arestrup as General Dietrich von Choltitz, commandant of Paris as the Allies near the city in August 1944; André Dussolier as Raoul Nordling, Sweden’s consul general in Paris. Outstanding dialogue-rich and beautifully filmed adaptation of French play, in which Nordling uses all his diplomatic skills to convince Choltitz not to implement Hitler’s plan to destroy all the bridges and the public monuments in Paris, which would result probably in tens of thousands of deaths. Both actors are powerful, fascinating, and compelling: the career Wehrmacht officer, who expresses his contempt for the French military, and insists that he has never disobeyed an order and is psychologically prepared at the beginning of the film to carry out Hitler’s orders; and the equally determined diplomat, who however uses talk-words, persuasion, and perhaps guile to get Choltitz to change his mind (although it is not clear in the film, Nordling was probably cooperating with the Resistance and the French military). The interview, which historically never took place, is carried out in part of a day and results in the general’s decision to spare the city. Nordling uses every argument in his arsenal to sway Choltitz’s, whose resistance is reinforced by the recently passed *Sippenhaft* that decreed the punishment of Choltitz’s family if he refused to carry out the order. It is not clear why Choltitz changed his mind. Perhaps the most effective incentive was the two men’s shared love of Paris, expressed through their enjoyment of red wine, Camembert cheese, and their view of the city outside Choltitz’s suite in the Hotel Meurice; even though he expresses resentment at the Allies’ total destruction of Hamburg, he simply cannot stomach doing the same thing to the City of Light. Another is Choltitz’s traditionalism, an old Junker military family that resents the SS thugs running Germany (a couple of them arrive chugalugging hard cider out of a bottle and claiming some paintings for Himmler) and that cares about the future of his country after the war is over. He also has a remnant of humanitarianism (although he admits to having murdered 30,000 Jews in the Ukraine) and is concerned about his reputation in the future – the main who destroyed Paris by obeying “un order aberrant”?! Suspense and excitement are built by cutting outside the hotel to the engineers setting the explosives and in the face of communication problems and Resistance activity their struggle to carry out their orders; grand finale when Choltitz races to the top of the hotel to tell the Lieutenant by radio not to ignite; even then, the French guide has to shoot the engineer dead when he gets ready to detonate anyway. Gripping dialogue, acting, and camerawork to ensure the viewer is never bored. A tribute to the art of diplomacy, where differences are settled by words and persuasion and not force. The film has a postscript dedicated to admirable Middle Eastern negotiator, Richard Holbrooke. (2015)

The Disappearance of Alice Creed 2009 J. Blakeson (Britain) 3.5 Eddie Marsan ugly, ill-tempered leader of an attempt to kidnap a British heiress and extract 2 million pounds from her loving dad; Martin Compston cute young kid who is usually submissive partner of Marsan in the kidnap activities; Gemma Atherton (Bond girl) with pretty bow mouth as the ultimate survivor victim who spends most of her time terrified but silenced with an orange ball gag. Compelling, claustrophobic thriller about two men who kidnap a young woman for ransom and then due to a lack of trust fall out between themselves and allow the victim to exploit their weaknesses. The film begins wordlessly with a series of efficient, sharply cut scenes in which the two principals prepare the kidnapping (buying things at the hardware store, preparing the cuffs on the bed, etc.) and then carry the victim screaming and kicking into the prison bedroom. The narrative carries a series of jolting surprises: the viewer progressively discovers that the sweet-faced Compston has known the victim ahead of time and that they had indeed been lovers; when Atherton is doing a bowel movement, Compston turns his back, Atherton grabs his gun, and she gives it up only when he convinced her that he loves her and they can cooperate to double-cross Marston; Marston of course discovers that something is amiss (Compston’s gun is in the bed and there is a bullet imbedded in the wall) and there is a hint of counter-collusion between him and Atherton; it is gradually

revealed that Marston and Compston are homosexual lovers; in the smashing conclusion Atherton is chained to a grate in an abandoned warehouse and in danger of being entirely forgotten and left to die, but Marston and Compston kill one another, but not before Marston gives Atherton the key to her locks so that Compston won't get all the money; when Atherton finds Compston dead at the wheel of the car full of money, she hesitates – return to her father? – and then makes her decision and drives off affirmatively claiming the money for herself! Intricately plotted, psychologically intriguing, well acted, and efficiently filmed low-budget film that keeps you guessing and off-balance the whole time. Never boring despite the essentially one-room set and the limited cast. (2010)

The Disaster Artist 2017 James Franco 3.5 Hilarious spoof account of the making of Tommy Wiseau's 2003 'The Room', judged (affectionately by some) as one of the worst films of all-time. James Franco almost unrecognizable as the eccentric, egotistical, delusional, unconsciously incompetent although often good-hearted Tommy; brother James Franco more sensible as Tommy's good friend, Greg; Seth Rogan very amusing as Wiseau's cynical, mocking, eye-rolling script supervisor for the making of 'The Room'; Ari Graynor (Lisa in film), Alison Brie (Greg's skeptical girlfriend), Jacki Weaver (mother playing in the film), Zac Efron, Sharon Stone, Melanie Griffith et al., in small, often amusing roles as players in the film. Film starts with hilarious scene in a San Francisco acting class featuring the nervous inexpressiveness of Greg, and the shattering, violent Method emoting of Tommy, who pounds the floor repeatedly screaming "Stella!" ('Streetcar named Desire'). The two decide to work together (much to the chagrin of Greg's mother [Megan Mullally]), and become famous in Hollywood. When neither of them make any progress (demonstrated hilariously by Judd Apatow's putdown of Wiseau's "audition" in a restaurant), they decide to make their own movie. Wiseau remains a mystery throughout – no one knows where the money comes from (about \$6 million), where he was born (somewhere in Eastern Europe?), or how old he is. Tommy writes a script devoid of all plausibility, the two friends buy expensive filming equipment, and go to work in cheap studio space. The laughs are intense in the making of the film: Tommy's inability to remember his lines (67 takes to get one short statement correct – Rogan very disgusted), his insistence that in the sex scenes his butt be shown clearly (causes consternation in the premiere of the film), the tendency of the screenplay to have Tommy say "Hi" at the beginning of each scene ("I did not hit her! Oh, hi Mark."), Tommy's overacting, non-sequitur conversations, editing so rough that it is impossible not to notice, etc. Greg stays loyal to Tommy, playing the peacemaker and fencer-mender throughout the process. Perhaps the weakness of the film is its going soft at the end. Although always allowing for the friendship between the two principals, the tone of most of the film is good-humored mocking, bringing out the absurdity of the process. Happily ever after at the end, however. Greg and Tommy are friends forever. And just when the jeering at the premiere is building up steam, the mood changes, the audience begins to cheer and clap, and give Tommy a standing ovation. 'The Room' becomes a cult film before our eyes, guaranteeing income and fame to Tommy. The director goes out of the way not to be contemptuous, as if Tommy had unconsciously planned the surrealist absurdity from the beginning. Nevertheless, takes its place next to 'Ed Wood' and 'Florence Foster Jenkins' in the pantheon of mockery of incompetent, lovable artists. (March 2018)

The Dish 2000 (Australia) Tom Sitch 3.0 Sam Neill as the pipe smoking avuncular head of the radio telescope (in Parkes, a small town in New South Wales) that will track the moon-walking TV signals on Apollo 11, Patrick Warburton as NASA expert with high sense of responsibility and an essential humility that respects competence, Roy Billing as the good-humored, somewhat ambitious mayor of Parkes; and a cast of happy secondary characters -- the teenager who marches around patriotically in an Australian uniform, the pretty young girl who brings food to the crew of the Dish, the daughter of the mayor who is politically shrill calling the prime minister 'fascist', the two assistants in the Dish who provide much of the comedy, and the security guard (Taylor Kane), who takes his job very seriously but usually exaggerates the necessity of security precautions. Delightful light-hearted comedy: the focus of the plot is the part the Dish plays in tracking Apollo 11 including the difficulties (a power outage, when even Warburton agrees to "bull-shit" NASA, and high winds that endanger the operation in its moment of crisis). But there are many subplots featuring the lovable, cheerful people of Parkes, who are delighted that fame has come their way: the mayor's pride at closing the deal (?) and his hopes to

promote his political career if he wins the favor of the tipping prime minister, the pleadings of the mayor's wife that he call her an upscale name in the presence of the visitors instead of the common, provincial name -- Maisie -- that he has used all their life, little romances budding under the approving eye of the elders, etc. The film successfully evokes the idealism of the age -- the excitement of landing men on the moon, and the pride and excitement of Australians that they are part of it; the viewer can't help but reflect that there are precious few such undertakings to be proud of today (2006). Australia comes across as provincial, bluff, uncomplicated, good-humored, and happy to enjoy a little of the reflected light from the great American technological achievement. One likes every character in the film, and one feels good/happy when all turns out right in the end. (2006)

District 9 2009 Neill Blomkamp (South Africa) 4.0 Shalto Copley in marvelous performance as foolish bureaucrat who is put in charge of the eviction of millions of aliens ("prawns") in a Johannesburg shanty town; Vanessa Haywood as his wife Tanya; cast of hundreds of talking heads, interviewees, soldiers, security personnel, Nigerian gangsters, and perhaps aliens. Terrific science fiction film set in South Africa. Huge mother ship is hovering over Johannesburg; the aliens, who are sickly and pitiful have been evacuated from mother ship and interned in shanty town; Copley is commissioned to remove them to a concentration camp outside the city; he encounters a bad liquid solution that begins to turn him into a prawn (images of his prawn claw growing out of his human arm are disgusting); in his race to be restored to full human nature, he befriends a prawn, Chris, and his son; and Chris manages to escape, while Copley is still trapped in his prawn body in the internment camp. Film begins as a mock documentary with talking heads, interviewees, etc. who are very convincing – making the film seem real and immediate. It is quite unusual to see an alien film in which the aliens are neither threatening ('Alien') nor benevolent (Spielberg), but pitiful victims; the parallels between the aliens and blacks in South Africa (especially under Apartheid where Blacks instead of Prawns are separated into camps) and other oppressed minorities throughout the world is unmistakable. Movie begins in documentary style (very effective) but ends in a more traditional way – buddy movie between Shalto and Prawn Chris; the tense race to see if Chris and perhaps Shalto can escape the bad guys back to the mother ship; the terrific special effects-laden final confrontation between Shalto, who is hidden inside a huge combat robot (like Robocop?), and the thoroughly hissable bad guy (David James) – James is finally blown away by the Prawn weaponry, and his limbs appear to be consumed by Prawns after the explosion. Again, the bad guys are no longer Communists, Russians, or Arab terrorists, but money hungry multi-national corporations. MNU (Multi-National Union) has apparently been hired by the South African government (?) to take care of the Prawn problem, which they do with extreme brutality and very heavy weaponry – although their pretense of taking care of the problem legally (e.g., serving eviction notices) is very amusing. Ending of the film seems to set up a possible sequel: since Shalto is now a prawn and is still in love with his wife (he sends her mysterious metal flowers), will Chris return to turn Shalto back into a human and give him back to his family? Gripping, original, sometimes touching sci fi alien invasion film. The director is gifted. (2010)

The Divorcée 1930 Robert Z. Leonard (MGM) 3.0 Norma Shearer as jilted wife who refuses to accept the sexual double standard, Chester Morris very clunky as husband who insists that his infidelity "doesn't mean a thing" (repeated many times), Conrad Nagel only a little less clunky as Shearer's disappointed suitor – he marries another woman because he feels guilty about disfiguring her in a car accident (she later wears a veil!), Robert Montgomery as the suave man about town who is Shearer's first lover after the marital breach. Early MGM talky that shows evolving film techniques in early talky period: static camera, mechanical seeming editing, bad sound (impression that there is no dubbing), awkward acting (perhaps the studio hadn't yet weeded out the bad sound actors). Setting is sophisticated party set probably in New York; they don't think they are having fun unless they are wearing evening clothes, playing bridge, wisecracking, and drinking bubbly in some night club. Movie has Norma Shearer going for it – elegantly pretty, intelligent, good actress; she has good eat-the-scenery scene in middle of film, when she mourns the break up of her marriage. Movie is also notable for its pre Breen Office treatment of the sexual double standard. Husband repeats like a mantra that his initial infidelity "doesn't mean a thing," but Shearer refuses to accept the code, and she goes off to even the score with

Montgomery. When hubby is furious about that, they divorce, and she embarks on extended round of no-holds-barred partying in night clubs (montages of champagne glasses revolving in circles, etc.) and going out with a string of other men. Nagel wants to get together with her – he has no compunction about leaving his disfigured wife; scene where she enters in black veil to plead with Shearer for her marriage is pretty atrocious. Ends in morally acceptable way: Morris and Shearer really love one another, even after all these years and partners, and they forgive one another and get back together. Film would have worked better if Shearer's husband was played by a better actor – say, Montgomery, who lurks most of the time in the background. (2008)

Divorzio all'italiano 1961 Pietro Germi (Italy) 3.0 Marcello Mastroianni very amusing as effete Sicilian nobleman in love with his niece (less than half his age) – looks young with brilliantine hair, hairnets in bed, but then more natural coiffure in latter part of film. Effective satire about Italian marriage and love customs. Takes place in Agramonte, fictitious town near Catania. Mastroianni has hilariously unattractive wife with low forehead, upper lip facial hair, and an amorous disposition that he doesn't respond to. Since divorce is not allowed in Italy, the problem is how to get rid of her. After several amusing imaginary sequences (have the mafia shoot her down? send her off into space by rocket?), he decides to encourage a liaison between her and her dorky old flame, whom he invites into the palazzo to restore the salon frescoes; he then (eventually – he needs the help of the local mafia) chases them down where l'artisto is painting his beloved next to the ocean, and he kills her. Ingenious use of a defense lawyer with high-flying rhetoric; as he plans and implements his plot, the soundtrack plays simultaneously the imagined bombastic defense the lawyer will use at his trial. Being in Italy, where 'onore' and male pride counts, he receives only a minimal sentence of three years, whereupon he returns to Agramonte and marries his beloved who has supposedly waited patiently for him. In the last shot we are unfortunately made aware that she will not be faithful to him, since while she kisses her husband, she plays footsy with the helmsman on the yacht. Entertaining and at times effectively satirical. Scrumptious little Margherita Girelli plays the maid Sisina. (2007)

Django Unchained 2012 Quentin Tarantino 3.0 Jamie Foxx as freed slave, smart, looking like Clint Eastwood on his nag, bent on finding his wife (Kerry Washington) in Mississippi; Christoph Waltz in quirky performance as retired dentist turned bounty hunter, a good-guy abolitionist that takes Django with him to kill outlaws and cash their corpses in for the federal reward; Leonardo DiCaprio wearing out his welcome sporting a unconvincing Southern accent as an over-the-top racist Mississippi plantation owner; Samuel L Jackson prosthetically aged as outrageously entertaining racist major domo of DiCaprio's plantation. A self-indulgent, predictably violent screed against slavery and racism presented as a spaghetti western played out in Mississippi (the principals also make it into what appears to be Wyoming's Jackson Hole); Jamie Foxx mounted on a horse recalls the classic laconic Clint Eastwood, and the music of Ennio Morricone on the soundtrack takes the viewer back to the Leone epics. The main plot motor is Jamie Foxx's search for his wife who has been sold to DiCaprio, but the lazily structured narrative expends most of its energy pillorying slavery and racism and bathing the viewer in fountains of blood squirting out of human bodies when hit by bullets. Tarantino seems to want to rub the nation in the sins of its past: white people are outrageously intolerant of blacks (the black Jackson is horrified that DiCaprio plans to allow Django sleep in a bed in the "Big House", saying that all the sheets will have to be burned); white overseers are caricatured as sadistic bastards more interested in torturing slaves than in getting them to do their work; white guards are the lowest of white trash, dirty and stupid in ragged clothes speaking a version of English that only their mothers (do they have mothers?) could understand; the "Nigger" word is used in practically every other line, by DiCaprio who is willing to pay \$12,000 for a "nigger Mandingo fighter" who will fight to the death, by Jackson hovering at the side of DiCaprio warning him about every nigger plot he can sniff out, etc.; the slaves themselves are offensively stupid and passive, looking on placidly at the cruelties and prejudices of their masters (don't historians tell us that black slaves resented their condition, hated their masters, and enlisted in large numbers in the Union Army to help achieve it?). The violence is so excessive that it becomes dull: people are murdered casually for the money (Django and Waltz killing wanted criminals from a distance with long rifles) or just to have a bloodbath, as in the shootout in the Mississippi Big House, where Django hides behind dead

bodies with blood squirting upwards when hit by bullets (was ‘The Wild Bunch’ the last time we were assaulted by so much blood?); when DiCaprio orders a black to be torn to shreds by dogs, his white trash acolytes leap forward with joyful whoops; and just to keep up the momentum, he adds dynamite to his arsenal, with which he dispatches the character played by Tarantino and then blows the Big House to smithereens. Some of the scenes are genuinely funny: the Ku Klux Klan precursors (this is the 1850s) start bickering like a bunch of old hens when they find out that they can’t see out of their hoods; the stupidity and ugliness of the white trash guards whose most eloquent utterances are grunts; the surprise destruction of Tarantino when he is blown up with dynamite. The scenes played in the Big House under the dominance of DiCaprio last way too long: the dialogue is not up to Tarantino’s usual standards; DiCaprio does not have the panache to carry the long scenes. Although a murderous bastard himself, Foxx impresses with his slow burn and repetitive groping his pistol in the holster; the bearded Waltz deserves perhaps another Oscar speaking in his precise diction with a tinge of a German accent, dedicated to the finding of Django’s wife, and surprising the viewer with his derringer-executed assassinations of a couple of main characters. Mostly entertaining film that often offends through its excesses. (2013)

Do the Right Thing 1989 Spike Lee 3.5 Spike Lee, Danny Aiello, John Turturro, Richard Edson, Ossie Davis, Ruby Dee, Bill Nunn (Radio Rahim), Esposito. Very ‘obnoxious’ movie about racial tensions in Bedford-Stuyvesant section of Brooklyn. Happens on very hot day, and racial tensions escalate resulting in burning of Sal’s pizzeria. Much tension among all racial groups – focus on Blacks, but also Koreans, who have opened a grocery store across the street from Sal’s, Puerto Ricans, who object only to Rahim’s very loud ‘Public Enemy’ music, the white cops, who can’t stand the ‘useless’ minorities, and of course Italians, who as usual are the bad guys in Lee’s movies (John Turturro is the most racist), who seem even to hate one another but hang together in a kind of clan belonging. Nothing poetic or quiet; everybody loud, in your face, loud music, a lot of shouting, and extremely profane. Mookie (Spike Lee) is the narrative focus; a skeptical, moderate guy, who tries to stay friends with both sides, and toward the end to keep the peace, but for some reason, he is the one who, after the killing of Rahim by the police, starts the riot by throwing a garbage can through Sal’s window. Radicals are Esposito and Rahim; moderates are the old folks, the Mayor and Mother/Sister. Lee is affectionate but impatient with three older black guys who sit on the corner (including “Sweet Dick” Willie) and express their opinions about everything, but who never act; they complain about the Koreans taking their jobs and money, but then Sweet Dick Willie, who is impatient with one of his buddies when the latter complains about racism, crosses the street to buy another beer from the Korean store owners. Camera quite subjective, moving from face to face, on one occasion with individuals from all racial groups shouting racial epithets at the camera, and ending with the radio station announcer (Samuel L. Jackson) telling everyone to cool it. Ends in violence beginning with the confrontation between Sal and Rahim (and Buggin’ Out) in the pizzeria over putting some pictures of Blacks on the walls of the restaurant, then the death of Rahim at the hands of the police, and then the looting and burning down of Sal’s; but the mood the next morning is subdued and in the case of Mookie remorseful. Lee ends movie with two printed quotations, one from MLK denouncing violence as no solution, and the other from Malcolm X seemingly justifying violence under certain conditions, i.e., in “self-defense;” -- quite ambiguous, some think irresponsibly so. A lot of imagination, and Lee has to get credit for making a movie about racism and violence, and inventing a style to express it. Through the character of Mookie, he seems to lean in the direction of non-violence. (2005)

A Doctor in the House 1954 Ralph Thomas (Britain) 2.0 Dick Bogarde as rather naïve young medical student at St. Swithin’s Medical School in London; Kenneth More as repeating student, slacker and rugby fan that flunks his courses on purpose; Donald Sinden as clueless, womanizing Tony; Suzanne Cloutier as pretty, free-spirited girlfriend of More; James Robertson Justice as humorous, pompous surgeon; Muriel Pavlow as pretty nurse that Bogarde takes a liking to; Jean Taylor Smith as Sister Virtue, the stern and forbidding nurse administrator. Famous British 50s comedy film – young Brits raising hell and letting off steam – that comes across as flat in 2015. The film follows an assortment of medical students through five years at St. Swithin’s: some make it all the way through (Bogarde); some are condemned to be eternal students (More, who prefers it that way since his grandmother gives him a

generous allowance). Bogarde, a retiring chap when he first arrives, soon learns from his chums how to drink, carouse, raise hell in the street after an exciting rugby victory; he is persuaded to take a sophisticated young woman to an expensive restaurant, where he is soon over his head in costs; he is almost expelled for falling through a skylight into the head nurse's bedroom, but he is saved by the supportive surgeon Justice; he and Pavlow strike up a romance, and although not married at the end, they seem destined to union. The film is a pale precursor of the immortal 'Animal House' – no bad language, no dirty jokes, no female nudity, no sex, and the schoolboy antics are tame and often accidental. Some amusing scenes: Bogarde drops his newly purchased skeleton in a city bus; the surgeon gives the students a lesson on diagnosis of a patient while telling the flustered patient not to worry since this doesn't concern him; Bogarde is able to pass the diagnosis part of his final exam with the help of the patient, who whispers his symptoms and diagnosis to him. Film was very popular at the time, giving rise to four or five sequels. (2015)

Dodsworth 1936 William Wyler (based on the novel by Sinclair Lewis) 3.5 Walter Huston making an impression of nobility and patient forbearance as a retired auto executive; Ruth Chatterton as his youngish wife going through a rough mid-life crisis; David Niven as her first potential lover (she is too "American" to proceed); Paul Lukas as the French playboy who seduces her during her visit to France; Maria Oupenskaya deliciously icy and haughty as the disapproving mother of the Austrian count she later decides to marry; Mary Astor saccharine as the single American *déracinée* living in Naples that Huston eventually settles down with to live happily ever after ; John Payne looking like he is 19 as Dodsworth's son-in-law. High quality 30s Hollywood melodrama about a man who retires from the work world and follows his curious wife to France to experience something new. It turns out the Chatterton's yearning for the unexperienced leads her into affairs with distinguished-looking Europeans in tuxedos (shades of DeMille except that – surprise for post-Code – she consummates her affairs); film repeatedly explains her behavior as a fear of growing old, a point a bit hard to accept since she seems to be about 25. All performances are first rate—particularly Huston's bluff, good-humored loyalty and patience when dealing with his wife's infidelities and Chatterton's indecision and sudden changes of mood and minds. For 1936 the film deals very frankly with the disintegration of the marriage relationship (he unromantic and unexciting and she flighty and superficial), and their decision to end it all with divorce! Ending is somewhat hokey; living platonically with Astor, Dodsworth is having so much fun that he cannot return to his demanding wife when she seeks reconciliation and he is reunited with Astor, both sporting huge smiles of joy! But for once the joy is expressed by a couple about to remarry after divorce. Film is extremely well directed – from the focused performances to the elegant deep focus *mise-en-scène*: characters or objects in the foreground with important happenings in the background, once viewed through a mirror, or the exiting through a door from Astor's apartment in Naples. Fairly typical Hollywoodian contrast between American and European culture: Americans are practical, down-to-earth, and don't waste their time; Europeans are suave, idle – plenty of time to seduce the eager American woman or break up a guy's marriage. Tone of film is genuine and serious; no cheap plot turns (e.g., somebody suddenly dies when hit by a car), but an honest look at a failing marriage, where the parties are drifting inexorably apart. (2007)

La dolce vita 1960 Federico Fellini (Italy) 3.0 Marcello Mastroianni as Marcello, existentialist everyman wandering through the night spots and aristocratic penthouses of Rome looking for meaning in life; Anita Ekberg as voluptuous, iconically glamorous American actress appearing briefly in first part of film; Yvonne Furneaux arresting performance as Mastroianni's mistress – desperately loving and jealous; Anouk Aimée as another one of his mistresses; Walter Santesso as photographer Paperazzo; Alain Cuny as Steiner, the philosopher family man. Somewhat irritating, often intriguing famous film about a newspaper reporter who would rather be a great artist/writer; he wanders through Rome and the living rooms of Rome's wealthy in search of the meaning of his life. The film is episodic, being bound together by the person of Marcello and the thematic significance of each episode. Begins with the famous scene of the statue of Christ being carried by a helicopter – which gives Marcello the opportunity to flirt with some pretty bikini-clad women on a rooftop; Anita Ekberg as mysterious unattainable child-woman cavorts with Marcello in the Trevi Fountain and climbs to the top of St. Peter's dome; the fake miracle scene

provides more scandal fodder for the Catholic Church; Marcello is attracted by the poetic and family lifestyle of Steiner, who personally puts his children to bed under soft mosquito nets; Marcello encounters his father, who turns out to be a good-natured bon vivant; Marcello has a *bataille royale* with Furneaux in his sports car on a deserted road – the mutual insults and escalating anger probably win the all-time prize for domestic disputes in the movies; Marcello and his friends retire to the country villa of a rich friend, where they cavort and shock us – e.g., Marcello rides one of the female guests like a donkey (but as usual no nudity and no sex); the guests then run down to the beach where they ooh and ah over a very ugly sea monster who has been netted by fishermen (symbol of the corruption of upper class life in Rome?); Marcello then encounters the angelic waitress on the beach – she beckons to him about something, but he cannot hear and he walks off disconsolately. The film portrays the director's ambivalence about Marcello's lifestyle – ooh, so much fun and so exciting, and yet it is corrupt and depressing, even to the point of driving Steiner to suicide. The issue is never decided, since at the end Marcello walks away from both sides – the corrupt party and from the angelic siren. Mastroianni comes across as rather tired and aimless as he wanders through the different scenarios; he never lives up to his reputation as such a ladies' man that his fiancée is consumed by jealousy. The strength of the film is the memorable images: Ekberg off the plane; Ekberg and Mastroianni in the Trevi Fountain; the helicopters carrying the statue of the Christ with the outstretched arms; the con-game children leading the stupid crowd around the abandoned field in search of the Virgin Mary; the wistful good-bye to the angel of innocence in the last scene. The film seems too anchored in the private fantasies and hang-ups of the director; moments of impatience and boredom due perhaps to the lack of narrative coherence. (2009)

Dolores Claiborne 1995 Taylor Hackford 3.5 Kathy Bates in blockbuster role as crusty, sarcastically humorous working class New Englander in hot water; Jennifer Jason Leigh in often annoying one-note performance as her angry, estranged daughter whose narrative duty is to help her mom and to figure out what exactly she has done; Christopher Plummer also in atypical, one-note performance as grim Yankee police investigator determined to prove Bates is guilty of two murders; David Straithorn as over-the-top abusive husband of Bates; Judy Parfitt in extravagant performance as wealthy woman that Bates works for and then takes care of in her dotage. Complex, grippingly entertaining psychological thriller set on an island off the coast of Maine (actually filmed in Nova Scotia). The film begins with what appears to be a lurid murder scene as an elderly Parfitt plunges down the stairs of her house and Bates looks extremely guilty holding a large ceramic rolling pin over her head (she dies before the trembling Bates can hit her). After journalist Leigh arrives from New York and moves with her mother into her spooky old run-down house, the screenplay focuses on discovering whether Bates killed her husband several years ago and whether she is guilty of a second murder. Virtually half of the film is taken up with colorful flashbacks representing Bates' revelations to Leigh about what really happened: both sadistic husband Straithorn and demanding employer Parfitt give Bates plenty of reason to want to commit murder; but it turns out that Straithorn fell by accident into a deep well when chasing his wife with murderous intent and that Parfitt threw herself down the stairs in a suicide attempt and then begged Bates to finish her off. The voyage toward discovery of Bates' innocence through flashbacks is suspenseful and very entertaining. The dialogue with the angry, sulking Leigh however tries one's patience – given her family background (it turns out she was sexually abused by her father) it is credible that she is an angry child, but her performance is too predictable. The film is atypical of King's vehicles with its emphasis on psychological issues, but it occasionally dips into grand guignol horror – the initial “murder” scene, the spooky run-down old house where Bates had raised her daughter, the ugly, lurid violence of Straithorn in the flashbacks, especially the time that he unexpectedly hits Bates in the back with a board, the equally lurid, hatefully ugly face of the bedridden Parfitt as she spews insults on the long-suffering Bates and then throws herself down the stairs. Cinematography is atmospheric, sometimes evoking the loneliness and bitterness of the principals and sometimes – especially in the flashbacks – the picturesqueness of the coastal locations. The film's strongest point, however, is the blockbuster performance of Bates, without whose power the film might have descended into the ridiculous. Entertaining and imaginative, although not for all tastes. (2011)

Don Jon 2013 Joseph Gordon-Levitt 3.0 Gordon-Levitt as addicted porn watcher and masturbator, who finds his solitary sex more enjoyable than the real thing; Scarlett Johansson as stunningly glamorous girlfriend, who has her own agenda -- dominate her man according to the rules of romantic comedy; Julianne Moore as free-thinking older woman that Gordon-Levitt meets in a community college class that his girlfriend makes him attend; Tony Danza looking wrinkled and short, but vivid as Jon's dad with a twinkle in his eye for a pretty young woman. Light-hearted drama about a guy who slowly learns how to love a woman more than the porno sex objects on his computer. For starts, he begins a relationship with Johansson, but doesn't give up his porn addiction (he can masturbate 15 times a week and still get it on with Scarlett whenever she wants). The film wittingly repeats his customary modus operandi – grease his hair, wearing tight pants, watching porn and stroking his meat (quick intercut pictures of porn stars), driving aggressively and angrily down the street in his loud American car, going to confession once a week (he say his church is very important to him), then saying his penance ('Hail Mary... a certain number of times) while lifting weights in the gym. Keen satire of the Catholic Church – people sit around distracted, the priest hearing Jon's confession barely pays attention, reeling off his rote formula of absolution and giving Jon a predetermined number of prayers for penance; the priest refuses to engage when Jon – with a dawning conscience – wants to ask a question. Surprise when the relationship with Johansson founders not primarily because of Jon's porn, but because of her inflexible devotion to the presuppositions of rom com – the man is there to indulge every whim of his lady, it is absolutely forbidden for him to do a lick of housework, if he breaks any rule, she storms out in indignation. Jon might have gone back to his porn friends, if it had not been for the adventurous and kind Moore, who gives the young man a couple of lectures and some hands-on demonstration of what a real relationship is like – what it is like to “lose yourself” in a sexual moment with a person that you love. No marriage plans, but Jon has learned his lesson and they are happy together for the moment. Moore's smarmy, wounded hippie character is perhaps the weakest link in this inventive and amusing independent film. (2014)

Don't Breathe 2016 Fede Alvarez 3.0 Horror thriller that pushes all the buttons showing that it is harder to get out of a well-locked house than in. Stephen Lang as the cruel Blind Man, who defends his home against intruders with every ruthless means; Daniel Zovatto as Money, the low-life leader of the burglary team – he is eliminated close to the beginning; Dylan Minette as deceptively sweet and cautious member of the trio, who is shot to death at the end; Jane Levy as Rocky, the only survivor of the beginning three – she is anxious to score money to be able to leave Detroit for California with her daughter. After establishing the identities and felonious m.o of the three burglars, they plunge into an old house in a Detroit neighborhood that looks as if it has been burned out by the Vandals; they think this burglary will be easy since the occupant is a blind Vietnam vet. Think of their surprise when the Blind Man turns out ruthless and cruel, determined to protect his cache at any cost. The millennial invaders are soon on the run, taking care not to make noise (breathing, panting, stepping on old boards, etc.) so that Blind Man won't be able to shoot them; they also try to escape through heating ducts, crash through skylights, and hide in bedrooms when Blind Man's vicious, slobbering Rotweiler wakes from his slumber and takes after them. A series of surprise developments keep the viewer attentive: Rocky discovers Blind Man's cache in a safe and henceforth will not be separated from it; Minette and Rocky discover a gagged and booby-trapped young woman in the cellar – it appears she is being punished for a hit-and-run accident that killed Blind Man's daughter; when Blind Man captures Rocky, in an uncharacteristic cascade of words he reveals that the woman (whom he has since accidentally shot) had been inseminated and was bearing his child – to make up for the daughter she killed; he then moves to inseminate Rocky, vials of dripping, goeey semen and all. Rocky is finally able to escape but only after a donnybrook confrontation with the dog in an abandoned car (the scene carries signs of Sam Raimi's car scene in 'Drag me to Hell'). In the last shot in the airport she walks toward her plane after learning that – believe it or not – Blind Man is still alive. Should we expect a sequel? The film is effectively made to keep the viewer nervous and in suspense; although several incidents stand out for their implausibility and one wonders how many times a film's characters are allowed to rise from the dead. (2017)

Don't Change Your Husband 1919 Cecil B. DeMille 3.0 Gloria Swanson very pretty dressed in rather outlandish Orientalizing costumes – long necklaces, turbans, feather fan, large earrings, wrap-around beehive hairdo, etc. and she wears a special headdress to bed; Elliott Dexter as inattentive husband who smokes cigars (dumps the ashes on the floor), falls to sleep with his cigar burning in his hand, eats onions raw (with a little salt), cares only about business, and pays no attention to his wife's romantic needs; Lew Cody as foppish guy with Kaiser Wilhelm moustache (thus the European look) who preys on other men's wives. DeMille moralistic tale about the dangers of changing mates, especially when it is mainly appearances and cigars that are the problem. Set in luxurious, elegant homes with a lot of Chinese motifs. Long, poetic, moralistic, rather corny titles. Accompanied by easy living music in the Henry Mancini style. Swanson resorts to much body and facial pantomime to get her point across in this silent flick; and she plays a ukulele! Much use of close-ups and editing to make points – e.g., visually comparing Cody to Dexter on several points – tie, smoking, shoes, etc.; or when Cody proclaims his love for Gloria at the dinner table by moving his doll next to hers and knocking over her husband's with his. When Cody turns up the seduction, DeMille cuts to a bacchanalian revel with bathing beauties and muscled black slaves in g strings bringing her jewels, and then a reduction "Afternoon of a Faun" fantasy with Swanson eating drippy grapes from her studly paramour. Plot moves through a predictable narrative pattern. Hubby is such a bad dancer that he blackens the dainty shoes of his wife. Swanson is constantly tempted to have a true dalliance swooning when the stud takes her in his arms, but guilt holds her back for a while. But when she tries to have a heart to heart with the husband, he falls asleep! When he finally realizes that things aren't good, he says he will not stand in her way. She leaves him for to marry pretty boy, but soon finds that he is no dream either – he uses toothpicks, smells of cigarettes and alcohol, he dips doughnuts in his coffee, hides behind the newspaper, etc. Meanwhile, hubby, who is very lonely, goes on a self-improvement campaign – off with the moustache and he starts to work out. Soon dreamboat starts to take her jewels to raise money and to gamble; and then Swanson discovers he has another girlfriend to whom he gives things he has refused his wife. Then begins the process of rapprochement with Dexter, and she notices that he is now fit, handsome, and wears cufflinks to be elegant for her (dressing up in evening clothes is a big plus for Swanson); and when they sit down to dinner, he passes up the onions that have been specially prepared for him. Nice parallel editing between the dinner of new hubby with his flighty, flapper girlfriend (they go gambling after) and the reconciliation dinner of Swanson and Dexter. He: "To think I had paradise in my arms and I didn't even know it." In final confrontation Husband One acts manly with Pretty Boy, who weakly collapses. Swanson sends him off with his girlfriend. Film ends unexpectedly (ending missing?) with hubby one promising that he will be waiting for Swanson when she is ready! Film is a wife's fantasy (husbands should be handsome, romantic, and attentive); and although basically moralistic, allows audience to enjoy a little immorality for a while. (2007)

Don't Think Twice 2016 Mike Birbiglia 2.5 Comedy drama about the flourishing and gradual decline of the New York improv group, the Commune. Mike Birbiglia as the founder of the Commune – he hasn't gone as far as some of his colleagues and is bitter; Maggie Kemper as Liz, who arrives halfway through film and becomes hesitantly attached to Birbiglia; Keegan-Michael Key as best looking and most charismatic member of the group – he gets a spot on Weekend Live (a stand-in for SNL); Gillian Jacobs as the sensible girlfriend of Key – she has self-esteem issues; Tami Sagher as plus-sized group member whose parents own an apartment on the "Upper West Side"; Kate Micucci pixie-like as cartoonist who has trouble finishing things; Chris Gethard as nerdish member of group whose father takes ill and dies during the show. Difficult to enjoy this film unless you like improv, which seems to enjoy a reputation as an independent art form. Much of the running time is taken up by improv performances – a cast member asking the (usually small) audience if anybody has had a particularly hard day, and the cast then improvising a short comedy sketch, which is often rather sarcastic and more clever than really funny. New improv members are urged not to think when they perform (rehearsals do no good) and always to give priority to the group over individual grandstanding. The interest in the film stems mainly from the dramatic interaction of the characters: Gillian Jacobs reveals that she is too timid to attend her Weekend Live audition; since Key likes the limelight, he is able to land a cast position on Weekend Live, thus creating conflict with the other members of the Commune and making him feel

guilty; Birbiglia is resentful of his inability to move ahead in his career, and when he meets Liz, begs her to see the good in him and even adopts the baby that she conceives with “a Brazilian guy”; Gethard and Micucci also experience discouragement when their writing packets are rejected by the TV show. In the end, the members of the group adhere again at the funeral of Gethard’s father, wishing Key well on his bit with Weekend Live, and doing a group hug as the film ends. The film gives a pessimistic interpretation of the lives of improv players, who essentially sacrifice their lives for their art; your particular improv group may struggle and then fade away, but other dedicated artists will rise to carry on. (January 2018)

Dore 2012 Cate Shortland (Germany) 2.5 The director is Australian. In chaotic Germany in 1945 14-year-old Lore leads four younger siblings from Schwarzwald to Hamburg in search of her grandmother. Saskia Rosendahl exceptionally expressive as Nazi-indoctrinated teenager left in charge of four small children, including an adorable baby, Peter; Nele Trebs as her shy and innocent younger sister; Kai-Peter Malina as reticent but helpful older teenager the children meet. The narrative has an interesting premise – the children’s parents are both active SS preparing to flee as the Allies approach in 1945; they soon disappear leaving the children to their own devices – the father (Hans-Jochen Wagner) to parts unknown; the mother (Ursina Lardi) marches off with her suitcase to surrender to the Americans. Because the trains are not yet running, the children set off across much of western Germany, passing through small towns and the countryside (photographed picturesquely), running across ruined shacks, searching desperately for food, stumbling upon dead human bodies in various stages of revolting decay. Germany seems shocked into primitiveness: the viewer doesn’t see many people, only tired peasants accepting the defeat and confusion; no patriots around, everyone is looking out for themselves; a few of the people that Rosendahl run across regret the passing of Hitler – while gazing at his portrait on the wall, one woman comments that he loved us so. Narrative interest is raised somewhat when Malina becomes attached to the group of children and develops a hesitant sexual interest in the intermittently receptive Rosendahl; Malina and Rosendahl commit a murder, and one of the children is killed (apparently) by a soldier from whom Malina has stolen some food. At first Seskia professes to despise Malina since she thinks he is a Jew (“My father will take care of you”), but the thrust of the narrative is toward Saskia accepting reality and breaking with the legacy of her mother and father, which she does at the end of the film after the children arrive at Grandma’s farm. Seskia’s anti-Nazi conversion is rather awkwardly symbolized by her crushing the childish statuettes she has brought with her. The screenplay does not deal with the psychological impact of the horrifying experiences on the children. Although the film’s emphasis on the impact of the national defeat on a Nazi child is original and interesting, it would have benefited from a more direct and dramatic narrative to illustrate the theme. (September 2017)

Dot the I 2004 Matthew Parkhill (English) 3.0 Natalia Verbeke extremely beautiful and cute as a Spanish woman apparently being wooed by an English fellow; James D’Arcy tall, yuppy-looking with a quizzical expression on his face – appears to be engaged to be married to Natalia; Gael Garcia Bernal as the other fellow – an unemployed actor – that she has her “one last kiss before her wedding” with in a party and with whom she falls in love. Story takes place among young people – students et al. – in London, largely at night. The first part of the film drags painfully, since it is presented as a slow-moving romantic story, in which Verbeke has a major sexual attraction for Bernal and yet she is torn because of her promise to and affection for D’Arcy. Film is “saved” by a series of unexpected, rather mind-boggling revelations, whereby we first learn that the love story has been concocted by D’Arcy and his two simpering cohorts to make a sort of *film réalité* – Bernal is actually hired by D’Arcy to play his role, but D’Arcy manipulates girlfriend Verbeke into her soul-crushing disappointment without telling her. The epilogue of the film is a further deception, whereby the lovers Verbeke and Bernal cooperate (trickily) in a public film reception to shoot the cad D’Arcy in the back and then manage to blame it on one of his idiotic assistants. The film ends with the two of them driving off smiling and full of themselves in a limousine, now apparently embarked on a successful film career themselves. The film doesn’t have much to offer aside from the trickily executed plot and the smashing good looks of Verbeke. The cinematography and editing are annoyingly trendy – a lot of darkly lighted scenes and swish pans to give the viewer little glimpses of the past. Much of the plot is highly improbable, although the pace of the film doesn’t give the viewer much time to think about it. (2010)

Double Harness 1933 John Cromwell (RKO) 2.5 Drawing-room romantic comedy that has the Powell and Harding overcome a pessimistic view of marriage to finally make it work. William Powell as cynical playboy, who plays the field and is owner of a San Francisco shipping line; Ann Harding speaking Mid-Atlantic as the sincere Joan; Lucille Browne as her flighty sister Val; Henry Stephenson as Joan's and Val's affectionate father; Reginald Owen amusing as cultivated, "well trained" butler with his cockney accent peeking through. Harding is deeply in love with Powell, and despite his free-wheeling lifestyle "tricks" him into marrying her; they are soon miserable even as they travel by steamer for a tour of the Orient; her persistence however pays off, and after the requisite number of misunderstandings Powell comes to recognize her sincerity and devotion; they will live happily ever after. The film features rich, sophisticated people who hang out in lovely apartments and announce that "they are sailing for Europe next week;" they are hardy drinkers, eat sophisticated food ("I've had so much caviar I don't want any dinner"), the women wear satiny, clingy dresses, and everyone exchanges witty lines. Powell and others start off with a pessimistic view of marriage: "No husband and wife can work their way into a civilized companionship until they have fought through two or three good separations." Powell is convinced that any romance will dissipate the minute you try to tie it down, and Harding states that marriage is a woman's business, just as a company is a man's business that he must treat rationally. They of course change their minds and realize that happiness will come from a loving marital relationship. A pleasing early 30s cast and some good writing. Good entertainment for the classic film buff. (January 2018)

Double Indemnity 1944 Billy Wilder 4.0 Superior, and perhaps the original, *film noir* movie from the end of the war years. Fred MacMurray, Barbara Stanwyck, Edward G. Robinson. Focus: MacMurray persuaded by *femme fatale* Stanwyck to murder her husband for the insurance money, the murder committed, and then the plot is discovered; the interplay between Keys, the insurance investigator, and Neff – father and son, mutual affection, that is supplanted when Keys discovers what is going on. Stanwyck is terrific as *femme fatale* – her anklets as she walks down the stairs, her off color conversation with Neff in the living room. Pretty clear that she is motivated purely by greed, and plots to rope Neff in for the kill; Neff is more complicated fellow, who seems to love her, at least at first, who has a father-son type of relationship with Keys, and who resents having a desk-type, salesman's job at the insurance company (no organization man, he!). Most of movie shot in typical *film noir* style – lots of nighttime shadows, bright lights reflected in dark evening street scenes, close-ups of faces divided into light and shadow, etc. Story told in flashback by Neff, who at the beginning of the film is dying of a gunshot wound and is telling the story into a Dictaphone. No doubt that there is no stopping the machine of tragedy – "all the way down the line," there is no way to get off the trolley until it reaches its destination – death. Evocative picture of suburban/business Los Angeles in the mid-1940s. Great pictures of the two lovers meeting in small supermarkets and plotting the murder in front of the canned peas! Music is somber. Very little humor in the film. (2005)

A Double Life 1947 George Cukor (wry. Kanin and Gordon) 4.0 Ronald Colman in the role of his life as mentally ill stage actor (Academy Award), who most of the time is kind, considerate, and loving (he wants to remarry his divorced wife); Signe Hasso reliable, slight and pretty as his former wife, who remains extremely friendly; Edmond O'Brien friendly, sensible and a little dull as the play's press agent; Shelley Winters sexy and believable as restaurant waitress, who wants to use Colman to advance her modeling career; Millard Mitchell in early role as enterprising reporter who helps catch Colman. Very compelling backstage melodrama about stage actor who is paranoid and splits into distinct personas when under stress; when he plays Othello, he becomes absorbed by the character's predicament, and transfers the Moor's rampant jealousy to his own life; he murders Winters and is then tracked down by O'Brien cooperating with the police. Film is very dramatic, dark, and tense. The viewer is on pins and needles throughout worrying whether Colman will actually murder Hasso (playing Desdemona) at the end of each performance of the play; once he almost does; and then as he becomes more paranoid and jealous, we worry that he will forget himself again. He murders his sexy friend Winters in her apartment next to the El tracks, as he recites the frightening lines from 'Othello'. All the while we are given intense, heavily

shadowed close-ups of Colman's face showing his intense anguish and suffering; Colman delivers a grave and strongly emphasized reading of Shakespeare's lines; Colman is often photographed looking into mirrors (the split between his two personas); and the AA-winning score of Miklos Rosza underlines his descent into madness. Perhaps the weaker part of the film is O'Brien's plan to prove that Colman committed the murder. Why is the good friend so anxious to trap Colman? The McGuffin scene in the restaurant where O'Brien hires an actress to impersonate the dead Winters in front of Colman (the waitress' earrings are a Hitchcock-like McGuffin) comes across as a bit contrived. The cinematography is very atypical of Cukor – heavily shadowed, melodramatic, the features of the actor heavily exaggerated by the stage lighting; obviously inspired by *film noir*, it works marvelously to bring out Colman's tortured and dangerous psychological state. The ending of the film – again the last scene of 'Othello' with Colman knowing that he is close to arrest – is tense and highly thespian; the reeling Colman muffs and modifies many of his lines; we wonder whether he will choke Hasso to death this time, but instead he commits suicide by really stabbing himself with Othello's knife; the play ends in close-up of Colman's face as he implicitly confesses the murder and regrets what has happened (as Othello says, "I have loved too well"). The viewer's feelings are Shakespearean – shaken by violence and tragedy, pity for the destroyed character. Consummate gripping Hollywood drama. (2008)

La double vie de Véronique 1991 Krzysztof Kieslowski (France) 3.0 Irene Jacob beautiful, serene, expressive playing dual role as Veronika (Poland) and Véronique (France). Beautiful, poetic, lyrical, and frustratingly ambiguous and opaque film about two nearly identical young women, one living in Poland and the other in France; they were born on the same day, have an identical appearance (even hairstyles and clothes) and professions (music), although a somewhat difference destiny. The film follows first Veronika, who is a gifted singer but with a heart condition; she dies singing her heart out in a concert performance. The film then takes up Véronique, who is making love with a guy, but suddenly stops, looks sad, and says that she somehow senses that she has lost something; the rest of her episode involves meeting a sensitive, poetic puppet master (Philippe Volter), being pursued by him, then being separated and ending the film mysteriously either by touching a tree right outside of her father's house (European ending) or running to embrace her father affectionately (American ending). Obviously there are many parallels between the two women: aside from the identical appearance and Véronique's mysterious sense of connecting with someone, they both handle a piece of string (!) and manipulate a spherical plastic lens that picturesquely projects an upside-down image of the environment. Véronique seems to learn things unconsciously from Veronika: she immediately quits her musical studies and takes up teaching music in a primary school; she appears to connect better with the puppet master than Veronika did with her boyfriend, but then the relationship fades away and she is left with a question mark (the tree) or just affection from her father; and of course she does not die. The film has a strong beginning as it follows Veronika in her visit to her aunt in Krakow and her winning of the musical competition (although we wonder what is the relevance of the distinguished looking man exposing his penis to her in the street), and the viewer is intrigued when the two Veronika's semi-encounter one another in the street during an anti-Communist demonstration (Véronique is too busy taking pictures to notice her counterpart); and then we are stricken with grief when the ecstasy of the music (very beautiful composed by a contemporary Polish composer) leads to her death. But the longer Véronique episode is frustrating in its apparent aimlessness and its ambiguity. The author is trying to portray a unconscious, mystical, spiritual connection between two persons unknown to one another (something like the experience of *déjà vu*?), but the exposition seems to vague to carry conviction. The most convincing aspect of the film is the ineffable beauty and serenity of Jacob and the loving and sumptuous way that she is photographed in both of her incarnations. Intriguing film that could have been so much better – more magical and moving. (2010)

Doubt 2008 John Patrick Shanley 3.0 Meryl Streep in sometimes amusing, sometimes serious role as pre-Vatican II principal in parochial school in the Bronx – the kids are terrified of her; Philip Seymour Hoffman somewhat subdued as parish priest representing the kinder, gentler Church of Vatican II (the film takes place in 1964); Amy Adams touching as young, pretty, innocent and inexperienced nun who loves to teach history to her 8th graders (?); Viola Davis a little 'mucoousy' as the mother of the Black

kid who has one big scene with Streep. Often eloquent film about the confrontation between the old, black-and-white church of pre-1963 and the new Church of Vatican II, and about the role played by doubt in the religious life of modern people. Film begins with a sermon that is more or less a praise of doubt by Hoffman, which immediately sets off life-abhorring Streep in a campaign to expel the pastor; she does this in spite of the accepted chain of command in the old church. As popular priest, Hoffman is encouraging to all the kids in the school, and he takes under his wing the one Black kid – he sees him as in danger of failing because of his difference. With help from observations from the innocent Adams, Streep becomes convinced that Hoffman is guilty of sexual exploitation, and she campaigns fearlessly to discredit him. The personal confrontations between the two are exciting and dramatic; sparks fly from two accomplished thespians as they lay all their cards on the table. Despite the lack of convincing evidence, Streep never has a moment of doubt that Fr. Flynn is guilty as charged. The script plays with the audience's desire to know the objective truth – through most of the film Hoffman seems to be the model of rectitude and charity, but after the confrontation with Streep he seems to admit that he had done wrong in his previous parish, but that he has confessed his sins, made amends, and that his behavior with the student has been honorable. This makes no difference to Streep, who intimates that she has contacted a nun in that parish, who has revealed all to her. Hoffman bows to her campaign and leaves the parish, although he is not discredited with his male superiors, since his next assignment is a clear promotion. At the end of the film, Streep admits that she has lied (Adams is shocked) and that she never contacted the nun – it was a ploy to force Hoffman's hand. But then she breaks down in tears and admits that she had doubts! Presumably about Hoffman's guilt. So, the audience is left in doubt, since we don't know whether Hoffman left his parish for fear of bad publicity or because of his personal guilt. Entertaining film especially for veterans of parochial schools in the period (like this viewer) with the church mysticism and the odors of incense, their clear black-white distinctions, fear of the principal, etc. Also moving: 20th century spirituality is penetrated with lack of certainty, a characteristic of our time, and the promising transition to the new Church, whose idealism seems now (2009) to have faded. (2009)

Down Argentine Way 1940 Irving Cummings 3.0 Betty Grable cute, blonde, shapely, wholesome, brassy personality and brassy voice, good dancer; Don Ameche handsome with pencil thin moustache, charming, lively, and smooth as Argentine playboy and horse raiser; Charlotte Greenwood as older, lively, horse-collecting aunt of Betty Grable; Carmen Miranda plays herself in non-dramatic role singing only, rolling her r's, bright costumes, tall, elaborate headdresses, two rows of straight white teeth, and defying her Argentine location by singing in Portuguese. Delightful 40s Latin American musical with forgettable plot, Buenos Aires locations shown in stock footage making it look clean, colorful and picture-perfect, and a lot of singing Latin American music and dancing. Argentina is a country of big haciendas owned by the wealthy; Buenos Aires is monumental (it looks like Paris), clean and well-preserved, full of wealthy folk and their hangers-on who spend most of their time in well-appointed nightclubs listening to Hollywood-class music or betting on the horses at the elaborate racetracks. Story is completely forgettable – the inevitable budding romance between the American Grable who loves horses and the suave, continental Ameche, who raises them on his large estancia and sells them to unsuspecting North Americans; Ameche's father is of course opposed to the connection and he must be won over. A good score including 'Argentina' and a lot of excellent entertainment, including fabulous athletic tap and acrobatic dancing by the Nicholas Brothers. A bit difficult to watch in the non-musical parts. (2009)

Dr. Mabuse, Der Spieler: Ein Bild der Zeit 1922 Fritz Lang (Germany) 3.5 Rudolf Klein-Rogge as the criminal mastermind Dr. Mabuse, a brutal and charismatic man of many faces; Aud Egede Nissen as Cara Carozza, who is hopelessly in love (!) with Mabuse and refuses to betray him to the Countess in a powerful jail scene – she is the subject of lovely close-ups; Paul Richter as effete playboy victim, Edgar Hull; Bernhard Goetzke as intrepid detective von Went, he also of many disguises (like Sherlock Holmes) and the only man who might be a match for Mabuse; Gertrude Welcker as the Countess. The film is derived in good part from French 'Fantomas'. Narrative is to establish the criminal genius of Dr. Mabuse, accompany him as he fleeces more victims; and then the extensive cat and mouse game between Mabuse and the state attorney as the two attack and counterattack. The narrative in

Part 1 ends suspended with Mabuse again triumph and in possession of the Countess – “Mine!” Wonderful portrait of Germany following the lost war: the country is filled with criminals; everyone goes to secret nightclubs where you need a password and you seek a good time flirting, drinking, applauding for the topless dancer, and playing cards for big stakes; financial speculation and counterfeiting; the main characters are welcome in fancy hotels like the Excelsior; they also attend séances. Dr. Mabuse is the fiendish super-criminal interested primarily in diabolical domination of people’s lives, an extraordinarily dangerous criminal who threatens the foundations of society. Mabuse – “There is no love. There is only desire! There is no happiness – there is only the will for power!” He has hypnotic powers – with his eyes able to get his victims to do his bidding, no matter how absurd; extremely clever – bilks vulnerable industrialist’s son at cards; induces rapid rises and falls of stock market by manipulating the news; he seems to operate mostly by preying upon gambling addicts, whom he can further bamboozle with his hypnotic powers. Carozza says – “Who he is – nobody knows! He is there! He lives! He towers over the city! He is damnation and eternal bliss! He is the greatest man alive! And he has loved me!” And she refuses to betray him. The mise-en-scène is mostly in realistic settings set in a large German city; but plenty of surrealist, fantasy scenes – inside of a restaurant with pointed jewel-like vaults for ceiling; a staircase inside the hotel with very wide passages and Italianate balustrades; dark, dangerous-looking street scenes; the bizarre candelabras behind the men playing cards at a table. Masterful silent filmmaking that errs in modern eyes only by its very deliberate pace. E.g., editing to make the scenes intriguing and exciting: looking out the rear view window of the cab, close-ups of little jets in the cab that spray a soporific on von Went; a lot of cross-cutting; shadowed photography on the head of Mabuse. Beautifully restored. Often very long quoting title cards. The modern score is musical and evocative, alternating between romantic solo piano and a lilting string Viennese-sounding ensemble with woodwinds. The film is a fascinating portrait of the time, Germany under the Weimar Republic, and a demonstration of the maturity of silent film only two decades after its invention! (2011)

Dracula 1931 Tod Browning 3.0 Bela Lugosi, Edward Van Sloan, Dwight Frye. Not so good original Dracula movie. Best things are Lugosi, who although not a great actor, has great presence with piercing eyes, penetrating stare, and some good campy lines, e.g., as the wolves howl outside the castle, “Listen to them. The children of the night! What music they make!” and “The spider spinning his web for the unwary fly. The blood is life, Mr. Renfield!” Karl Freund’s semi expressionist photography (he was a German cinematographer emigrated from Germany) creates some good effects in creepy crypts, etc. Best part of movie is opening castle sequences, which are genuinely creepy (and campy), and the contest of will between the Count and the heroic anti-Dracula crusader, Van Helsing (this is the battle of foreign accents). The whole movie is spoken in British and other foreign accents. Most of the acting is stilted with stiff lines and artificial sounding English accents. Renfield’s raving doesn’t even qualify as scenery-chewing. Movie takes Dracula seriously, since Van Helsing has to resort to superstition himself (wolves bane, crucifixes, stakes through hearts, etc.) to defeat an obviously real supernatural menace. Dracula has a certain sexual presence, with his devouring young women with his eyes and his lusting for female partners (he exults that Mina will be with him for all eternity); but the sexual aspect is buried compared to the novel. There is virtually no music on the sound track, and the mise-en-scene and acting are extremely stogy and static; there are long periods of silence where all you can here is the popping noise on the optical sound track. One assumes that Browning was not a skilled sound movie maker, although the silent approach works well in the initial castle scenes. A bit difficult to imagine that this once scared the pants off people, including the writer who lay awake screaming two nights in a row after he saw it at the age of 12! (2005)

Dracula’s Daughter 1936 Lambert Hillyer 3.0 Otto Kruger, Gloria Holden, Marguerite Churchill, Nan Grey, Edward Van Sloan. First sequel to Dracula. Not bad, although quite different. Print much clearer, more “modern” with musical soundtrack, more natural dialogue; humor with classic cautious British cops, who are afraid of vampires, and with Hitchcockian adversarial relationship between Kruger and Churchill that – somewhat inexplicably – melts in the end. Daughter is controlled from beyond the grave by the family tradition; she kills more or less against her will, and would like “release” from the curse, which she hopes to achieve with the aid of psychiatry (Kruger is psychiatrist who has

studied under Van Helsing); she then falls in love with Kruger, and lures him back to her Transylvanian castle (very weak, even unintentionally hilarious scenes at the end with 'Transylvanian' peasants sticking out like a sore thumb!) to "spend an eternity" with him, but of course the plan backfires. Again we are reminded to take vampirism seriously, unlike modern scientists and medical doctors. Pretty good at portraying sexuality of vampire legend – the sexual aura that in-love vampiress projects, victim Nan Grey baring her shoulders for the vampire (Nan was charming and innocently sexy), and Daughter moving in for the lesbian kill, etc. Lacks the clunky awkwardness of the original. All the actors are competent and expressive. (2005)

Drag Me To Hell 2009 Sam Raimi 4.0 Alison Lohman as sympathetic, pretty, determined, spunky, self-motivated loan officer in Los Angeles who denies the wrong woman an extension on her mortgage; Justin Long as her steady, encouraging psychologist boyfriend who doubts her at first but then stands beside her to the end; Lorna Raver brilliantly scary gypsy-like woman with a glass eye, rotten, pointed false teeth, extreme projectile vomiting of blood, pus, maggots, and insects – she also sends insects that attempt to penetrate Lohman's every facial orifice; Dileep Rao as unconvincing low-key fortune teller who does research to connect Alison with the nasty supernatural world harassing her; David Paymer as amusingly clueless boss at the bank; Molly Cheek as Justin's uptight, easily shocked, upper middle class mom. Brilliantly scary and amusing horror movie set in Los Angeles: out of personal ambition (she wants a promotion) Lohman makes the mistake of denying a mortgage extension to an older woman, who turns out to be viciously violent and possessed of a curse (imposed through a button off Alison's coat) that will send a demon to drag Lohman to hell on the third day. The film follows Lohman step by step: she is visited in shocking fashion several times by Raver or a violent spirit, one of the more startling is her projecting huge amounts of blood on the shocked bank manager in the presence of dismayed customers, an apparent result of having ingested a fly the previous night while sleeping; through Rao she finds out what is happening and as the clock ticks takes supernatural steps herself to defeat the beast. The film's ending is masterfully manipulative. Allison digs up Raver's grave to give her back the cursed button, and as a violent storm rages and fills the grave with turbulent, muddy water, she manages to escape heroically; all assume the danger is over; Alison's boss phones her to tell her that she has the promotion; she goes to Union Station to go off on a lovers' weekend with her boyfriend, who plans to ask her to marry him; she jettisons her old coat that contained the cursed button and buys a new sky blue one that she shows off to him on the train platform; he however pulls out an envelope saying that she must have picked up the wrong envelope in the car (he had previously put a coin in a similar white envelope); she realizes to her horror that she did not give the button back to Raver's ghost but that she still "owns" it, she backs and falls on to the tracks, a train comes rushing in her direction, and to the horror of the on-looking Long, she is then dragged down to hell through the roadbed as the train crosses over; when the gravel settles back over the site, the title 'Drag Me to Hell' suddenly appears. The audience, previously convinced by the 'safe' format (the two protagonists are such nice kids, too nice to die, things are straightening themselves out at the end) that there will be a safe Hitchcock ending, leaves the theater in shock! Film is outstandingly impactful because the protagonists are young, innocent, and attractive, and yet they fight back with courage when frightened. The film has a great sense of humor that is often unexpected – Raver's eye gets stapled in the garage fight; the goat used in the outlandish séance sequence starts talking at one point with human teeth; in the same sequence a possessed guy dances on a flaming table; the flooded grave sequence recalls a similar scene from Spielberg's 'Poltergeist'; Raver expels all sorts of disgusting substances on Lohman – blood, pus, maggots – and even when she loses her false teeth in an auto accident, she gums Alison's chin in rage. Nice satire of upper class Angelinos – the parents whose initial suspicions of Alison's status are confirmed by Alison's bizarre behavior during the dinner, including giving them a suspicious-looking 'harvest cake' full of bugs. The director is expert at allowing the audience to relax for a moment and then returning to scare the bejeezus out of them with all the tricks – camera, sound, suspense, etc. Inspired fun from beginning to end with a masterful use of makeup and special effects (nicely explained in the DVD extras). (2011)

Dreamgirls 2006 Bill Condon 2.5 Beyoncé Knowles as Deena, the most fetching of the Dreamettes, in a pretty superficial performance; Jennifer Hudson as Effie, a powerful, vibrant voice, but overweight which chases her from the spotlight; Eddie Murphy pretty hilarious as rascally singer (based on James Brown?) who dies of a heroin overdose; Jamie Foxx as successful manager who however sells his soul to the Devil; Danny Glover as avuncular manager who is outwitted and shoved aside by Foxx.

Quintessential Hollywood musical product about the ups and downs of Motown performers that is half rock video and half soap opera. Viewers who love rhythm and blues singers belting out the tunes at 200 decibels with stentorian orchestral accompaniment will like this movie. Hudson is the musical star, but her strong gospel voice (however expressive) is hard to take for any viewer wearied by 'American Idol'. The musical numbers are entertaining with their synchronized stepping and dancing and outrageous costumes that chronicle the evolution of American pop culture from the 50s to about 1980, but the original songs written for the play and the movie just are not inspired; and they seem to want to make up for the lack of inspiration by a reliance on volume. Murphy is very funny and believable as a James Brown-like over-the-top Black artist, who tries to go mainstream white and ends up in trouble with drugs. The story is soap opera material – the romantic ups and downs of the performers; the central story is the increasingly heartless behavior of success-obsessed Foxx, and the deviation of him and wife Beyoncé into rich-and-famous self-indulgence. Hollywood ending has most everyone redeemed (except for Murphy who is dead): Beyoncé leaves Foxx, Hudson returns and asserts herself back into stardom, and even Foxx for the first time casts an affectionate glance toward his daughter. Social-political theme of the parallel rise of the Civil Rights movement and the efforts of the principals to break out into the white audience. Pretty deafening. (2008)

The Dreamers 2003 Bernardo Bertolucci 4.0 Michael Pitt as innocent, sensible American student in Paris in 1968; Eva Green as fetching young woman living in her parent's bourgeois apartment with...; Louis Garrel, Eva's twin brother, a political radical living in an all-but-incestuous relationship with his sister. Outstanding, beautifully shot film evoking the heady atmosphere of student revolt in 1968 Paris through film, sex, and political activism. Tried and true story of the American naïf falling under the influence of European license and decadence, except that this time it is more than sex and alcohol (no drugs this time). Green and Garrel are linked like "Siamese twins" (as Garrel says to Pitt), never leaving one another's company, making only a pretense of going to school, surviving on checks given to them by their parents, sexually involved with one another short of actual intercourse. An important part of the film is Pitt's seduction by this heady brew of freedom and pleasure, but – being a North American? – eventually tiring of it, falling in love with Green, and trying unsuccessfully to separate her from her immobility and neurotic attachment to her brother. The film presents NC-17-style of nudity including fairly intimate looks at male and female genitals, a lengthy masturbation of scene when Garrel performs for his sister and friend ejaculating on a poster of Marlene Dietrich, and a stretch of enthusiastic sex between Pitt and Green. In the end Pitt finds Green and Garrel bizarre and superficial; he is in love with Green, and when she refuses to part with her brother (he dashes into the streets and throws Molotov cocktails at the Paris police), he drifts off into the crowd, presumably to return home and find himself a good girlfriend and potential mate. The film also lovingly evokes the old movies that were so important to political radicals in the era: Bertolucci often cuts gracefully to the elegant silvery images of black and white classics – Greta Garbo caressing the furniture in 'Queen Christina', Marlene Dietrich doing her famous gorilla dance in 'Blonde Venus', the trio running through the Louvre in Godard's 'Bande à Part' (does Godard really belong in the same category as the true classics?); the clips illuminate the gilded isolation of the twins, who live in the past with one another in their parents' decayed bourgeois apartment. The student revolt of 1968 is moving constantly in the background, emerging into the limelight only at the end when a brick thrown through the window of the twins' apartment rouses them from a childlike game they are playing camping in a pretend tent set up in the living room. Politics seems to get a reaction from the twins, but their behavior suggests that politics will only be another game they play together; Pitt walking away from the conflict and back toward bourgeois responsibility seems the adult choice. The cinematography, editing and lighting are beautiful and evocative suggesting a golden era in the past that will never be recovered. The acting is convincing throughout. A film bound to appeal especially to viewers who lived through the heady days of the late 60s. (2013)

Dressed to Kill 1946 Roy William Neill (Britain) 2.5 Basil Rathbone, Nigel Bruce, Patricia Morison. Last of the Rathbone Holmes movies. Rather pedestrian little movie that presents Holmes and the rather thick-headed Watson with a puzzle contained in three music boxes (Why are they so sought after?) about currency plates stolen from the Bank of England and then hidden (it is in the secretary of

'Dr. S,' which turns out to be Sam Johnson). Holmes his usual urbane, intelligent self (with no deerstalker cap nor cape, since he is not in the country), with bumbling Watson at his side; Holmes nice enough to let Watson think that he is valuable part of the team. (Question: how could such an idiot be the author of the clever Holmes stories that appear in 'The Strand'?) Holmes gratified by having to deal with a woman – Morison -- who is a worthy opponent. Film much like a good TV program, although the 70s BBC Holmes series is much better (cranky Holmes, more intelligent Watson, truer 1890s London atmosphere). Distracting that the decade of the film is so ambiguous – cabs and London streets seem out of the 1920s, Morison is dressed in stylish 40s clothes ('Dressed to Kill?'), the two principals look Edwardian. Quite off-putting for an historian! (2006)

Dressed to Kill 1980 Brian DePalma 4.0 Angie Dickinson, Michael Caine, Nancy Allen, Dennis Franz (beginning of his tough cop persona). Smashing, outrageous thriller, in which DePalma and his camera are the real stars. No doubt he uses Hitchcockian motifs, but in updated, explicitly sexualized, inventive way that adds to the viewer's pleasure. Most apparent is debt to 'Psycho' – the two gripping, dangerous shower scenes, the use of the hard (this time glinting, shiny, often covered in brilliantly red blood) blade for murder, the psychological condition of the perpetrator, who is inhabited by two personalities and in whom, like Norman Bates in 'Psycho,' one of them – the female one, Bobbi – kills anyone, like Dickinson, who arouses the other; the respectable psychiatrist; the second psychiatrist's explanation humorously recalls the explanation scene at the end of 'Psycho.' Some apparent inconsistencies in presentation to lead us astray – DePalma has us watch on split screen the bewigged 'Caine' pursuing Allen, while Caine is listening to a phone message from Bobbi; but who the hell cares (cf. Hitchcock on 'the plausibles'). Characters and acting are good, particularly Dickinson, who does game job on depicting the neurotic, horny housewife (feminists need to find some satisfaction to keep them from bitching), and Nancy Allen as nice, 'ingénue' prostitute, cute as a button, who does tricks to make money for investing in the stock market, who becomes a kind of sweet surrogate mom for Dickinson's bereaved son, and who shows a lot of pluck and inventiveness as she pursues her more or less independent investigation. Film is full of shocks, mostly centered around menacing presence of large 'woman' in big blond wig, long, black raincoat, and of course the glinting razor blade. Greatest strength of movie is the individual scenes: the initial erotic shower scene in which, to the accompaniment of Pino Dinaggio's lush, romantic music, Dickinson and her double masturbate, while husband placidly shaves himself – with a straight razor! The museum scene (really filmed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art), in which with wonderful combination of classical editing and brief steady cam shots, Dickinson indecisively plays cat and mouse with a potential erotic partner, moving past the interesting canvases in the collection, many of them having erotic content, the action and mood again punctuated by Dinaggio's music; the editing and movements of Dickinson in the scene coming down the Met Museum's steps, again illustrating how one tells a story without uttering a word; DePalma uses her gloves as a McGuffin, and when she finally gets in the taxi with the stud, an unidentified hand picks up the other glove she has dropped (but we have caught a glimpse of Caine's alter ego in a previous swish pan). The murder scene in the elevator: Dickinson is caught, tension added by her pushing different floor numbers on elevator panel since she thinks she has left her ring in lover's apartment, then trapped claustrophobically in enclosed small space with the murderer, and she is terrified as bloody, disfiguring murder takes place in slow motion (time dilation taken from Eisenstein!); epilogue funny when down on first floor her bloody arm protrudes through elevator door with automatic door bumping rhythmically against it. The outrageously excessive and probably humorous seduction scene, in which Allen uncovers her black begartered body and – almost fatally – turns on the male Caine, while the son watches loyally from the outside and a violent thunderstorm crashes all around. The final ending: the murder scene in the insane asylum is over the top and might have been cut, but the 'murder' scene in the shower is sexy, tense with expert editing to enhance the menace and suspense (bird's-eye view of Allen's pretty and vulnerable body in the shower ('Psycho!'), the shots of the 'nurse's' half-hidden shoes, cuts to Allen's reactions, seeing the nurse in the mirror), and then a horrifying shock as – again – the razor blade cleanly and bloodily slices our beloved Allen's neck; followed by Allen waking up screaming in bed with the kid trying to comfort her. Final scene is a cheat, but it works to perfection to scare the wits out of us. Perhaps

DePalma's best movie – incredibly effective mise-en-scene, editing, characterization with, this time, enough attention to character and narrative plausibility to make it work to perfection. (2009)

Drive 2011 Nicholas Winding Refn 3.0 Ryan Gosling silent, grim, inscrutable as “driver” who does movie car stunts by day and moonlights as expert getaway car driver at night; Carey Mulligan inexplicably passive and inscrutable as pretty, kewpie-doll style young woman who with a son lives in the same apartment building as Gosling; Christina Hendricks looking low-life and a lot less glamorous than her character in ‘Mad Men’; Ron Perlman as ugly, huge-jawed, very threatening low level mafia type; Albert Brooks surprising performance as underworld type that at first seems harmless enough but ends up looking as if he has been stabbing people in the eye and the gut for decades. Michael-Mann style La thriller about a shady character that falls in love with a pretty but mousey young woman and then wreaks revenge in hyper-violent, vigilante style upon the men responsible for the death of his beloved’s husband and then departs to unknown destination when he is assured there will be no reprisals against Mulligan. The film is psychologically and dramatically frustrating: Who is this guy who has emerged from the alleys of Los Angeles much like the gunfighter in a classic western riding in from the East? How could he fall in love with a woman as pretty and harmless as Mulligan? Is he really happy to sit quietly as a part of family togetherness after the husband’s return from prison? Would such a sensitive guy be able to murder every crook he runs into as ruthlessly and hyper-violently as he does? Mulligan seems to be lost in a movie where she doesn’t belong and that she doesn’t understand. On the other hand, the action sequences are expertly rendered: exciting car chase sequences at the beginning and the end (in which Gosling chases down one of the perpetrators, wounds him severely in ramming his car, and then pursues him into the ocean surf to drown him in the breaking waves) restore one’s faith in Hollywood’s ability to create compelling action. The film presents memorable urban images of Los Angeles: gleaming nighttime streets, strip malls, small motels, auto repair garages, winding two-lane roads in the mountains. The execution sequences are obscenely graphic and violent: Gosling stomping a man to death in an elevator while Mulligan looks on horrified – part of his jaw is detached by the final blow; in a meeting with Gosling at the end of the film, the treacherous Brooks unexpectedly stabs him in the stomach, but Gosling is able to respond and kill Brooks with his own blade; after an immobile pause Gosling comes back to life and drives off leaving Brooks lying in the parking lot. The style of the film recalls Michael Mann’s ‘Miami Vice’: to the accompaniment of dreamy rock music, the film eschews dialogue, focuses on lengthy close-ups of the impassive and inexpressive faces of the principals, particularly of Gosling driving his Impala or his Mustang through the city, emphasizing visual style rather than real characters or believable drama. The appeal of the film is mainly its style. (2012)

Drums along the Mohawk 1939 John Ford (20c Fox) 2.5 Henry Fonda his usual earnest, solid self as frontier farmer; Claudette Colbert out of her element as girlish, hysterical woman that he brings with him from more comfortable circumstances into the Mohawk Valley – she never develops strong chemistry with Fonda; Edna May Oliver (AA nomination) as tart-tongued battle-axe but good-hearted employer who “hates housework”; John Carradine as suspicious-looking Tory with an eye patch leading the Indians against the American settlers; Jessie Ralph in very small role; Arthur Shields as Irish (!?) preacher showcasing the Ford humor; Ward Bond as good-natured, oafish buddy to Fonda. Top budget adventure film, one of the three that Ford made in 1939; the film is preserved in beautiful Technicolor (AA nomination, although there is some color separation). On the frontier battling to build a civilization against savage Indians and other bad guys (the British and American Tories) makes this film a kind of 18th century western. Fonda takes city slicker Colbert from civilized Albany to the frontier where she has a tough time adapting – her long-winded shrieking when a friendly Indian enters her log cabin is memorable. The best part of the film is the action sequences – the settlers flee to the fort to take refuge against the marauding Indians (who burn down their houses); the attack of the Indians and the Tories on the fort toward the end; and the famous sequence in which Fonda outruns pursuing Indians through several picturesquely filmed scenes (on foot – doesn’t anyone have a horse?) to get help. Ford also photographs the country (actually filmed in Utah) and the big sky with his accustomed aplomb. Indians are half-naked savages that under the direction of Tory officers attack in rather undisciplined way whooping and hollering and burning down structures aimlessly (there are a couple of good Christian

Indians, who however are presented as colorfully naive). The settlers are noble and courageous, hanging together to preserve their foothold in the wilderness. Ford's corny, sentimental humor abounds: Fonda hyper-nervous – almost fainting – when Colbert is giving birth to their first live baby; the usual character who speaks in an Irish brogue and drinks too much; a quirky preacher speaking Irish right out of the 'Quiet Man' – he senses the contradiction between the Christian value of love thy neighbor and the need to inspire the settlers to kill the enemy; Edna May Oliver overdoing the crotchety but good-hearted old bag. Much of the film is hard to watch. Nevertheless a sometimes moving Fordian tribute to the dedication and determination of American frontier settlers. (2013)

The Duchess 2008 Saul Dibb (Britain) 3.5 Keira Knightley as Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire and the "Empress of Fashion" with her increasingly wonderful, feathered hats and elaborate bouffant hairdos; Charlotte Rampling as her dour, uncompromising mother, Lady Spencer; Ralph Fiennes as the harsh, deadpan Duke of Devonshire who cares only about his dogs and producing a son; Simon McBurney as the charming Whig firebrand, Charles Fox; Hayley Atwell fetching as Bess Foster, Georgiana's good friend; Dominic Cooper as Georgiana's lover, Charles Grey. Excellent soap opera adaptation of the best-selling book focusing on the emotional life of the Duchess and leaving out most of her public life that played a large role in the book. She is married off by her mother to the distracted older Duke; Georgiana complains to her mother that he never speaks to her and he is unhappy about her failure to produce a son; she finds an only friend in Bess, but then she takes up with the Duke, forming a triangle in Devonshire House London; Georgiana then seeks out a lover in Charles Grey, but her husband and mother force her to give him up; after she gives birth to Charles' daughter and she hands him over to his family, she returns to her husband and Bess and lives out her life as a threesome. The locations (vast parks, beautiful mansions where important scenes take place in enormous, ornate rooms, the main square in Bath) and costumes are exquisite. Georgiana with her fashionable hairdos and hats becomes quite a celebrity at Whig Party gatherings; she loved to socialize and play cards and drink (one time to excess) with the Whig elite. There is quiet reference to the inferior position of women in 18th century Britain: the husband is in complete charge of the family; he may have a mistress but Georgiana is not allowed to have a lover; he is perfectly capable of taking her children away from her; Bess has to be ruthless in her campaign to get her children back by becoming the Duke's mistress and thus earning his powerful support. The film is essentially a soap opera that buries the viewer in the music of swelling strings and in the emotions of the women (the men are often unfeeling and on the outside), but one of very high quality. Most of the performances are outstanding, especially Fiennes, who depicts expertly the stony, single-minded, and seemingly unfeeling exterior of the Duke (although he shows more emotions as the film goes on); Knightley is a stick-thin sort-of pretty face, who does well most of the time but has problems with the intensely emotional scenes. An outstanding guilty pleasure. (2010)

Dunkirk 2017 Christopher Nolan 4.0 Visually spectacular film focusing on the drama and individual sacrifices of the 1940 Dunkirk evacuation. Fionna Whitehead as the British soldier Tommy that the film follows to the end; Tom Hardy as the Spitfire pilot out to protect the troops on the beach (one of the planes sent by the high command, it is said) – he has to land his plane on the beach at the end; Mark Rylance as the steady captain of the small boat crossing the Channel to rescue BEF soldiers off the beach (not enough can be rescued by larger ship off the mole (long pier)); Cillian Murphy as the shell-chocked sailor rescued by Rylance off an overturned, sinking ship; Kenneth Branagh as naval officer in charge of evacuating the soldiers – the viewer tires a bit of his grim expression; other unknown actors playing soldiers, pilots, etc. The film is divided into three scenarios: the longest and slowest is the painful attempts of the soldiers on the beach to escape the (unseen) Germans and find their way 20 miles across the water to home; the voyage of the courageous Rylance's Moonstone across the Channel and its eventual rescue of dozens of British soldiers and sailors; the thrilling air combat sequences, which follow the campaign of three Spitfires to protect the British soldiers on the shore and in the ships relieving them. The flying sequences are thrilling, even on a computer screen: limitless horizons, shots of the planes in formation and individually, shots of the hyper-focused Spitfire pilots only their eyes visible since their faces are hidden behind their masks, spotting enemy planes (the main hostiles being the Heinkel bombers) and attacking and shooting them down, being hit themselves by the German fighters, ditching in the ocean

and landing on the beach. Most of the film treats the experience of the soldiers on shore trying to get back to their homeland: starting with seven soldiers being chased through a town's streets and shot, with the exception of Tommy; troops lined up disconsolately on a surreal beach with smoke billowing in the background, being attacked on the beach or on the mole by German planes leaving bodies strewn about, embarking on larger ships but then caught beneath deck as water pours in drowning some soldiers while others like Tommy escape out a hatch only to be almost drowned again. The sequences describing the suffering of the soldiers sometimes seems repetitive. In any case, most of the principals make it back to England (Dorset), where they feel humiliated at their defeat – one of them reads the line “Wars are not won by evacuations”. They – and we – are thrilled when cheering civilians approach the train passing bottles of beer through the windows and congratulating the kids on their escape. Churchill’s “We will fight them on the beaches” speech is intoned, and the viewer is filled with admiration for the courage and determination of the British people. What would have happened to the non-Nazi world if those 360,000 soldiers had not been successfully evacuated? (And where was the USA in Britain’s moment of need?) Nolan’s film excels in depicting the sacrifices the British made to continue the fight and in creating drama, suspense, and spectacle; it is ultimately a patriotic film. (January 2018)