

## GSC Films E-L

**E.T., the Extraterrestrial** 1983 Steven Spielberg 4.0 Henry Thomas, Dee Wallace, Peter Coyote, Drew Barrymore. Superior children's fantasy movie about encountering a visitor from another world, and deciding not to destroy, dissect, study, etc., but to love, support, and help it return to its own parents. Very endearing throughout; sentimental, but saved from excess by Spielberg's genuineness and good taste. Much glowing supernatural mystery with the hazy atmosphere and crane shots of the city's street, the bluish night sky with the new moon (appearing emblematically in first part of movie) and the sparkling stars suggesting the intriguing mysteries of other worlds. Set firmly in American suburbia in Southern California; the family lives in a typical tract home, the kids swarm into the streets like locusts on Halloween, the final exciting extended chase takes place through graded lots and houses under construction. The family is 'typical,' always tugging on the heartstrings; the mother, Mary, is pretty, competent and divorced and is teary eyed when she thinks of her husband off with another woman in Mexico; the kids bicker, but hang in there together when the going gets tough; they care about their mother's feelings; Gertie (Drew Barrymore) misses her dad and generally is cute and adorable throughout. Movie is definitely kid's eye with few adult characters, aside from the mother, who finds out about E.T. pretty early on. Kids hope and believe and are not realistic; they have the privilege of living in a world of make-believe, where they are not suspicious and accept creatures different from themselves. E.T., despite his bizarre appearance, is pretty much like any other kid: same desires, he misses his parents, he can learn a foreign language quickly, etc. An extra-sensory parallel of powers between E.T. and Elliott, whereby E.T. heals Elliott's finger, and then Elliott raises E.T. from the dead. The federal agents are faceless and threatening in the beginning; then they metamorphose into rather sterile medical personnel as they perform endless tests on E.T. and pursue the kids as they try to cycle the extraterrestrial back to the clearing to meet his parents; there is one good guy, Peter Coyote, who understands what childhood wonder and faith are like. Great emblematic moments: E.T. undiscovered by Mary because he looks like a stuffed animal in the closet; E.T. leaving the Reese's Pieces on Elliott's blanket; the kids on their bicycles levitating and peddling in front of the large yellow full moon; the sensitive close-ups of E.T.'s face. All performances good, particularly Thomas, who shows real emotion. Values are ultimate in family values: tolerance and understanding across all frontiers, the sacredness of life, the healing power of love; the value of a close family; always stay loyal to your friends. (2004)

**The Eagle** 2011 Kevin Macdonald 3.0 (Britain) Channing Tatum as muscular, heroic officer in Roman Britain bent on saving the honor of his father's memory; Jamie Bell as his pouty, resentful Briton slave who accompanies Channing into the North; Mark Strong as a Scottish Celt chieftain. Rousing action-adventure story about the determination of a Roman officer to travel beyond Hadrian's Wall into Scotland (New Caledonia) to recover the eagle standard that his father had lost when the Ninth Legion disappeared there 20 years before. Perhaps the most enjoyable part of the narrative is the first 20 minutes in which Channing takes over command of a far northern garrison in Britain and defends his fortress against the attacks of the barbarians; after recovering from his wounds under the care of his uncle (Donald Sutherland), he and his slave cross the wall into the wilds of Scotland, where they encounter the barbaric Seal People (their faces painted in gray), find the eagle, escape, and then once they have reunited with members of the Ninth still alive, fight them to a standstill in the midst of a mountain stream. The film is based on a famous British young adult novel. There are no female characters. What the film lacks in psychological and cultural sophistication, it makes up for in beautiful scenery, military spectacle, and effective action scenes. The scenery – filmed in Hungary and Scotland – is spectacular and convincing: the rolling hills and wide vistas in the border regions (seems more like Hungary than England), the frozen uplands and forbidding seas of the scenes in the Seal People's village, and the close-up shots of the pristine River and moss-laden cliffs and boulders in the final battle scene. The military imagery in the first part of the film is outstanding: especially in the scene in which an alert Tatum detects movement outside the fortress and defeats the attack by lighting the pitch in the ditches on fire; and even more when he leads a detachment of disciplined soldiers into the field and they form a kind of box with their large, rectangular shields to defend some of their own that they have rescued from the Britons. All the battle scenes – perhaps particularly the final one against the Seal People in the creek – are filmed dynamically

and expertly with the shrieking Britons rushing wildly at the Romans who steadfastly hold their ground. The film depicts life in the wilds outside the wall as much inferior to the relative ease and civilized sophistication of the Roman world – no image of the noble savage here; we appreciate the benefits of the pax romana. The Seal People are dirty, painted, half-naked, cruel (they kill the chief's son for taking a toy from Tatum), and live in the most barren and forbidding of terrains. The return to the Roman city at the end is a relief after exposure to the wet, the cold, and the ugliness and cruelty of the North. Good action movie, beautiful cinematography, convincing male action hero. (2011)

**The Earrings of Madame De...** 1953 Max Ophuls (France) 4.0 Daniele Darrieux as wealthy Parisian woman who flirts constantly – she thinks innocently; Charles Boyer as her husband, a top society general who tolerates her antics; Vittorio De Sica as distinguished and handsome diplomat who seeks to become her lover. Perhaps Ophuls' best and most elegant film. We begin with famous long tracking shot of Darrieux getting dressed as she opens and closes sumptuously stocked closets and drawers and looks at her herself in the mirror, and then she rushes out the door to sell her earrings, thus beginning the saga of the earrings and her love with De Sica. Environment is pure elegance in 1880s Paris – jewelry stores, diplomats' receptions, riding through the streets in carriages, sumptuous interiors with marble, mirrors, and formal sweeping staircases, etc. The camera is ever on the prowl, looking at characters through interior and exterior windows, moving through whole houses to follow the movements of the main characters, panning right and left as it moves, following couples in love dizzyingly and ecstatically dancing a waltz, night after night. ... Amidst the elegance of environment and camera movement, the film is essentially a love story – Darrieux plays a game of limited commitment, but the rules are shattered when she falls in love, although it is not entirely clear whether she ever consummates her connection to De Sica. Even more arresting is the character study of Boyer: he is a disciplined and controlled personality who tolerates his wife flirtations and who has his own mistress, but it becomes gradually apparent that he truly loves her and he suffers from their lack of intimacy or sexual connection (they sleep in separate bedrooms); when she confesses to him that she is in love with another man, he replies that he has not been without his faults either and that they will meet the challenge together; when however it is apparent that she cannot help herself, he decides to punish her – by teasing her with the “McGuffin” earrings and then challenging De Sica to a duel and killing him (although his death is not shown on screen). As always in Ophuls, love is irresistible, but it never leads to happiness, only to tragedy and death – it is an overpowering force that brushes aside individual resistance. The drama is made more piquant and entertaining by the sale of the tell-tale earrings: they travel to and back from Constantinople, they are purchased or sold by a jeweler three or four times; toward the end they play a more essential role in the plot when they become a symbol for Darrieux of her love – after Boyer turns vindictive, he uses them to torture Darrieux by forcing her to give them to a relative for her wedding; the film ends with a shot of the earrings on a votive altar where Darrieux had left them as an offering to ensure the survival of her beloved (but this of course does not work, this being an Ophuls film – De Sica dies in the duel). (2008)

**The East** 2013 Zal Batmanglij 2.0 Brit Marling (co-writer) as pretty, blond Sarah, a field agent of a private security firm commissioned to infiltrate the East, an anarchist group that commits payback revenge on environment-damaging corporations; Alexander Skarsgard as (supposedly) charismatic leader of the East, Benji; Ellen Page as Izzy, fanatic operative not afraid to hurt people including her father; Toby Kebbell as Doc, a graduate of Stanford Med School with serious health issues; Patricia Clarkson actually making a clear impression for her character as the rather maternal head of the security firm. A thriller with a social, environmental conscience undermined by indecisive plotting and mushy acting. Marling gets accepted in the East and actually participates in a couple of the “jams”, operations against corporations designed to exact revenge (e.g., getting them to drink some of their own dangerous drug or be immersed in toxic effluent) and discredit them in public opinion; the script has Sarah arguing within the group against violence (she is a good-hearted kid) and being gradually converted to their activist point of view and falling in love with Benji (the evolution of the relationship is dull and endless); in the last part of the film she oscillates between company headquarters and the band without being able to make up her mind; the ending, which develops way too quickly in a couple of sequences,

has her (apparently) send Benji off to Mexico and then take over the campaign securing help from the Environmental Protection Agency to close polluting factories; she has found a third way. The film has serious deficiencies. The members of the group have a bizarre culture – unrealistically lax discipline that allows Sarah to come and go as she pleases, speaking in New Age clichés, eating out of garbage cans in principle (society throws away too much good food), learning to trust one another by kissing and washing one another. Most of the East members seem to be disaffected, spoiled upper middle class kids angry with their parents, Izzy being the worst since she is willing to poison her own father out of revenge for his environmental crimes. One wonders whether environmental activists are happy with the film’s depiction of members of their movement. The biggest problem is a mushy script and non-expressive acting that subtract from the drama since the viewer is often unsure about what is happening; Marling’s impassive face and blank expressions are perhaps the most off-putting. Environmental protest deserves a much better film. (2013)

**East of Eden** 1954 Elia Kazan (Warners) 3.0 James Dean as the “bad” son Cal, John Davalos as the rather colorless “good” son, Aron, Raymond Massey a bit solemn and serious as the Bible-reading, demanding father, Adam; Julie Harris as Abra is good although a bit over-Methodesque at times to be a simple Salinas girl; Jo Van Fleet as the mother of the twins who ran away from the controlling and demanding ways of Massey, Burl Ives as the good hearted sheriff who tries to mend the broken relationships. Sometimes brutal 50s-style family conflict: Cal feels inferior compared to his father and brother and is driven to find his mother to dig his way out of his misery; Aron is in love with Abra, but since he is somehow distracted and doesn’t demonstrate to her that he loves her, she grows increasingly close to the “dangerous” Cal, and the two boys end up slugging it out (Cal is much the better fighter); Aron’s well-being depends on thinking his mother is a deceased angel, and he melts down and runs off to join the army (World War I) when he meets her drunk and slatternly in her (profitable) Monterey whore house. Beautiful Cinemascope cinematography that puts the viewer convincingly and ravishingly in the California lettuce fields; Kazan is perhaps overly fond of tilted camera shots during tense dialogue. Film of course rises and falls with the performance and dilemmas of James Dean. Dean is very handsome, coming across as a beautiful young man that women would love to mother. His acting is Methodesque slouched over and with head bowed, muttering lines so that they are sometimes difficult to hear, sudden outbursts of rage or pain, such as when he jumps on the neck of his father after the latter refuses to accept the money he offered him (was this scene really improvised by the “brilliant” actor Dean to the surprise of Kazan and the horror of Massey who disliked Dean?), turning his back to us in key emotional moments, such as holding on to the doorknob in the dramatic \$5000 scene with his mother. Cal is a confused character – he resents his father, and yet he is enthusiastic about the lettuce idea; he then gives all his bean money to his father in perhaps a guilt offering; he appears to love his brother and yet he is attracted to his fiancée and then attacks Aron viciously, etc. Film ends with a certain redemption: on his deathbed father relents and asks Cal to take care of him in place of the annoying nurse; since Aron has gone off to war, Cal gives Abra a convincing kiss and the presumption is that they will live happily ever after. Film has mildly anti-war subtext: both boys, especially Aron, are skeptical about the war, a sympathetic German immigrant character objects strenuously to the lies of anti-German propaganda and he is almost beaten up by the very people that had lived with him for decades, etc. (2005)

**Eastern Promises** 2007 David Cronenberg 4.0 Viggo Mortensen practically unrecognizable with gaunt features, slicked back hair, and model Russian accent as (apparently) driver for Russian mafia organization in London; Naomi Watts the innocent outsider as second generation Russian, who is present at the delivery of a baby and then makes it her mission to find the right home for her; Vincent Cassel as the psychopathic (and impotent) son of the crime boss; Armin Mueller-Stahl as the crime boss, who at first appears benevolent and sensible, but who is dangerously devious; Jerzy Skolimowsky (the Polish director) as the well-meaning Uncle Stepan. Wonderful film set in émigré crime underworld in London (written by Steven Knight of ‘Dirty Pretty Things’) about the international trade in sex slaves: a girl is drawn from her village in the Ukraine, she becomes a prostitute in London, and then pregnant dies in the beginning of the film, giving birth to a daughter. Film begins with a violent bang – a Russian hood has his throat cut by a straight razor in the barber’s chair (blood gushing forth in a stream), and then a young

pregnant woman enters a pharmacy, begs for help, and promptly has a fatal hemorrhage on the floor. The latter is an active character through the film since Watts finds her diary and reads from it constantly. A lot of expertly presented plot issues keep the viewer engrossed: What will happen to the child? What kind of person really is Mortensen – just a hood or is there decency lurking beneath? Will he and Watts fall in love, and would they ever be able to get together? Riveting cinematography and editing – the dark, damp and reflective streets of London; the camera tracking behind Watts’ moving motorcycle or walking characters such as the girl walking into the pharmacy; holding the camera on a person’s face to extract a perfectly timed reaction. Characters are all interesting and presented in depth: Watts is the standard kind and gentle normal person, but we don’t tire of studying and learning more about Mortensen, Mueller-Stahl and Uncle Stepan. Terrific fight scene about three quarters of the way through the film: Mortensen, completely naked in a public bath, is attacked by Chechen hoods wielding knives and box cutters and Mortensen, whose genitalia are flapping in the fray, struggles, writhes, tumbles, and takes horrible gash wounds until the assassins are both bloody and dead. Two big surprises toward the end: knowing that he is obliged to sacrifice his only son to the Chechens, the crime boss plots to substitute Viggo for him (hence his false induction into the family and the fight in the baths); and a subsequent visit from a British police inspector informs us that Viggo is really a Russian undercover agent working with the British to infiltrate the local crime organizations. Film ends sensitively with Viggo and Watts saving the baby from being drowned by Kirill (the bastard father has ordered the baby killed because the baby’s DNA could be used to convict the father of rape), the two kissing briefly and then parting; the film ends with a scene showing the baby lovingly cared for in Watts’ family, and then another with Viggo sitting alone reading the diary next to an empty bottle of vodka. Wonderful in-depth characters, intricate yet believable plot, excellent direction, picturesque violence make this film an out-of-the-ordinary crime thriller. (2007)

**East Side, West Side** 1949 Mervyn Leroy 3.0 Bivy of Hollywood actors of the day: Barbara Stanwyck in for her unusual role of the rather dull, long-suffering and true wife; James Mason suave and urbane as her cad of a husband, who can’t help himself with girlfriend Gardner; Ava Gardner, statuesque and thin, but her clothes and haircut don’t do justice to her beauty; Cyd Charisse in non-dancing role as very pretty young model, who might have stolen the show from Gardner; Van Heflin pretty glamorous as young ex-cop, who falls for Stanwyck; William Conrad, Gale Sondergaard, William Frawley, and Nancy Davis in small roles. High quality soap opera that takes place in New York among four or five main characters looking for love: Stanwyck is married to “playboy” Mason, who has eyes only for the completely faithless Gardner; virtual teenager Charisse has a crush on Heflin, who in turn has a yen for Stanwyck. Everyone is frustrated. Gardner is murdered by a jealous rival; Heflin tells Charisse she is too young; Stanwyck rejects Heflin since she is still committed to her husband. Film ends with Stanwyck having had it with Mason’s infidelities and leaves him for parts unknown. Mason, who had previously carried on an innocent motivated flirtation with Sondergaard, Stanwyck’s mother, then calls her to say that he will no longer be attending their Thursday night dinners. The film has great star power, but the script seems often halting, inconsistent, and silly; it gives the impression that – like in TV soap operas – the writers were working while the film was being made, and that no one really knew what was going to happen next. Stanwyck comes across as uninteresting rather than moving and sympathetic; Gardner has little heft as the *femme fatale*; it doesn’t make much sense that Sondergaard would somehow manage to get along with son-in-law Mason so well for all those years despite despising him as she expresses it at the end. Mixed genre – mostly soap opera, but a weak murder mystery with Heflin investigating thrown in, and an ending where everyone is left standing alone. Entertaining to watch, however, with some dramatic moments. (2009)

**An Eastern Westerner** 1920 Hal Roach 3.0 Entertaining short (24 minutes)

**Ed Wood** 1994 Tim Burton 4.0 Johnny Depp foolishly optimistic, energetic, clueless, face locked in eternal smiling rictus, as infamous “world’s worst director”, Ed Wood, completely clueless that his films are so bad; Martin Landau (AA) as emotionally vulnerable Bela Lugosi at the end of a 20-year morphine addiction; Sarah Jessica Parker as Ed’s bulbous-nosed, ill-tempered, conformist girlfriend who leaves him after she discovers that he likes to wear women’s underwear; Patricia Arquette as Wood’s

nicer and calmer second girlfriend (and eventually wife); Jeffrey Jones his usual absurd self as Criswell, a psychic who supports Wood's career – he begins the film by rising out of a coffin in a haunted house (thunder and lightning crashing outside) and proposing that he narrate the film; Vincent D'Onofrio gives spot-on impression of Orson Welles, Wood's idol as fellow film auteur; Bill Murray in low-key role as effeminate friend who unsuccessfully seeks a sex-change operation in Mexico; Lisa Marie as Vampira, ultra sexy Goth predecessor of Elvira; George "the Animal" Steel plays wrestler turned actor Tor Johnson. Tim Burton's low-key, droll, black-and-white celebration of the career of Ed Wood in the 1950s, a character with whom Burton obviously identifies: the film takes us through the making of 'Glen and Glenda', in which Wood himself plays the role of a cross-dressing guy, and 'Bride of the Atom'; and it ends with the immortal 'Plan 9 from Outer Space' (the title is changed at the behest of the film's financiers, a couple of preachers from the Beverly Hills Baptist Church). The film's portrayal of Wood's eternal search for money in even posh venues like the Brown Derby, his casting of any warm body he can get his hands on, his directing style that never calls for a second take even when an actor (Tor) almost knocks down the wall of one of the sets, his minimalist set decoration and costumes, his enormously cheesy special effects (spray-painted Chrysler hubcaps bouncing around on visible strings in front of an amateurish mock-up of the Hollywood sign, knocking over cardboard headstones, half-hearted "smoke" to mark the entrance of a monster), the random insertion of usually irrelevant stock footage of anything from buffalos stampeding to armies marching, the theft of a prop of a giant octopus from a studio warehouse – all make for entertaining humor especially for movie buffs; the viewer cannot help but admire Wood for his dogged persistence. Characterization is mostly superficial with the exception of Lugosi. Landau is wonderful, playing Lugosi as far over the hill, stooped body, lined face, blackened teeth, living in a tiny suburban house filled with his memorabilia and accompanied by two yappy lapdogs, desperate for money and work, seriously addicted to morphine, lonely and eager for friendship. Wood takes him under his wing, and half-exploiting and half-supporting him, builds three of his movies around him; Wood is loving and loyal when Lugosi has to go to a treatment facility for detoxification; their connection is emotional and genuine. When Bela dies during the filming of 'Plan 9', Wood hires a chiropractor to double for him, but he has to hold a cape in front of his face to "hide" the switch; when the film is debuted, the marquee still features Lugosi as one of the players. A memorable tribute to the champion of the Hollywood "Z" movie. (2013)

**The Edge of Heaven (Auf der Anderen Seite)** 2007 Fatih Akin (Germany) 3.0 Nurgül Yesilcay as Ayten, the daughter of Yeter and a radical opponent of the Turkish government; Nursel Köse as her mother, a prostitute in the beginning of the movie who hooks up with...; Tuncel Kurtiz, an old fun-loving Turk living in Germany – he is the father of...; Baki Davrak, who is a professor of literature in a German university; Patrycia Ziolkowska as the childish, impulsive Lotte who becomes Ayten's lover; Hanna Schygulla as Lotte's ex-hippie, now-bourgeois mother who disapproves of her relationship with the Turkish girl. "Open-ended", unpredictable, "decentered" film with several narrative lines that seem sometimes not to be connected – along the lines of "Babel". It is about Turks and Germans, who move back and forth between their two countries. The narrative focuses at various times on the six main characters: Kurtiz at first in his courtship (?) of Kose, and then when he accidentally beats her to death; then on his son Davrak, who goes to Turkey in search of Kose's lost daughter, but then decides to buy a bookstore and stay; then to Kose's daughter Ayten, who is a violent anti-government activist (she has a pistol for a brief time); she flees to Germany to escape the Turkish police and is given shelter by Lotte, who then becomes her lover; Lotte is then killed by gun-happy kids in Istanbul, and the moment of absolution and reconciliation has set in – a glowing Schygulla learns to forgive Ayten, whom she has held responsible for the death of her daughter, and at the end seems to be drifting toward assuming Ayten as her daughter; and finally back to Davrak, who begins searching for his father, who has returned to Turkey after serving a prison term for the murder of his companion; although the two never meet, the film ends with Davrak waiting patiently on a beach on the Black Sea coast for his father to return from fishing (the shot is held for the whole end credits crawl). The film's ending is partly mid-stream: Schygulla's and Ayten's story seems initially resolved, but the viewer never witnesses the reunion between Kurtiz and Davrak. Film sometimes packs a big emotional punch – e.g., the prediction through titles of the deaths of Yeter and Lotte and the viewer's suspense awaiting them, the final meetings between Ayten and

Schygulla – but because of its unpredictable plot turns it is sometimes difficult to empathize with events. Ultimately, the films' theme seems to be about forgiveness and atonement: Davrak must forgive his father for the death of Kurtiz, and Schygulla must forgive Ayten for the death of her daughter Lotte. The viewer's reaction to the film will depend on his appreciation of the "decentered" story. (2008)

**The Edge of Seventeen** 2016 Kelly Fremon Craig (James Brooks producer) 3.5 Winning coming-of-age comedy by first-time director about negative high school teen who eventually breaks through to happiness. Hailee Steinfeld ('True Grit') charming, lively, and affecting as unhappy, although engaging, 17-year-old, Nadine; Haley Lu Richardson as her more sensible best (and only) friend, Krista; Blake Jenner as Nadine's impossibly accomplished and popular brother, Darian; Kyra Sedgwick as Nadine's neurotic mom, Mona, always locked in frustrating combat with Nadine; Woody Harrelson in winning role as Nadine's wry, ironic History teacher, Mr. Bruner – she confides her frustrations in him; Hayden Szeto as Nadine's nice, nerdy, half-Korean would-be boyfriend, Erwin. Nadine doesn't fit into the culture of the American high school: she is in constant conflict with her insecure mother and her brother, who is favored by Sedgwick; she is persistently teased by her classmates in junior year; her only outlet is to complain to teacher Harrelson, to whom she announces at the beginning of the film that she is going to commit suicide (don't worry; no one takes that seriously; most of the rest is flashback). It is hard to know why Nadine is so unhappy, but she relentlessly pushes everyone away. If you challenge her or get on her nerves, she will instinctively fling gratuitous insults: she shouts at her brother that he has a huge head (he doesn't) and that he will never get over it; when Harrelson does some truth-telling, she expatiates on his scanty hair, calling him bald and a terrible, lazy teacher. Krista is her only friend, but when she gives Darian a hand job during a sleepover, Nadine breaks with her, saying Krista can't date Darian and be her friend too. The viewer puts up with Nadine because of Steinfeld's sensitive portrayal of a teenage girl in confusion and pain. She seeks salvation in a halting pursuit of a boyfriend, first Erwin, and then of the class hunk (works at Petland), to whom she texts that she would like to feel him inside her (when she confides to Harrelson, he tells her to watch for her run-on sentences). His aggressive sexual pursuit of her is the beginning of her redemption – she has enough sense to reject sex on the first date. In the course of rescue by Harrelson, she begins to understand her brother also has frustrations; for the first time she breaks into an unqualified wide smile, and the film ends happily holding hands with Erwin. Thanks to Craig's winning screenplay and Steinfeld's engaging performance, the viewer hangs in there with Nadine in dark times and is delighted when she finally finds some life satisfaction. The film is a step above most teenage coming-of-age films because of its realism and genuineness. (2017)

**An Education** 2009 Lone Scherfig (Britain) 3.0 Carey Mulligan thin, simply and modestly dressed, cute, beaming, and wise for her age as 16-year-old bored stiff in 1962 London; Peter Sarsgaard a bit paunchy, but charming and apparently worldly wise as a 30-year-old who picks her up to show her the ways of the world; Alfred Molina comic as Carey's father, not too protective since his fondest ambition is for Carey to move up in life; Olivia Williams as plain teacher in girls' school who takes an interest in Carey; Dominic Cooper as good-looking friend of Sarsgaard; Emma Thompson in Margaret Thatcher hairdo acting forbidding as the headmistress of the school. Entertaining and sometimes moving little film about a suburban English girl living in a middle-class family in swinging London and wanting desperately to join in the excitement; Sarsgaard distracts her from her preparation for Oxford, shows her around the town, deflowers her after she turns 17 (her condition), and even asks her to marry him; but the sudden surprise is that he is married and lives just down the street from Carey's parents; Carey, who has quit school, is devastated, but she recovers, and moves on to Oxford with the support of her parents and her teacher (Thompson is extremely reluctant to let her back in the school); she is older but wiser and she realizes that you can't skip any steps on the way up. Sarsgaard's personality is difficult to decipher: for most of the film he seems sincere and devoted to his teenage friend, and the revelation that he is a rank adulterer and seducer comes across as a bit extreme. The parents are amusing, especially when they themselves are seduced by Sarsgaard's charm into believing that he is the best thing for the future of their daughter (but is it credible that they would not object to her marrying a man twice her age and about whose family they knew nothing?). The film plays with potential tragedy – Carey could have gotten pregnant, married the wrong person, and ended up living a life of desperation – but it has a happy ending

with her luck holding out and not having to pay for her mistakes – the last shots of the film have her riding bicycles down the halcyon streets of Oxford and making plans for her next rip to her beloved Paris. The film works primarily because of the charm, simple beauty, and credible maturity of the teenage Mulligan; one cannot help but sympathize with her and shout at the screen that her future is the university, not that grinning jerk! (2010)

**The Egg and I** 1947 Chester Erskine: Universal 2.5 Claudette Colbert as passive, pretty city girl that agrees to accompany her new husband to start a chicken farm in the Pacific Northwest; Fred McMurray after ‘Double Indemnity’ back to a comedic role as focused, rather insensitive guy, who at first doesn’t think twice when he rides roughshod over his wife’s preferences; Marjorie Main steals the shoe as good-hearted, superficially irascible country lady Ma Kettle with a brood of about ten children, whose names she cannot remember; Percy Kilbride as the comically lazy, incompetent Pa Kettle; Louise Allbritton as the rather glamorous, citified neighbor that appears to make a play for MacMurray. Formulaic “let’s go live in the country” film that is partially saved by the star power of Colbert and MacMurray. When MacMurray informs Colbert that he has decided to move them to the country – in fact he has already purchased the property – the latter, apparently much in love with her husband, agrees without demur. Much of the first part of the film is taken up with comic efforts by the couple to set up their new farm, many of them of course disastrous. Less slapsticky is meeting picturesque neighbors, such as the lady who talks constantly about her health, and primarily Ma and Pa Kettle, the latter borrowing everything McMurray will give him, and Ma chasing around her children and saying wry, colorful things: the two Kettles rather steal the show, resulting in the string of eight Ma and Pa Kettle B movies that Universal subsequently produced through 1957. The film has two crises: after a forest fire burns down MacMurray’s and Colbert’s outbuildings, the couple is tempted to give up farming (they resist however); and the screenplay leads us to believe that Allbritton is making a play for MacMurray and that he might have given in to her at the end. All of course ends well – the neighbors, who have nothing in common with 2016’s gun-wielding bigots, help our couple to reestablish themselves by bringing lumber, chickens, pigs, etc.; and in an extremely improbable sequence Colbert runs back to the city, refuses to read hubby’s letters, has a baby, and then forgives him and returns to the neighborhood to find to her surprise that MacMurray has bought Allbritton’s farm – that’s all there was to the relationship. Obviously they live happily ever after on their modernized farm. The film has some clever moments with eggs, especially in the introductory sequence when Colbert reprovokes a Pullman porter for breaking an egg and making light of it. Reflects the desire to get back to normal – for many GI’s on the farm – after demobilization in World War II? (2016)

**Election** 1999 Alexander Payne 3.5 Matthew Broderick, Reese Witherspoon, Chris Klein, Jessica Campbell as Tammy, Mark Harelik as the unfortunate Dave. “Wicked” and sardonic satire on high school culture and on the American electoral process; film deals with a campaign for student body president in affluent George Washington Carver High School (there are very few Blacks!). The usual high school types are depicted with great wit (Reese as the overachiever, Klein as the dumb but well meaning jock, Jessica as the counter-culture, cynical lesbian who gets herself kicked out and sent to Catholic school so she can be with girls). The electoral process is skewered by double-speak (Reese very good at that in her speeches and in her face-to-face showdown with Broderick), by campaigning strategy, by photo ops of Witherspoon photographer dropping her ballot into the ballot box. Film has equal opportunity sarcasm, since it also skewers foolish aberrant sexual behavior of adults; the funniest is Harelik as the 30s teacher who loses his job because of his sexual affair with Witherspoon – when confronted in principal’s office, tears are welling out of his eyes. Witherspoon is girl on the make, ambitious, manipulative, obsessive vixen, who turns to rage when thwarted; she is an expert comedienne. Broderick as the History and Civics teacher gives most of the voice-over (although all the main characters get their chances to talk); he is confused, good-intentioned, but stumbling over his own feet contradicting his own principles and getting into serious trouble, such as (almost) cheating on his wife, getting kicked out of the house, and getting caught falsifying the results of the student president election; and this after announcing in an early scene that he is much concerned with morals and ethics. Comic style is impeccable. Funny juxtapositions: Broderick says he is in love with Linda’s character, and camera shows

him looking at her butt and her cleavage; Broderick explaining to Klein about fruit on the blackboard (a teacher!), and then cut to a bowl of fruit at his parent's house; Broderick's Linda-induced fantasy about being in a cool Italian sports car instead of his aging dirty sub-compact; when Broderick is down and out and everything is going wrong, even the vending machine in the cheap motel where he is staying steals his money. Music is also sardonic, e.g., some Arab-sounding wailing when there are serious passages in the film. This man has a great satirical sense of humor.

**Elegy** 2008 Isabel Coixet 3.0 Ben Kingsley in starring role as an aging and erudite Columbia professor who has never liked relationships longer than one-night stands, but who is captivated/ obsessed by the vision of Cruz sitting in his classroom while he lectures on literary criticism; Penelope Cruz doing us the favor of disrobing twice so that we can see her breasts, but who is basically a psychological mask that we labor (in vain) to understand; Dennis Hopper excellent as wise-cracking and pretty wise handball and drinking buddy, whose premature death drives Kingsley closer to self-understanding; Patricia Clarkson effective as Kingsley's very independent and focused fuckbuddy who is not above jealousy; Peter Sarsgaard as Kingsley's son, who cannot forgive his father for abandoning his family when Peter was a little boy. Slow-paced rumination about love and death, about the acceptance of aging, and about eventually moving toward personal commitment and permanency. Kingsley may be allergic to romantic commitments (the sex is where it's at), but he is sexually obsessed by his very beautiful student Cruz (very dark long hair, dark eyes, very white bleached teeth, a swelling chest under her blouse); so Amor surprisingly puts him in motion to deal with aging and lack of commitment. He resists getting to know Cruz's family even after being together for a year and a half; she breaks off with him; but when after a couple of years she returns faced with the prospect of losing one of her breasts to cancer surgery, he is greatly affected and comes around, embracing her in the end saying "I am here". He finds it very difficult to get past the exterior shell of beauty worn by Cruz (Hopper's phrase) and fully to appreciate Cruz's character and soul. In the meantime he has other small epiphanies: when his faithful friend Dennis Hopper (Kingsley's only enduring relationship before the end of the film) has a fatal stroke, he kisses Kingsley on the lips (Ben is very embarrassed) just before he dies; and when Clarkson finds tampons in Kingsley's bathroom, she becomes furious and terminates their decades-long relationship. No doubt that Kingsley does an excellent job inhabiting Philip Roth's character, but this viewer often tires of contemplating his craggy face and shaved head; the goateed Hopper more or less steals the scenes he has with Kingsley; Cruz often looks vacant and desirable in keeping with her role in the film as Kingsley's sexual muse. The film often moves at a glacial pace with not much happening in the frame and the viewer wondering whether he can stand another intense close-up of Kingsley's face. The *mise-en-scène* is exquisite – perhaps too much so: dark stony and metallic textures, lovely balancing of volumes and shapes, semi-deep focus when useful; but one cannot escape the sense that the beauty is for its own sake and does not enhance the human qualities of the film. A score consisting mostly of Satie and Bach helps maintain a meditative, slightly depressive mood. (2009)

**The Elephant Man** 1980 David Lynch (Britain) 3.0 John Hurt evoking pity and admiration as John Merrick although hidden inside his hideous disguise; Anthony Hopkins very young and playing it straight and a bit dull as the doctor who sponsors Merrick's emergence; Anne Bancroft as a kindly actress who lends her support to Merrick and Hopkins; John Gielgud as the crusty hospital administrator who supports Hopkins; Wendy Hiller as the head nurse, also supportive; Freddie Jones well played as the cruel and evil original "owner" of Merrick. Sentimental, beautifully produced and directed adaptation of the best-selling book (although the film denies that it is based on anything but the historical record). Merrick is rescued by Hopkins from exploitation in the virtual sewers of London, placed in a safe room (well, more or less) in his hospital, where he develops as an intelligent man and Victorian gentleman until his death at the end of the film. The art direction, make-up, and costuming are flawless – from the cockney denizens of the basements and slums of London to the gas lit hallways and rooms of the hospital and the rooms of Hopkins and his wife neatly overloaded with Victorian bric-a-brac; the cinematography evokes the era expertly. The film is essentially about Victorian conformity and kindness. Hopkins seems to be a decent and kind gentleman, who is at first prejudiced against Merrick because of his shocking deformities but then becomes his defender when he discovers that he is intelligent, not violent, and respectful of



Victorian proprieties: once acclimatized, Merrick speaks to all his visitors politely, he takes tea like a proper English gentleman, he enjoys a cult of female beauty without expecting any beastly sexual connection, he recites psalms with spiritual fervor and romantic quotations from Shakespeare (it appears that he somehow has already learned how to read). One often gets the impression that the upper class Victorian folk that support and applaud him when he attends a play in the theater (at the invitation of Bancroft) are really applauding themselves for their enlightened willingness to treat him like a human being and not a freak. The film comes across as quite prejudiced against lower class people, since they are the ones that exploit Merrick, display him in freak shows, and mock him for his appearance. The film sometimes uses horror film gimmicks (the camera descending into the depths of the cellar, photographing Merrick's face with a fish-eye lens, etc.), but generally the story flows peacefully in the direction of right behavior. The ending is appropriately sentimental – Merrick lies down to die on his bed, and the camera pans out the window, travels through the night sky, and fixes on a vague, celestial image of a beautiful woman, presumably his mother whom he has left the earth to join. What more could one ask for than to be a proper Victorian gentleman?

**Elizabeth** 1998 Shekhar Kapur (Britain) 3.5 Cate Blanchett as pretty, feminine young Elizabeth trying to establish herself as queen around 1560; Geoffrey Rush as Francis Walsingham, a key adviser and protector, whose loyalty for a while is in question; Joseph Fiennes as Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, Elizabeth's lover who wants to marry her; Christopher Eccleston as the head-shaven, hard-nosed Duke of Norfolk, who wants to be king in place of Elizabeth; Richard Attenborough as avuncular Sir William Cecil, Elizabeth's faithful minister; Fanny Ardant with a lot of teeth playing the shrewd French Mary of Guise in Scotland; Vincent Cassel as the outrageously comical cross-dressing Duc d'Anjou, Mary's nephew and one of Elizabeth's suitors; Kathy Burke very moving showing the sufferings of Mary Tudor (no children, fear for the fate of her beloved Catholic Church in England) as she dies; John Gielgud in brief appearance as the pope ordering an insurrection against Elizabeth. Although outlandishly unhistorical, colorful and compulsively watchable drama about young Elizabeth's journey to stability in the first years of her reign. Elizabeth is surrounded by plots and machinations on all sides: the compulsively ambitious Norfolk plots with the Spaniards and the pope (but not the French) to replace the queen on the throne; the Spanish ambassador, lurking in the shadows, is constantly fomenting resentment and rebellion against Elizabeth; the loyalty of Francis Walsingham, who is called in to protect the queen, is doubtful; even loyal Cecil constantly prods her to marry an eligible king (Philip or the duke of Anjou), and one of the most amusing incidents of the film recounts the visit of the Duke to London to seek the hand of the queen (unsuccessfully due to his apparent homosexuality and outrageous sense of humor). The film climaxes in an apparently fictitious plot involving the main players including Dudley to overthrow the queen, upon which Elizabeth, acting on Walsingham's advice, assassinates her opponents. And then – the kicker – she decides that she must emulate the Virgin Mary, who has been drummed by the Protestants out of the English Church (untrue), by renouncing her gay, pleasure-loving persona, cut her hair, paint her face dead white, dress in restrictive clothing, and then appear before her court and subjects as the stern Virgin Queen, who sacrifices marriage, motherhood, and the other pleasures of life for the well-being of her subjects. The main thing is that she has survived and will rule for another 40 years as queen. The film is entertaining, lurid, humorous, and scandal-seeking throughout: depicting the pleasures of the queen dancing in court with Dudley or cavorting in bed with him, the tittering of the ladies-in-waiting when confronted with scandal, dwelling on the suspicious (the Spanish ambassador) and the scary (the murderous Spanish priest sent by the pope to England striding menacingly through the dark corridors of the palace with his brown cowl floating and fluttering about him), showing the heads of the beheaded conspirators impaled on sticks. The scenes of Mary Tudor early in the film are very moving in depicting her pain at the consequences of her impending death. Entertaining, lurid film with a lot of suspense and an affecting performance from Cate Blanchett. (2013)

**Elle** 2016 Paul Verhoeven (France) 3.5 Multi-faceted Verhoeven film focuses on a rape victim's search for her rapist and on the victim's outrageous erratic behavior. Isabelle Huppert dominates the film as the rape victim, Michele; Laurent Laffite as good-looking and apparently friendly and harmless neighbor; Anne Consigny as Huppert's business partner and possible long-term lover; Charles

Berling as Huppert's ex-husband, who is playing the fool dating one of his students; Christian Berkel has shaven head as Anna's husband and Michele's doltish sometime lover; Judith Magre as Michele's rather outrageous mother indulging a very young lover; Jonas Bloquet as Michele's witless son, who has trouble keeping a job (at a hamburger joint) and has pronounced relationship issues with his girlfriend. Film presents itself first as a rape revenge story: it opens shockingly and noisily with Michele being raped in her apartment by a man wearing a ski mask: she then conducts a somewhat desultory search for the perpetrator, leading her through an unsuccessful investigation of the young males in the video game company she runs with Anna (their games are both violent and sexual – she insists in one scene that the sex scenes be more explosively orgasmic). Since Michele appears to have masochistic tendencies, the viewer is led to wonder whether the rape was consensual; she tickles Laffitte's genitals with her foot under a dinner table, masturbates at some length as she watches him load a truck outside her window, and when she visits his house, she willingly submits to violent sex (rape?) with him in the cellar of his home, as it emerges that he can't perform sexually except in rape mode. Michelle moves around aggressively perpetuo mobile and is confrontationally honest, saying even the most scandalous and wounding things to friends and family (announcing to her friends in a restaurant that she has been raped, telling her son that his baby couldn't be his because the baby's skin is dark); after her mother dies, she dumps her ashes casually into a canal as she crosses a bridge. Her disordered personal relationships come to view: her father, who is still in prison, is a mass murderer and her mother, who still loves her ex-husband, indulges her sexuality at an advanced age; she argues with her son and treats him contemptuously when he won't stand up to his girlfriend; he exploits the affection of one of her young male employees to spy on the computers of other employees. The ending doesn't settle much: Laffitte attacks Michele again in her apartment, and as she resists, her son rushes in and beats him over the head into unconsciousness (it is unclear whether he is dead). Afterwards, in a scene recalling the end of 'Casablanca', Michele and Anna walk away arm-in-arm in a cemetery. (Is Michele a lesbian?) The film is brilliantly played and produced. Huppert's subtle, reserved, impish, ironically humorous personality makes the film fascinating; and Verhoeven's lurid evocation of sexual and violent images and themes has a brilliant and powerful impact on the viewer. Just enjoy it! You won't if you judge it morally or try too hard to find a theme. (2017)

**Emma** 1996 Douglas McGrath (Britain) 2.5 Gwyneth Paltrow perhaps a bit too sweet and American as the pretty but snobby Cupid, Emma; Greta Scacchi colorless as Emma's sensible confidant, Mrs. Weston; Alan Cumming as the stuffy parson Mr. Elton; Jeremy Northam as the glamorous Mr. Knightley, a friend of Emma's family and the man she is obviously intended to marry, although it takes a long time to get there; Toni Collette as the often foolish Harriet Smith, not the social equal of Emma but a contender for the attention of Knightley; Ewan MacGregor not recognizable as the earnest Frank Churchill, at one time a pretender for the hand of Emma. Talky, rather lengthy, adaptation of the Jane Austen novel that brings out the marriage obsession of English provincial society in the early 19th century, where everyone seems to live in manor houses amidst leafy, grassy parks and all they think or talk about is who will marry whom. Austen's novel fits neatly into the romantic comedy genre. The focus is at first Emma's focus on finding the right mate for all her friends and cousins; although the film begins with a success – the marriage of her friend Scacchi to Mr. Weston – her schemes sometimes misfire; she attempts to couple Harriet with Mr. Elton, thereby inducing Harriet to turn down the worthy farmer Watson (who Emma clearly thinks is socially unworthy), but Elton then goes off to Bath and marries and brings back with him a foolish and hypercritical young woman. Oops. Emma is courted for a while by Churchill, but she begins to think of Knightley, who however because of some misunderstanding asks Harriet to marry him. All turns out for the best when Emma has an awkward conversation with Knightley in the park grounds, whereby they declare their unending and tender love for one another, while Harriet is suddenly the object again of the farmer's affection. One feels certain that they all will live happily ever after. Partly because of the low stakes of the narrative, partly of the ordinary dialogue, the film often drags seriously. Perhaps the only ah-ha! Moment is Emma's cruel put-down of the dull Miss Bates (an overacting Sophie Thompson), an event that excites the criticism of Knightley and perhaps sets Emma on the path to salvation. Filming is also rather dull, though pleasant – the standard man house interiors, sitting outside taking tea, walking through the grassy, tree-shaded parks, exchanging conversation about local subjects (weather, who is engaged to whom, etc.). Paltrow doesn't

seem to have the thespian pizzazz to carry the film through. A pleasant but rather hollow film not worthy of the author.

**Les émotifs anonymes** 2010 Jean-Pierre Améris (France) 3.0 Isabelle Carré as a charming and very shy young woman, who is an excellent chocolatière and is looking for a mate; Benoit Poelvoorde as the owner of a small chocolate manufacturer in Paris, who is comically terrified of women. Charming, light-hearted, rather short (1:17) romantic comedy about how two extremely timid people finally find one another despite all the obstacles. A very traditional romance that believes that love between a man and a woman is the key to happiness, and when the couple is finally married in the end, they start off full of joy down the road of happiness that disappears over the hill in the distance. Nary a serious bone in the entire film. The backdrop is provided by modern psychological aids – Benoit sees a psychiatrist who gives him useful exercises, such as “touch someone” and who gives Benoit the opportunity to explain to the audience what he is feeling and doing; and Isabelle attends a support group entitled “Émotifs anonymes” (obviously patterned on Alcoholics Anonymous) where she explains her plight to her group (and to the audience). Both actors are extremely accomplished in portraying their almost pathological shyness – facial tics, stumbling at key times, suddenly disappearing from a room (Benoit does this several times); there is however no physical slapstick. Perhaps the most amusing scene is their first date in a restaurant, where Isabelle brings notes to consult about conversation subjects (complete failure) and where a profusely perspiring Benoit keeps retreating to the men’s room to change his shirt; he returns once with a formal ruffled shirt, whereupon humiliated he flees out the bathroom window. When they finally end up in a hotel together, they fall into bed despite hesitation and confusion; then Isabelle begins to bawl hysterically about getting married and having children, causing Benoit again to flee out the front door. Touching conclusion where Benoit uninvited attends the same sharing session as Isabelle and declares his love in front of the group; then off to the church and down the road of marital bliss. Simple, naïve, happy view of life perhaps reminiscent of Pierre Etaix; refreshing naturalness compared to the big star calculations of Hollywood romantic comedies.

**En la Cama** 2005 Matías Bize (Chile) 2.5 Blanca Lewin; Gonzalo Valenzuela. Claustrophobic film about a couple getting to know one another after meeting at a party and going to a motel for some recreational sex; the two actors are the only players and they never leave the motel room. The film starts off with the sexual event depicted by a lot of huffing, grunting, and crying out and only indistinct images of sheets and flesh very close up that slowly become more distinct when they finish. It turns out that neither partner knows the first (or last) name of the other; and they warily yield their identity and then begin to reveal important things about their own lives. They make love two more times, once beginning in the bathtub; the third one is interrupted suddenly by Lewin when Valenzuela cries out the name of his former girlfriend in the heat of passion. The film seems like it must have received an NC-17 rating. It is reminiscent of ‘Before Sunrise’ in its easy-going, natural talkiness, and sometimes playfulness that gradually leads to significant revelations about the principals. Both of course are wounded by previous failed relationships; Valenzuela reveals that he is soon to leave for Europe to study for a Ph.D. When Valenzuela’s condom tears, Lewin reflects on intimacy by imagining that the sperms of this man that she barely knows are swimming around inside of her. They guardedly approach aspects of an intimate relationship, and when they part, the viewer is left with the open question of whether there is any possibility of pursuing the connection. The strength of the film is the natural, insightful dialogue that explores the frontiers of intimacy and its relationship with sex. The static, claustrophobic visual atmosphere, however, make it hard to watch all the way through.

**En pleine forme** 1966 (reedited 1971) Pierre Etaix (France) Short (about 14 minutes) black and white film that depicts camping light-heartedly as a kind of prison. Film begins with Etaix camping by himself in pretty lakeside location, where he struggles with a coffee-making machine (Keaton) – charming gag shot in which a cube of sugar suddenly absorbs the few drops of coffee in the cup that he has managed to produce. Afterwards, he is conducted by a policeman to an organized, cramped campsite surrounded by as barbed wire fence. At first, the crowded camp seems like a city – e.g., businessman crawls out of tiny pup tent in a suit, and takes off for work in a car housed in a larger tent next to the small

one. The last two sketches take a darker tone: a camp denizen in striped pajamas talks to visiting mom through the fence wire (as in the prison visiting room?); then two kids in a tent dig a tunnel to escape, using toy dump truck to move tiny quantities of earth. Even though the hole is only a few inches deep, Etais then uses it to escape from the camp (prison), appearing suddenly just outside the fence. A happy ending to a tale that could have been much darker. (2015)

**The End of the Affair** 1999 Neil Jordan (Britain) 3.0 Ralph Fiennes as London writer who has had an affair with Sarah and who now must come to terms with it; Julianne Moore as Sarah, the wife of a London bureaucrat, who looks for love outside of her affectionless marriage; Stephen Rea as colorless but earnest upper bureaucrat who suffers from his wife's infidelity; Ian Hart as earnest Dickensian private detective who shadows Moore for lover and husband. Searching adaptation of Graham Greene novel, set in London during the war and right after; film emphasizes equally the romantic, sexual aspect of the film (the sex scenes use tasteful nudity to make them convincing) and Green's probing Catholic-tinged theology of good and evil. Film is beautifully photographed and edited -- close-ups are elegant and appropriate; colors and hues are dark and rich; although we may wonder why almost every outdoor scene has to be in the rain. Film has modernist plot structure, beginning with Fiennes at his typewriter announcing that he is writing the story of his affair on the theme of hate; and then alternating between flashbacks to show us the progress of the affair and the present where he develops a kind of friendship with the husband as the two of them try to come to terms with what has happened. Sarah has a fatal disease and Rea invites Fiennes to live in his house to attend to Sarah until she dies. The affair had been stormy, very romantic, and very sexual. Fiennes suffers from jealousy mainly of the husband, and the script announces that as a sin. The affair comes to an end when a German bomb explodes next to the building where the two lovers are in bed, apparently killing Fiennes; when Sarah discovers that he is not dead, she makes a pledge to God on her knees that she will never see her lover again and the two part. When we come to the present, the theme has become the tension between God's rules about sexuality and love (or perhaps just of Sarah's understanding of them, since Fiennes continues to insist that he does not believe in God) and the demands of the human heart and body. Sarah shows that she cannot remain true to her pledge, since her need to be with Fiennes is so great; she agrees to go off with him. Fiennes is increasingly frustrated and angry that God has taken his beloved from him -- first because she "got religion" in her supposed vision in the explosion, and then because she gets sick and dies. Film ends in a kind of depressed resignation, when Fiennes finishes his work and asks God just to leave him alone. Film is noble effort to translate Greene's themes to the screen; it suffers from an overly complicated thematic development; more simplicity would have increased its impact. (2008)

**End of Watch** 2012 David Ayer 4.0 Jake Gyllenhaal as decent, talkative, dedicated "ghetto" cop in the nastiest parts of Los Angeles; Michael Peña as his Mexican-American partner, family man, talkative, good-humored, and completely devoted to his Anglo buddy; Natalie Martinez as Pena's perhaps overly pretty and glamorous wife; Anna Kendrick as Gyllenhaal's toothy girlfriend, whom he marries toward the end of the film; America Ferrera as LAPD tough lady cop; Yahira Garcia stands out as perhaps the most violent and foul-mouthed female gangster ever to appear on the big screen. Cop buddy movie that however stands out for its level of intense violence and its sympathetic and believable presentation of male camaraderie under fire. Gyllenhaal and Pena are tough, dedicated cops who specialize patrolling the toughest streets of LA -- South Central in the beginning (the film begins with an exciting car chase through the alleys of South Central followed by a fatal shootout with street thugs) and then a Hispanic neighborhood close to downtown. The two get into many scrapes: saving kids from a burning house, entering a house filled with stinking body parts, but mostly chasing gang bangers in exciting sequences through the streets of ghetto neighborhoods and then shooting them down and somehow escaping being killed themselves. The narrative line has the two increasingly crossing paths with a powerful and ruthless Mexican drug cartel making its appearance in LA, until the bosses put out a contract on the two street cops (!?); in the final, extremely well staged shootout, Pena is killed and Gyllenhaal, whom we think is dead, is actually severely wounded, but then the forces of good appear at the end of the street and efficiently dispatch the remaining assassins -- the camera lingers over the bloody dead bodies of the most offensive of them. Camera work is original -- much of the footage is supposedly

shot by Gyllenhaal as part of a project he is doing for a film class, although it soon becomes obvious that a third-person camera is always present to make the conceit work (e.g., when Gyllenhaal has sex with his girlfriend, there is a camera recording some of the highlights); whenever there is as violent scene – fistfight or gun wounds – the camera is tumbling around as if it is being attacked; there are very few steady camera shots. The film tells the viewer a lot about the thoughts and feelings of the two buddies: they like excitement and violence, although they are not rogue cops, and they are completely dedicated to their jobs – protect and serve. The main point is that they are very close emotionally: they talk about their private lives, they share family events, and they stand by one another through thick or thin; when Pena is killed, Gyllenhaal mourns him like a brother. The film generated a lot of suspense for this viewer: you become so attached to the two men that you fret that their increased contact with the drug gang will get them killed. Although the bad guys in the film are an incredibly savage and foul-mouthed Mexican gang (Garcia takes the prize for foul language and mindless violence), the film is ethnically fair: Pena and Gyllenhaal represent whites and browns joining hands, and the two seem to be on good terms with the Black hoods in the area. A riveting cop movie that perhaps overplays noise and violence, at least for this viewer. A kind of antidote to the vicious “Training Day” with its less than flattering picture of the LAPD. (2013)

**Enemies: A Love Story** 1989 Paul Mazursky 4.0 Ron Silver as survivor of the Nazi persecution, hapless victim of indecision and Angst living in New York in 1949; Margaret Sophie Stein as his wife with whom he lives in Coney Island -- a former Polish servant girl that saved Silver's life, she is supinely attached to him; Lena Olin (AA nomination) as Masha, Silver's girlishly beautiful, sexy, impulsive, unhappy mistress (she lives in the Bronx); Anjelica Huston (AA nomination) as Silver's prewar wife that returns from the dead -- sarcastic and outspoken, she is surprisingly gentle and sensitive as Silver's confidante; Alan King doing his New York shtick as worldly rabbi; Paul Mazursky in brief but colorful appearance as Masha's husband, who agrees to divorce her if she will have sex with him. Part farce and part comedy of manners about the plight of Silver and the three women in his life against the backdrop of the concentration camps (all four experienced the Nazi persecution) and Jewish life in New York; the film has also an element of tragedy -- Masha's suicide and Silver's disappearance to unknown destinations -- but it ends upbeat with the first two of Silver's wives collaborating to take care of the baby that Silver fathered with Stein. Colorful, accurate evocation of 1949 New York -- riding on the subway, the colorless apartments in Brooklyn and the Bronx, the Jewish shops in the street with the star of David in the window, the elderly Jewish ladies gossiping in the streets, the transplanted New York Jews playing shuffleboard and canasta in the Catskills, etc. The film is very witty, even farcical at times, with first rate performances from especially the women -- Tamara's sardonic good heart (she takes Silver under her wing and sticks around to help take care of his baby); Masha's hyperactive, needy sexiness (she blows hot and cold with Silver, one moment covering him with affection, the next shrieking that she will never look at him again); Stein's simple-minded, worshipful fidelity (when she first meets former boss Tamara after a long absence, she runs into the bathroom screeching that she has seen a ghost; thereafter she subjects herself to her, calling her "Mistress"). The film evokes a lot of empathy: impatience, and yet pity, for the hapless Silver whose only decision in the film is to run away from his dilemmas; affection and attachment to the beautiful Masha, who gives all of her heart to the unworthy Silver and in the end ends her own life with quiet dignity; to the superstitious, dependent Stein, who worships the ground Silver walks on and then devotes the rest of her life to their child when he leaves; Tamara, who mocks Silver and yet tries -- unsuccessfully -- to help him straighten out. Every scene is rich in pleasure -- dramatic situations, comedy, dialogue, acting, expressive directing (Mazursky is especially good at catching Huston's facial expressions). Perhaps a small weakness -- the script waffles between ascribing the characters' problems to their own personalities or to the Nazi experience; it is hard to understand, for example, how Silver's paralysis might have originated hiding from the Nazis in a barn. A moving, entertaining film. (2014)

**The Enemy Below** 1957 Dick Powell 3.0 Robert Mitchum as forceful, competent skipper of an American destroyer escort that happens upon a German submarine in the South Atlantic; Curt Jürgens as the equally competent anti-Nazi German u-boot captain; Theodore Bikel as Jurgens' first officer; Russell Collins as Mitchum's ship's doctor that delivers sententious messages at the beginning and the

end of the film. Gripping World War II naval drama about the pursuit of a German submarine by a U.S. destroyer in the South Atlantic. Sets and environments well produced and realistic with on-location shots aboard the destroyer and the usual claustrophobic feel in the submarine, especially when under attack; model-based special effects of the ships colliding and burning at the end are competent. The strength of the film is the performances of the two principals, as they engage in a deadly duel – the u-boot is headed toward a rendezvous with a large German surface raider, and the charismatic Mitchum is determined to head it off and destroy it. Entertaining cat and mouse pursuit, as each of the worthy opponents uses his weapons, experience, and guile to outmaneuver the other. The u-boot is on the defensive, running, descending, waiting, feinting to avoid the American ship passing over several times to bombard it with depth charges; extensive use of sonar and listening equipment to track the enemy, spectacular underwater explosions of the depth charges, the torpedoes running in straight lines through the water like streamlined fish. The two captains each make a mistake at the end: Mitchum imprudently exposes his broadside to the German and is torpedoed; when Mitchum feigns imminent danger of sinking, Jürgens foolishly surfaces and is then blown out of the water by the destroyer's guns; the destroyer then rams the submarine, and the two are finished off by the submarine's scuttling explosion. The Americans rescue the Germans, Mitchum and Jürgens salute one another as worthy opponents earning mutual respect. The ending of the film is on the one hand conciliatory about the future friendship of the enemies (there are a lot of anti-Nazis in Germany?) and on the other hand almost anti-war in recounting an adventure that results in the destruction of both antagonists: doesn't it seem wasteful, almost absurd? The script does a better job establishing the camaraderie among the Germans than the Americans. Good head-to-head war adventure used in several subsequent films, e.g., 'The Hunt for Red October' and 'Das Boot'. (2016)

**Les enfants du paradis** 1946 Marcel Carné (France) 4.0 Arletty as Garance, iconically beautiful and inscrutable unattached woman for whom only love matters, Jean-Louis Barrault as the inspired mime Baptiste, in the middle of the many love stories, Pierre Brasseur as Frederick, the bullshitter actor always playing a flamboyant part in his life and for whom only being a success on the stage (he hates mimes) matters, Louis Salou as an also iconic Count de Montray, stiff, formal, formidable, dangerous, impeccably turned out, Marcel Herrand as the criminal leader Lacenaire, who is also irresistibly drawn to Garance. Two part movie – the first rather optimistic and happy, the second fatalistic and tragic – about complex love relationships in the world of the theater in Paris of the 1820s and 1830s. Pace of movie is quite slow as all the ins and outs of the love stories are developed: focuses on Baptiste's love for Garance – with serious rivals from Frederick and Lacenaire; the love finally has its fulfillment at the end when Baptiste and Garance spend the night together. Garance is elusive and refuses to settle down, marry, etc.; the only thing that matters to her is love – and she truly loves Baptiste at the end – but for her it is soon over – the wheel of life continues to move – and she must move on. Baptiste loves her with a pure romantic ideal, to the point that he dare not touch her when he first has her in private; Lacenaire is no love, but tells her he “desires” her (sex); Frederick just likes to sweet talk her – since there is apparently no character behind the actor's mask, it is difficult to know what he wants. Ends dramatically and tragically. Garance returns to disturb the happy marriage that Baptiste has with Nathalie (Maria Casarès), and when his wife tries to reclaim him after the affair, Baptiste leaves the room and runs hopelessly through the street screaming his lover's name. Meanwhile, de Montray, who is trying to fight duels with most men, is murdered by Lacenaire in his Turkish bath; the latter waits to be arrested. All the other characters are again set free and are lonely individuals in the world; the love connection has not remained stable for anyone. Marvelous copy of the film restored by Criterion. The environment is popular celebration in the streets (e.g., Mardi Gras in the last scene), and the lower class folk (“enfants du paradis”) who sit in the cheap, higher seats in the theater, and cheer lustily the mime of Baptiste and the acting of Frederick. Hard to know where the allegory of Nazi occupation lies. Plays with images of illusion – the acting profession and how it affects one's real-life behavior, the role of dreams and idealism in one's love (Baptiste), etc. A film that needs to be seen many times. (2005)

**Enough Said** 2013 Nicole Holofcener 4.0 Julia Louis Dreyfus as disheveled, Plain Jane, nervous masseuse looking for Mr. Right after ten years divorced; James Gandolfini in his last film as overweight, gentle, good-hearted middle-aged guy also divorced and ready for romance; Toni Collette

with British accent as friend of Dreyfus – she fights hilariously with her husband; Catherine Keener looking older as client of Dreyfus that she gets close to. Another outstanding Holofcener film: it deals with banal subject matter -- middle-class divorced people dealing with loneliness and looking for a romantic connection, but succeeds by providing healthy doses of low-key humor, insight, and sincerity. Narrative is slight but engaging. Dreyfus and Gandolfini meet at a party and pursue a relationship with some hesitation from Dreyfus, who is shy about committing herself, in part, she says to herself, because Gandolfini is overweight and he complains constantly about his ex-wife; in any case, there doesn't seem to be any bedroom fireworks. Matters get complicated when Dreyfus discovers that her newfound friend (Keener) is Gandolfini's ex-wife; and when Gandolfini discovers that she has been pursuing their relationship without telling him, he walks away telling her "I know this sounds corny, but you have broken my heart." They pursue their separate lives for a while, but their reunion scene in front of Gandolfini's house is priceless: no explicit discussion yet, but the body language testifies eloquently that they will reconcile; when they sit down together on the cement front steps and Gandolfini cracks the kind of silly joke that he used in the beginning of the relationship, we know that they will stay together. Gandolfini and Keener are a bit generic-genial as characters, but the viewer empathizes with the anxieties of Dreyfus as she lugs her folding massage table from client to client -- some of them gabby, one of them apparently having an erection during her ministrations, a young man neglecting to help her carry the heavy table up the stairs to his apartment; we are happy and charmed when we realize that things will work out. The anxieties of both Gandolfini and Dreyfus as their teenage daughters head off to college is genuine and endearing, as is Dreyfus' precocious relationship with her daughter's friend, who asks her if she should have sex with her boyfriend. Wonderful to encounter an intelligent romantic comedy that avoids the Hollywood formula -- no charming-cute female lead (Meg Ryan!), an unpredictable outcome, authentic situations and characters that draw you into the story. Holofcener is a unique American treasure. (2014)

**Entre les murs** 2008 Laurent Cantet (France) 3.0 François Bégaudeau playing himself as a teacher struggling with his pupils in a junior high in the low-income 20eme arrondissement in Paris; the children are played more or less by themselves. Highly praised semi-documentary film about trying to teach a multi-ethnic gaggle of early adolescent kids on the other side of the generation gap in contemporary France. The film feels like a documentary: no music on the soundtrack, more or less flat narrative curve as we follow Bégaudeau's daily struggle. The narrative focuses on a Black girl who defies and mouths off at the teacher continuously, but who after a confrontation with him cools down; on an aggressively mouthy Arab girl Esmeralda who at the end of the film tries her best to get Bégaudeau into trouble; on a hard-working and cooperative Chinese kid, Wei, and his beaming parents; on an engaging heartbreaker of a kid from Mali, Suleyman, who refuses to do any work and finally explodes in the classroom and is then expelled from school. Bégaudeau is engagingly well-intentioned; he thinks the best way to get the kids to learn French is to go down to their level, put up with their interruptions and disrespectful interjections, so to speak become their friend and associate so as to motivate them to care about their education and future. He uses sarcasm, talks back to the kids in class, and as the school year wears on, he often gets angry – to the point of calling two girls “skanks” (French original?) in class. The overall impression is that the rewards of teaching to this group are minimal at best; at the end of the year very few of the students are motivated to make something of themselves. Teaching in this environment is basically waging a war against resisters on the other side of the cultural divide. The kids are separated from the school system by their youth culture that prizes baggy jeans, rap music, video games, and being cool and also by their ethnic differences, which appear to be much deeper than in the USA, where immigrant children seem to have accepted basically that they are Americans. The immigrant kids in France seem to identify with their place of origin and express resentment against being “French”, which to them evokes snobby white people in suits and ties; the school is an institution trying to brainwash them into joining the club, although they don't think they will ever be accepted anyhow. The impact of the film on the viewer is that teaching in such an environment is mostly a hopeless task, and this despite the director being clearly on the side of the kids – for example, he has firebrand Esmeralda put down Bégaudeau in the end by announcing in front of the class that she has read Plato's ‘Republic’ (Huh?)

That's what kids read in their spare time?). Often engaging film that is sometimes dull and manipulative. (2009)

**Equity** 2016 Meera Menon 2.0 Wall Street thriller (?) about women who want to be a success in finance and get a lot of money. Anna Gunn struggling to convince as female Wall Street banker specializing in IPOs; Sarah Megan Thomas as Gunn's assistant itching for a promotion and a big raise – or else; Alysia Reiner as friend of Gunn and U.S. Attorney investigating Wall Street malfeasance but open to temptation....; James Purefoy as Gunn boyfriend and big shot employee of her bank; the immortal Carrie Preston ('Good Wife') in a bit role as bank compliance officer. Turgid, scrambled attempt to make a Wall Street movie about ambitious women. Film focuses on a fading Gunn as she tries to guide an IPO to completion; in a sharing group with Reiner present she says that what motivates her most is ... money. A subplot tracks the machinations of Thomas as she seeks money-compiling alternatives to the promotion that Gunn won't give her. Another lazy subplot gives the viewer the impression that Reiner is investigating people around Gunn for possible prosecution; it features empty conversation with an older male colleague. As the IPO nears completion, Gunn's client begins to lose confidence in her, and the day of the IPO is a big disappointment as the stock closes at around 24 instead of the 35 that Gunn planned. Plot details are hard to pin down, but it seems that in cahoots with Purefoy Thomas has stabbed her boss in the back to lower the IPO price so that she and her co-conspirator can grab shares at the reduced price. The film ends with a surprise twist when supposedly straight-arrow Reiner appears for an interview with a private equity firm confessing she (too) loves money and wants a salary four times greater than the U.S. Government has been paying her. The greed infection is rampant. Although the film has possibilities, it is poorly developed. Gunn never convinces as the hard-nosed, ambitious bitch; she falls flat when she loses her temper and cusses (happens a lot). The narrative is muddled and unclear, and rather than keep the viewers in suspense, it frustrates and annoys us. In an effort to depict a no-holds-barred environment, the screenplay overuses the f...-word expletive to an irritating degree. Reiner and Thomas do a creditable job, but Gunn just doesn't have the chops to carry a film on her shoulders. (June 2017)

**Erin Brockovich** 2000 Stephen Soderbergh 3.0 Julia Roberts credible and entertaining as ill-tempered, potty mouthed housewife (three children) who suddenly launches into a crusade against big industry; Albert Finney also entertaining as the equally combative and excitable lawyer who works with her; Aaron Eckhart as thin, hirsute motorcyclist layabout who spends most of the movie submissively taking care of Roberts' children. Entertaining Hollywood-style film about an alienated housewife who finds redemption in her campaign to get compensation from PG&E for the horrible health damage they have caused in people living near one of their Southern California plants. The film marks time when it lingers on the absurd romance between leather bedecked dropout Eckhart and the shrill and in-your-face Roberts – it is difficult to believe that a Hells Angel admirer loves to change diapers and feed the baby, and Eckhart's acting skills seem in any case to be in remission; it also marks time when Soderbergh pulls our heartstrings as we watch and listen to pale copies of Ma and the Judd family ('Grapes of Wrath') whine weakly about their physical and familial ills. The pace picks up a lot, however, when the blustering Finney and the mouthy Roberts are in the same frame; against our better judgment, we enjoy how despite their conflicts and outbursts of temper they grow together to accept and even admire one another. Roberts' performance is reinforced by her revealing wardrobe – the viewer has long looks at sizable parts of her breasts and of the bras that have them barely under control. The depiction of the legal progress toward sufficient damages (the plaintiffs were awarded \$333 million) is also entertaining: in high Hollywood style, we chuckle at the discomfiture of arrogant and up-tight lawyers and at the defeat of the heartless big corporation. The film ends of course in triumph: with a twinkle in his eye Finney gives the (for once) dumbfounded Roberts a check for \$2 million, he walks away with a merry spring in his step, and the credits tells us how everyone lives (more or less) happily ever after. (2008)

**Etaix, Pierre:** numerous films made between 1961 and 1971. He writes, directs, and stars in all of his films.



**Rupture** 1961 Pierre Etaix (France) 3.0 A short film focusing on Etaix solo. He hurries home to his apartment, where he opens a letter that has his photograph torn in two – his girlfriend has broken up with him. Outwardly calm and methodical (as always), he tries to write a reply to her, but all his utensils and even his apartment revolt against him: his pen falls apart, he spills ink repeatedly on his writing paper, his desk starts to fall apart, his ink pot slides off onto the floor; in the course of his struggle, he dumps everything on the floor, where a chaotic pile of junk is revealed toward the end. In the last sequence, he tries to sit down in his rocking chair, but it dumps him out of the window. Etaix is fussy, methodical and meticulous as always; he is greatly frustrated by the revolt of his environment, but of course he doesn't show it. Post-recorded sound effects exaggerate the impact of all the little physical events. Perhaps less engaging than the *Heureux anniversaire*, since Etaix does not interact with other characters.

**Heureux anniversaire** 1962 Pierre Etaix (France) 3.0 Amusing short film (13 minutes; won Academy Award) about Etaix trying to get home to celebrate his wedding anniversary (?) with his wife. Most of the film deals with the ups and downs of driving in a realistic Paris filmed on location: amusing sequence of a huge traffic jam, in which the drivers engage in everyday activities as they wait – wash their car, dictate a letter to their secretary sitting in the back seat, have a full meal with wine at a table hidden in the back of a panel truck, read a book, etc. Running joke about parking: a man with shaving cream on his face moves his car so Etaix can get his out, and then has to drive around the block several times with the cream still on his face because he can't find another parking spot. Film starts with his wife preparing an elaborate meal in their home; since hubby doesn't show up, she gradually eats all the food herself, drinks all the wine, smokes several cigarettes, and then passes out, so that when Etaix finally arrives, he – hesitantly of course – declines to wake her and just fixes himself a sandwich with a single piece of saucisson.

**Le Soupirant** 1963 Pierre Etaix (France) 3.5 Delightful fantasy on the misadventures of a lonely young bourgeois Frenchman living with his parents who decides he wants to have a girlfriend and get married. The film is composed of autonomous sketches (in case the producer declined to release the film as a feature), but they meld together well as a low-key, quirky reflection on the perils and uncertainties of entering the dating market after a lifetime of abstention. Etaix has a unique comic personality much influenced by Buster Keaton and Jacques Tati (one minor character manifests the Alpine hat and stiff-backed walk that Tati made famous). Etaix is reserved, shy, but methodical, determined, and persevering: no matter how disastrous the initial results, he just doesn't give up; his environment might degenerate into chaos, but he is like Keaton immobile and unphased – a kind of Stone Face. Running throughout the film are his humorous encounters with the pretty Swedish au pair girl living in the house; their communication is at first humorously blocked by the girl's lack of French (she doesn't answer when he asks “Voulez-vous m'épouser?”), but the film ends on a romantic note when Etaix and the girl meet at the train station, and although he is wheeled away Keaton-style by a luggage cart, the viewer can see that the cart is turning a corner and will bring him back to the standing girl. The least engaging parts of the film are his disillusioned courtship of the boisterous woman he meets in the nightclub (he constantly and repetitively tries to avoid her) and his lengthy obsession with a man-faced pop singer that he becomes disillusioned with when he discovers that she has a son about his age. The funniest and most original sequences include his lame attempts to pick up women in the night club (lipstick gag, pick-up-the-tab gag, and his vain attempts to play footsie with a pretty girl); and his entry into the circus theater, where he not only sows chaos among all the acts, but he shows his expertise at prestidigitation. Film emphasizes gags dreamed up by the writers: including Etaix's use of earplugs that spare him listening to a lecture from his father about proper behavior; and his father's ongoing attempts to indulge little pleasures like smoking and reading at night without his (bossy, shrewish) wife finding out. A la Tati, he films his sequences without sound, and then adds pumped up voices and sound effects after; the effect is a silent film punctuated with music and sound effects. The viewer is rewarded at the end with his finding a partner that had been in reach throughout the film; he could have had her without the heroic campaign. (2013)

**Yoyo** 1965 Pierre Etaix 3.0 Puzzling second feature length-film of Etaix that seems influenced by Fellini and modernist films; its only unity seems to be a tribute to the culture of the circus. It begins with a long silent sequence featuring Etaix as a hyper-rich industrialist living alone in an empty chateau served by martinet servants – there is no dialogue, but supplied with his usual punctuating sound effects; the sequence seems to run a little faster than usual to imitate silent films. After the stock market crash, Etaix – now as Yoyo the clown – is reunited with his long-lost love, and the couple with their little son travel around France (Alsace, the stormy Atlantic shore), Spain, and London putting on small performances (one of their advertising placards has “8 ½” printed on it); meanwhile the chateau has fallen into ruins and the Germans have defeated France in World War II. Cut to Etaix’s son, also Yoyo the clown and also played by Etaix; he suddenly becomes rich (this viewer didn’t notice how), conducts some sort of modern enterprise placed in the 1960s; he restores the chateau painstakingly, throws a huge dinner party and is then transported away from the crowd and the chateau by an elephant; la fin. The lack of narrative continuity means that the viewer must depend on the gags to get his bearings. References to people committing suicide in 1929, to Chaplin playing the Hitler character in ‘The Great Dictator’, to defeat at the hands of the Germans in World War II, to television which he pillories (?) in a long sequence, to the flat-crowned hat of Buster Keaton, to the inane behavior of people at cocktail parties. Circus performances and characters recur frequently – the figure of the clown, card tricks, magic, and prestidigitation (Etaix is obviously at ease with all these); the central part of the film where Yoyo Junior’s little family is touring Europe recalls Fellini’s ‘La Strada’, the music recalls the circus music used in Fellini’s early films. Good gags are scattered throughout: taking the millionaire’s dog for a walk by driving in limousine with leash hanging out the window; peasants in prayer interrupted by Etaix’s arrival (Millet’s ‘The Angelus’); the superior surrealist gag in which Etaix is too distracted to distinguish between table and bedside stove (similar to gag in ‘Soupirant’), puts his alarm clock on it, and it melts (like Dali’s clock); the slow, methodical unlacing of a boot that is supposed to suggest a striptease; meeting the pretty girl in the corridor of a London hotel, she steps through the door – into a circus space where she ascends to a trapeze act. The best series of gags is at the cocktail party focusing especially on the scramble for the lady’s lost pearls and the man seeming as if he is molesting her. A lot of imagination in making this film; but it has diminished comic impact because of the lack of a consistent narrative and subject focus such as in ‘Soupirant’. Leaves this Etaix admirer puzzled. (2013)

**Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind** 2004 Michel Gondry 3.0 Jim Carrey, Kate Winslet (speaking in flawless American accent), Kirsten Dunst, Tom Wilkinson. Very inventive, unpredictable screenplay. Film about two lovers, who take advantage of new medical technology to erase painful memories of their ill-fated romance. You put a sort of helmet on your head, and then computer has you relive and then erase your past, beginning with the most recent (and therefore painful) memories and regressing to the most distant (and romantic) ones. Film a kind of attention-teaser: you spend a lot of time trying to figure out what is going on – Is this really happening? Is it in the mind of one of the characters? Are both Winslet and Carrey there, or is this the memory of only one of the characters? Begins with Carrey meeting Winslet on Montauk Beach, he being very shy and she coming on to him; and then confusing cut to hard-to-follow actions, which turn out to be a prequel to the first scene. Point: this is a sweet romantic story about two ne’er do wells, who love one another, can’t get along, despair (thus deciding to erase the memories), and then in process of reliving their memories, decide to give it another go: Winslet says to Carrey at end, “Meet me in Montauk,” thereby telling us that the versions of the meeting at beginning of movie is the second try. An inventive romantic comedy, kind of like a good Woody Allen one. Winslet particularly good as unpredictable, emotional, and demanding young woman with blue or orange hair; Carrey completely buries his bigger-than-life comic persona. Demands that movie makes on one’s attention and interpretation undercuts somewhat one’s involvement in the drama, but still sweet and romantic.

**Le Grand Amour** 1969 Pierre Étaix (France) 3.5 Pierre Étaix as passive and hapless middle class character, convinced that he will be happy with a “grand amour” but who always gets dragged along by events; Annie Fratellini as Florence, his long-suffering, ever smiling wife; Nicole Calfan as Etaix’s

cute new adolescent secretary, apparently willing to have a fling. Etaix's best known film of 1969 structured around a rather banal story of bourgeois erotic yearning, but including Chabrol-like mocking of the French bourgeoisie and some enjoyable comic surrealistic fantasy. Film begins majestically with camera floating over a large provincial city and then descending into a cathedral and joining Etaix and his bride at the altar. Etaix marries Fratellini, and thus becomes enmeshed in the hyper-bourgeois web of the life of her parents (everyone is always smiling and banal, house stuffed with old furniture and family photos, the dad owns a leather tanning factory, Etaix and Florence live in an apartment above her parents, mass on Sunday, dinner with the parents, etc.); however he meets bodacious teenager Calfan, who displays herself demurely, but Etaix is too shy or guilty to make his declaration (when he takes Calfan out to a romantic restaurant for dinner, all he can bring himself to talk about is business and finance); he finally decides he no longer loves her and rushes to the train station to meet Florence on her return from a three-week stay at the beach; since she is accompanied by a young stud with a guitar, Etaix becomes jealous (has she had her own fling while he failed?), they have a matrimonial tiff in the middle of the street before getting into his new sports car to return home to an uncertain future. The film stands out for its numerous gags, many of them surreal. In initial flashback, Etaix cannot remember whether he met Florence on the café terrace or inside, which is annoying for the waiter who shatters Etaix's fourth wall by asking him to make up his mind. While narrating how he got to the altar, Etaix contradicts the supposed joyousness of the occasion by constantly referring to his mistake, things getting "worse", i.e., closer to actually getting married. One piece de resistance is a mostly wordless five-part chain of gossip that turns Etaix's initial polite tipping of his hat to a young woman eventually into a sexual encounter in a city park. Another is Etaix's single bed (no lit matrimonial in their bedroom) taking off to travel on country roads when he begins to fantasize about Calfan; snuggling up to Calfan, he witnesses other broken-down beds on the road, bed accidents, bed repairs. When Etaix's friend is advising him about his amorous entanglements, his different suggestions are pictured with the friend confronting Etaix's wife and secretary according to the different scenarios. Etaix is often unlucky: when he decides to make a declaration to Calfan with his back turned, the woman standing there turns out to be his old secretary and not his beloved; when he decides to return to his wife at the station, she is accompanied by a guy we suspect is her lover. Film is impeccably restored in excellent color and definition. It seems to lack some of the comic inspiration of 'Le soupirant'.

**Ethan Frome** 1993 John Madden 2.5 Liam Neeson strong and suitably agonizing as the husband of Joan Allen and lover of the younger Arquette, Joan Allen as shrewish, contemptible hypochondriac wife of Neeson, Patricia Arquette as the destitute, coquettish, somewhat desperate poor relative in the household. Based on Wharton's famous novella, the drama takes place in wintry New England (actually filmed in Peacham, Vermont); narrated in a flashback to inform the new preacher who arrives several years after the incident. The landscapes dominate and are very pretty, but also cold, forbidding, little sign of life. The plot is claustrophobic – concerned with the fate of a ménage a trois in a small New England town. Illicit romance between the homeless Arquette and the romantically deprived Neeson is consummated twice. Allen of course objects, and the two agree painfully to send Arquette away; but they decide on one more sleigh ride, which ends in a crippling accident. The viewer does not know immediately what the outcome is, but after we return to the present and the minister visits the Frome household, we find out that all three are still alive, but with Arquette now an invalid in bed being cared for by the two spouses. The story is hard to swallow: Wharton is not happy with simple tragedy, but racks up the punishment for adultery – the two lovers are not allowed to die, but must live out their days handicapped and sharing their household with the shrewish Allen! All performances are good, especially Allen, who depicts the ill-tempered hypochondriac very convincingly. The film is a competent adaptation of a literary work, but the story is a serious handicap.

**Evelyn Prentice** 1934 (MGM) 2.5 William Powell in his accustomed urbane persona as fast-talking lawyer and inattentive husband; Myrna Loy as charming, long-suffering wife with an up-turned nose and dressed in fashionable long skirts; Rosalind Russell in her first (small) role as woman making a play for married man Powell; Una Merkel as Loy's cute friend who talks her into a little adventure; Cora Sue Collins as cutesy, lively (and annoying) Shirley Temple wannabe as the Prentices' daughter; Jessie

Ralph in single scene as amusing, garrulous middle-aged Irish lady; Isabel Jewell as perfectly coiffed Merkel lookalike delivering a moving peroration in Prentice's courtroom. Combination MGM courtroom drama and marriage film about a high society marriage endangered by misunderstandings and a distracted husband, but which is saved in the end by the ability of the husband to forgive his wife's transgressions (when his wrongdoings are at least as serious). The film takes place in an upper class setting probably in New York. Loy spends the first part of the film sighing about her husband's absence, thinking all the time that he spends all his time lawyering, whereas he has at least one affair – with predatory Rosalind Russell. In response, Loy begins to respond to the attentions of a well-known ladies' man (Harvey Stephens), although despite her presence in his apartment at the time of his death, the affair was apparently not consummated. Before Stephens is murdered, we see Loy picking up a revolver out of a desk drawer. Another woman however – Isabel Jewell – is incriminated, but in a carefully plotted Perry Mason-style courtroom scene, the truth comes out: Loy thinks she killed Stephens, but she didn't, and then Powell gets the jury to acquit Jewell, since she had been abused by Stephens and since he was lunging at her, she shot him in self-defense. Afterwards, Loy thinks her marriage with Powell is over, but it is saved when the latter – reinforced by the irritating Collins – forgives Loy without any reference to his own sins – infidelity and obsessive devotion to his work. Excellent cast with good performances; the film is the early 30s equivalent of prime-time soap opera in the 2000s. Sound is well done. Amazingly competent, although not terribly interesting, film only five years after the introduction of talkies. (2012)

**Everybody Wants Some** 2016 Richard Linklater 3.0 Somewhat disappointing (kind of follow-up to 'Dazed and Confused' and 'Boyhood'; Linklater's recollections of starting college about 1980. Blake Jenner as amiable freshman at Southeastern Texas State College on a baseball scholarship; Glen Powell as garrulous, philosophizing upper classman; Juston Street as intense, highly competitive, angry pitcher, who throws his best stuff during batting practice; Q. Johnson laid back and sensible as the only black(ish) guy on the team; Tyler Hoechlin as the athletic, high-performing jock; Zoey Deutch as the reserved mainstream girl that Jenner falls for toward the end of the film; and several other young players pretty much indistinguishable to this viewer. The film follows the interactions of the dozen or so ballplayers as they count down the last three days before the beginning of classes. A lot of conversations, exchanges, small conflicts among them as they horse around in their residence house (Yeahh – no drinking on the premises and no girls upstairs in the bedrooms), drink a lot of beer and smoke hash, plot to hook up with girls they run into on campus, walk up and down the streets of the college town, attend parties and different kinds of night clubs – country, hard rock, etc. with hard dancing to deafening music (turn down that volume). Most of the visuals are backed by a soundtrack of contemporary songs bulging at the seams, and almost always noisy. The boys are friendly but excitable, competitive since all of them plan to play pro ball – a long road ahead since they already realize that college is a new ball game after high school and plans for beyond college are vague. The emphasis is on guilt-free hedonism – having fun and having no adults or other representatives of society get in your way. This is our day in the sun after the strictures and foolishness of high school and before the responsibilities of adulthood. Very little attention to the female half of the student body, who are the objects of boy's sexual plans and who appear to be thinking the same way about the guys. The film finds a little focus about two-thirds of the way through: the guys finally get to play some baseball (a practice with no adult present); serious guy Jenner pursues Deutch, they hook up in her room after she verifies first that she really likes the guy, and they part in friendly, slightly embarrassed fashion at the beginning of class; the professor writes on Jenner's blackboard "Frontiers are where you find them." (Huh?) There is perhaps a slight movement toward maturity – Jenner's and Deutch's semi-committed romance, and Street's reluctant apology to Powell after their dustup on the baseball field. A kind of celebration of male bonding in a moment of freedom. (2016)

**Everything You Wanted to Know About Sex...But were afraid to Ask** 1972 Woody Allen 2.5 A list of well-known actors including Anthony Quayle, Louise Lasser, Gene Wilder, Burt Reynolds, Tony Randall, John Carradine, Lynn Redgrave. Seven shorter vignettes on sex themes. 1) Stupid farce set in medieval times, in which Allen, playing a jester, wants to have sex with the queen (medieval dialogue) and ends up getting beheaded; 2) Gene Wilder as a doctor that falls in love with a sheep, who at one point is wearing a "sexy" garter belt; 3) Allen in Italian language segment (he seems to

speak Italian pretty well) about a man, whose bride is frigid – indifferent to every tactic until we discover that she can orgasm only in public (apparently a parody of Antonioni); 4) a middle-aged, suburban guy indulges his cross-dressing in the street and scandalizes neighbors and friends with his weak attempts at acting feminine; 5) a parody of “What’s My Line” in staticky black and white – in “What’s my Perversion?” a rabbi has a model hit him with a whip while his (dowdy) wife eats pork on the floor; 6) parody of ‘Frankenstein’, in which the mad scientist conducts funny experiments, after which the countryside is ravaged by an escaped giant “tit” that lumbers through the grasslands and falls into a giant bra trap (Helen MacRae is pretty); 7) a man trying to have sex with a woman is controlled by a team recalling Apollo mission control (communicate instructions to the eyes, to the ears, start winding up the erection, etc.); Allen is a nervous sperm with a skinny tail, who has to bail out of the urethra like paratroopers out of an airplane. Sketches are extremely uneven: the worst are Allen the jester, Wilder falling in love with a sheep, the middle-aged, cross-dressing guy. The “What’s My Perversion” number is mildly amusing for those who saw the 50s TV show. The Italian language sequence amuses in its reference to pretentious Antonioni films (and Allen apparently speaking Italian pretty well). The ‘Frankenstein’ sequence has great over-the-top comic delivery by Carradine, and the tit + bra gag is memorable. The final sperm sequence mixes amusing performances (Reynolds and Randall), satire of Mission Control, and all the paraphernalia of sexual contact, including the nervous, nebbish sperm played by Allen. (2014)

**The Evil Dead** 1982 Sam Raimi 2.5 Bruce Campbell looking constantly petrified, covered with blood and gore and fighting for his life; several unknown actors who turn into ghouls and then go after Campbell. Blood- and gore-fest about a bunch of college kids who for some reason rent a shack in the backwoods of Tennessee (?) for a little fun, and who get more than they bargained for. The best part of the film is the beginning that is filled with menace as the kids prowl around the house and in the threatening outdoors; they find a skin-covered book in the cellar, and the reading out loud of the contents awakens some bloodthirsty force buried in the ground that attacks the kids (one girl appears to have been raped by tendrils from bushes outside) and turns them into ghouls, who in turn attack one another and Campbell, who for some unexplained reason is able to resist without turning into a ghoul himself. The last half of the film is a blood-fest: the girls, for example, turn into screaming harpies with whites of their eyes protruding and various sorts of goo sometimes dribbling, sometimes projecting, out of their facial orifices; the favorite is the scene in which Campbell attempts to bury his transformed girlfriend, but she seizes his arm through the earth from the grave, rakes bloody gashes in his legs, leaps upon his body, and when he hits her with a shovel, he detaches her head that flies off, planting itself right side up in the ground, still crowing, while her headless body struggles on top of her former boyfriend. The ending has Campbell with his blood-soaked face exiting peacefully from the house – he has survived! But the force again generates momentum from behind the house, the steadycam bobs and weaves through the house and toward the back of the protagonist, who turns to face his pursuer – he screams knowing that he will join his friends. The film is low-budget – basically one set, unknown and low-paid actors; but it is well filmed with lots of angles, tilts, and shots well-chosen for suspense. The famous Raimi sense of humor is not apparent, aside from a few moments, e.g., the flying head. One tires awfully of gory images, blood splashing in all directions, extremely ugly visages shrieking and cackling in ghoulish glee. It must have made quite an impact in 1981, but it hasn’t aged well. (2011)

**Ex Machina** 2015 Alex Garland 3.0 Domnhall Gleeson as fair-haired, innocent-faced computer programmer chosen to evaluate the artificial intelligence of an android programmed by the owner of the company; Oscar Isaac as the arrogant, highly intelligent, alcoholic owner of the world’s most popular search engine; Alicia Vikander as Nathan’s android – she is ethereally beautiful, inquisitive, well-spoken, good at conducting a conversation; Sonoya Mizuno as Nathan’s lovely, sexy, mute slave assistant – she turns out to be an android herself. Interesting sci fi movie about an android that turns against its creator; the title is probably a reference to the gods that control the outcome in Greek tragedy. The android is a beautiful young woman who (for some reason) is programmed by Isaac to have sexual feelings and fall in love; Gleeson is the candidate since he is the first man aside from Isaac – “same thing as her father” – that she meets. The film is a kind of three-way drama among Isaac, Vikander (the robot),

and Gleeson. Gleeson walks into the situation innocently, Vikander flirts with him and seems to want a relationship; meanwhile, the obnoxious Isaac stands on the side acting passive although the viewer knows that he is in charge. The drama takes place in an isolated futuristic house – no windows, sophisticated security system with key cards that open only appropriate doors, modernistic furnishings in muted, rather hazy colors; it is situated in a beautiful wilderness landscape with precipitous mountains, lush forests, and roaring waterfalls (that turns out to be filmed in Norway although the plot takes place in Alaska). Suspense is enhanced by periodic power outages, during which Gleeson and the android talk about their feelings, the robot’s distrust of her maker, and her desire to escape with Gleeson. Several surprises punctuate the last part of the film: as suspected, Isaac has caused the outages so that he can spy on his couple; Mizuno turns out to be a (charming and sexy) robot; Gleeson discovers closets full of beautiful female androids that Isaac has essayed and then abandoned; and when Gleeson manipulates the security system to escape with Vikander, she double-crosses him, locks him behind sound-proof glass doors, and escapes into a nearby city. Ruthless to the core, she has been plotting the whole time to get free. Despite his vaunted programming prowess, Isaac has miscalculated: her sexual feelings are much less important than her desire to be free; she has escaped the evil Isaac and manipulated the naïve Gleeson. The film’s art direction and cinematography are perhaps more interesting than the narrative and the issues raised, which sometimes are confusing (e.g., the innovative idea of giving the android sexual feelings has little to do with her priorities). (2015)

**Executive Suite** 1954 Robert Wise (wr. Ernest Lehman) 3.0 William Holden as honest, idealistic researcher who ends up running for president of the company vacated by the sudden death of the president (Bullard); June Allyson in typical 50s role as the pleasant, husky-voiced, supportive wife (*vide* ‘The Glenn Miller Story’ and ‘Strategic Air Command’); Barbara Stanwyck in cameo-style role as one of the company’s principal stockholders; Fredric March as scheming, back-stabbing accounting mastermind of the company who wants to be president; Walter Pidgeon as the old number two and heir apparent, who however decides he is too tired to compete for the top job; Paul Douglas as weak-willed milquetoast vice-president who waffles about who to support (his mistress is Shelley Winters); Louis Calhern as sleazy, dishonest board member who is concerned only with making a buck; Nina Foch as old faithful executive secretary and one of the few actually concerned with the welfare of the company (AA nomination!); Dean Jagger in minor role as one of the board members. Often interesting part soap opera, part (timid) critique of American business meant to be a companion to ‘All About Eve’ (the theater) and ‘The Bad and the Beautiful’ (Hollywood). It has a stunning all-star cast recalling ‘Grand Hotel’, etc.; it plays something like a stage play with most of the scenes shot inside board rooms, offices, or the stunning 50s international-style house of Holden and Allyson. Bullard, whom we never see or hear, dies suddenly of a heart attack or stroke in front of his office (remarkable first person camera for about a minute); therein ensues a struggle for succession among all the vice presidents; March, playing against type a ruthless and presumptuous operator, plots and maneuvers to get the four votes on the Board necessary to be elected president; the unassuming Pidgeon and the idealistic and dashing Holden team up to stop him; to do so, Holden has to (reluctantly) agree let go of his research interests and to run for the office and of course his spirited wife has to come around to support him; the vote is a cliffhanger, since Douglas waffles back and forth and Stanwyck has to let go of her affection for Bullard(!) and begin to think about the good of the company; Holden finally wins them over in a rousingly idealistic speech, and to the discomfiture of Calhern and March, the board agrees to elect Holden by acclamation. The film is filled with good performances, but it would seem March deserved an AA nomination rather than the low-key and sad-eyed Foch. It is gracefully and effectively directed by Robert Wise, although one rather tires of the inexpensive indoor sets reused from other films. The film is fairly informed by corporate goings-one – the maneuvers within the Board of Directors, the importance of profits and loyalty to the stockholders (more or less themselves?). Although critical of some aspects of corporate culture (the egos, the maneuvers), it lacks the satirical bite of ‘The Bad and the Beautiful’ and ‘All About Eve’. In any case, the virtuous Holden wins the day with his on-screen speech about the importance of responsibility to the whole community, workers included, and his commitment to high-quality products rather than cheap ones intended only to make a buck and keep the stockholders happy with high dividends (March represents the cold corporate profit culture). Interesting film, a tad predictable, and with a great all-star cast. (2011)

**The Exorcist** 1973 William Friedkin 3.5 Ellen Burstyn as actress mom living in toney Georgetown townhouse who fights to save her daughter from the clutches of the devil; Jason Miller as Fr. Karras, who although a scientifically trained psychiatrist and chagrined by the death of his lonely immigrant mother, agrees to perform an exorcism; Linda Blair as cute and innocent pre-pubescent 12-year-old Regan, who is possessed by the devil; Lee J. Cobb as conscientious and kind police inspector is an outside observer of the lurid proceedings; Max von Sydow as elderly priest, who is a Middle Eastern archeologist and is called in to perform the exorcism with Fr. Karras' assistance; Arthur Storch as psychiatrist who is attacked in a delicate place of his body when he tries to help Regan. Very scary and well-made film (AA for best adapted screenplay) about a possession of a young girl, the horrifying effects of the experience on her, and the self-sacrificing heroics required to cast out the devil. After a more-or-less irrelevant introductory sequence of Van Sydow discovering disturbing satanic images in Iraq, the remainder of the film takes place in the "normal", elegant upper middle class surroundings of Georgetown on the shore of the Potomac River. The direction is effective in establishing a convincingly normal time and place in the USA. Regan's progressively worsening condition is portrayed through the usual tricks of Satan – opening windows to her room, freezing temperatures, banging furniture around and opening and slamming doors, turning the child into an unrecognizable caricature of herself with white skin, bleached eyes, dry, parched lips, monstrous, growling voices emitted from her mouth, projectile vomiting of pea-soup-like, gooey substances from her mouth; when challenged by priests or sprinkled with holy water, she/he shrieks obscene insults. The film depicts modern medical science – neurologists, psychiatrists, etc. – as incompetent, blinded, and unwilling to accept that Regan's problem may be something other than medical. It becomes quickly obvious to the audience that the possession is real and not some rare psychiatric issue; not taking the possession seriously almost costs Regan her life. The two priests team up heroically to confront Satan amidst ice cold air, shrieking, growling, furniture banging, levitation of Regan's body, and the devil trying every trick in his book to defend himself against the supernatural powers at the Church's disposal. Armageddon between the forces of good and evil is dramatic and moving; Von Sydow, whose weak heart has been established, dies of a heart attack, and in the final confrontation, Karras calls Satan to possess him instead; his eyes are blanched, he struggles, and he throws himself out the window and falls to his death down the fated stairway outside. The paladin of modern psychiatric science has performed the exorcism and sacrificed himself to give life back to the girl. In Armageddon good has not won a clear victory over evil: the girl is saved, but two good men are dead, the devil still roams the world. Film is first-rate spectacle and drama: the special effects are mustered effectively to show the violation of the girl; and her salvation is dramatic and moving.

**The Eye** 2002 Pang Brothers (Hong Kong) 3.0 Anjelica Lee as cute, placid, but periodically emotive young woman with troubling visions seen through her new eyes; Lawrence Chow as impossibly cute and young psychotherapist to Lee – he falls in love with her and becomes her protector. Sometimes scary Hong Kong film about blind young woman who begins to have frightening visions when she receives a cornea transplant and is able to see. When she returns home to her mother, she has visions that alternate between views of rooms and of people that we assume are related to her previous life and encounters with unknown characters who had unfinished business when they died (e.g., the boy who keeps asking her if she has seen his report card) or who have just died or are about to (she is able to see the shadowy figures that escort the souls of the people who die to some unknown destination, e.g., the little girl she made friends with in the hospital). Chow awkwardly announces that he has fallen in love with his patient, and he accompanies her to Thailand to find out what they can about the Thai girl that donated the eyes; it turns out that she committed suicide and naturally there is much scary unfinished business to take care of until Lee believes that she will finally have peace; she has a big surprise in store, however on the way home in a large city, where Lee intuits a huge disaster about to happen when she sees shadowy figures drifting between the cars caught in the traffic jam; the ensuing explosion destroys Lee's new eyes; the postscript shows her walking blind with a stick down a Hong Kong street, where she implies that she is better off without sight. The film has some rough aspects: the male actors, all of whom are young and cute, seem to have been chosen to appeal to teenage girls; the middle part of the film is weak on plot and character developments and sometimes seems just a succession of scary shots; and the final shocking disaster in Thailand is out of keeping with the quiet, more subtle ethic of the rest of the film. However, the Pang Brothers show a cinematic flare that keeps the viewer engrossed. They play

expertly with point of view throughout the film, especially in the first and middle parts where out-of-focus shots are used to mimic Lee's imperfect eyesight and to suggest the ghosts that are haunting her in the distance. Also hard-hitting visual sequences, e.g., during the lead-up to the street disaster very vivid visuals (e.g., of gasoline leaking out of the overturned tank truck and of an electrical impulse traveling down a wire to the spark plug producing a spark in the firing gap) combined with rapid-fire editing to produce suspense that leads to the catastrophe. Film is fun to watch. (2011)

**Eye in the Sky** 2015 Gavin Hood (Britain) 3.0 Engaging thriller-drama about the ethics of drone strikes against high-value terrorist targets. Helen Mirren as no-nonsense, hard-nosed British army officer – a colonel – in charge of a drone operation to get high-value Al-Shabbab terrorists hanging out in Nairobi; Alan Rickman in his last performance as her superior – a Lieutenant General – that has to argue with British politicians about permission to launch the operation; Aaron Paul as drone controller, who is reluctant to launch the Hellfire missile when a civilian – a little girl – is spotted selling bread next to the target house; Phoebe Fox in small role as his equally hesitant assistant. A real-time thriller drama that cuts among several locations: Mirren's command headquarters in UK; a British cabinet conference room where Rickman labors to obtain from British political leaders permission to launch the strike; a couple of locations in Nairobi with emphasis on the target site; a command room in the USA; the launch room in Nevada, where Paul and Fox wrestle with the unpleasant reality of their task. A lot of decisions have to be made in response to changing circumstances: when it turns out that the perps are plotting a double terrorist attack, the mission changes from capturing a woman who is a British citizen to a missile attack to kill the bad guys; taking up a great deal of screen time is wrestling with whether the strike is legal and justified given the presence of the little girl just outside the target house. The narrative is compelling, the editing among the different locales is effective, the acting all credible. Nice to have Mirren in a hard-ass role – although always loyal to her superiors, she is completely devoted to the elimination of the terrorists, impatient when she doesn't have the support she is looking for, and she even bends the rules (putting pressure on one of her subordinates) to facilitate the launch. The tone is cool and objective; the Allies (Britain, USA and Kenya) are portrayed as conscientious and genuinely concerned about legality and ethics, the Americans being perhaps more aggressive than the Brits – if we cancel the strike because of a concern for the innocent bystander, then we will regret it when the terrorist suicide vest kills scores of Kenyans. The script makes it clear that politics plays a role in the decision, which is constantly kicked upstairs as far as the US Secretary of State and the prime minister – what happens if the death of the little girl makes it on Youtube, etc.? Perhaps the main weakness of this suspenseful film is the constant postponements of the launch, which sometimes drain it of its energy. Suspenseful film with a serious discussion of drone issues. (2016)

**A Face in the Crowd** 1957 Elia Kazan (wr. Budd Schulberg) 4.0 Andy Griffith in the role of his life as Lonesome Rhodes, homespun wise man from Arkansas that turns out to be a megalomaniac and a hypocrite; Patricia Neal in heavy acting role as the Arkansas radio reporter that launches his radio-television career and then fatefully falls in love with him; Tony Franciosa also over-the-top as scheming operator with a big grin that ends up with a 51% share of Rhodes' act; Walter Matthau pretty dull (not comic) as the liberal conscience that first sees Rhodes' dangerousness and pushes to wean Neal away from him; Lee Remick as delectable teenage baton-twirler that Rhodes marries and then banishes when she has an affair with Franciosa. Famous film about how the new (1957) medium of television brings an unknown country-hick drunk and philosopher to stardom and then exposes his runaway megalomania until he goes over the edge into insanity (the last scene has him yelling to Neal from a skyscraper not to leave him). The best scenes in the film are in the beginning, when Rhodes is introduced to the audience and we observe him progressing from radio to television in Memphis and then finally to the big time in network TV in New York. Rhodes charms his mostly rural and working-class audience with bad songs accompanied on his gee-tar and simple, heart-to-heart observations about the life conditions of ordinary Americans; when he gets to New York, he soon falls victim to the temptations of the big city (floozyes visiting him in his room, hobnobbing with the rich, riding around in limousines, etc.) and power, as he soon realizes how much influence he has over his public; right-wing politicians such as behind-the-scenes manipulator The General (Percy Warren) and Senator Worthington (played by Marshall Neilan, the



famous silent film director of Mary Pickford) get hold of him and he is soon denouncing Social Security on his show. The film is a bitter and contemptuous satire on American commercial culture, making fun of TV commercials and pointing out that the products advertised are often worthless; after an ironic start while still back home, Rhodes willingly serves the cause of sponsors by pushing sales of the worthless Vitajex snake oil concoction to new heights. Much of the film is taken up by the relationship between Rhodes and Neal; using her eyes and straight-toothed smile beautifully, Neal begins an affair with Rhodes, who is genuinely taken with her, but his faithlessness and “marriage” to Remick end their bond and send Neal into a downward spiral; at the end she turns on the microphone when Rhodes is delivering one of his supposedly off-camera diatribes about the “fools and morons” that make up his audience. Having fallen firmly on the side of righteousness, she walks out of the film on the arm of Matthau, who cannot resist one less speech denouncing the evils of demagoguery (the book he is writing is titled ‘Demagoguery and Denim’). Television, commercial culture, and right-wing politics are defeated by a couple of decent, sensible people and by the instincts of the American people, who reject Rhodes after his diatribe. There is perhaps too much purple prose and violent, loud emotion, especially toward the end. The film however is a triumph of appropriate mise-en-scène and percussive acting – Griffith makes a great impact with his manic, over-the-top delivery and his equally manic broad, toothy smile. One of the strongest films of the 50s. (2013)

**Fahrenheit 9/11** 2004 Michael Moore 3.0. A supposed documentary, but really a polemic against Bush and his administration. Voice over often sarcastic and makes sure you get the point. Fairly entertaining, although fewer gotcha interviews than in ‘Roger and Me;’ the attempted interviews with the congressmen in the street were anticlimactic. Focuses on making Bush look like a nonentity and an idiot, which it succeeds in doing – doing nothing in the reading class in Florida waiting for instructions from his staff! (Cheney?); missing his punch line at the end of the movie; telling reporters to ‘watch this drive’ after he finishes denouncing terrorists. Basic idea = U.S. run by an oligarchy; Bush and Co. has intimate connections to the Saudi oil interests; Cheney (who is often photographed leering and sneering and talking out of the corner of his mouth) is right in the middle with his Haliburton interests; Bushies maintain the appearance of democracy by instilling fear in the American public, and thus inducing many of us to rally behind our savior president; the Bush presidency was a dismal failure until 9/11 happened, which was exploited ruthlessly to raise the prestige of the president. Will probably convince few Bush supporters to vote against him, but is reasonably entertaining for a Bush-hater. (2005)

**Fair Game** 2010 Doug Liman 3.0 Reasonably interesting docudrama about Valerie Plame’s and her husband Joe Wilson’s conflict with the Bush administration over Weapons of Mass Destruction leading up to the Iraq War. Naomi Watts masters the American accent with perhaps an extra twang as the dedicated undercover CIA operative specializing in the Middle East; Sean Penn hot-headed and impulsive as her ex-diplomat husband now tending the two children and trying to build a consulting business. Plame is presented as the dedicated operative working in Langley digging out information about Saddam Hussein’s intentions. At the same time extreme pressure is coming from the Vice-President’s Office and in particular Scooter Libby (a relentless David Andrews) to confirm rumors that Saddam is trying to buy uranium ore from Niger; when Wilson is sent there to scout out the rumor, he returns with unequivocal information that it is not happening. When the administration persists with its aggressive campaign citing false Niger information, the latter loses his cool and writes the famous op-ed to the New York Times making it clear that he found nothing in Niger. The administration then strikes back in the form of leaked information identifying Plame as a CIA undercover operative; she is identified as “fair game”. The focus shifts to the personal impact of the outing on Plame and Wilson, who have intense marital squabbles, finally agreeing to abandon Washington and settle far from the drama with their two children. Libby is eventually indicted for outing a CIA operative and condemned to five year in prison; an obvious fall guy for the higher ups (Cheney), he has his sentence immediately commuted. The ruthlessness and hardheartedness of Washington politics is vividly portrayed: the Vice-President’s office thinks nothing of destroying the career of a dedicated CIA employee, and the CIA thinks nothing of dismissing her without a word of thanks, treating her like an outcast once she is excluded; scientists who had supplied information on the Iraqi weapons program to the CIA are abandoned without compunction. Penn

sometimes rattles the furniture too much. For political junkies, the film perhaps downplays the enormity of the crime committed by the Bush Administration – lying through their teeth to start a disastrous war that has upended the Middle East for 14 years (2017). Why does the film have to end on a quiescent note with the Wilson family settled with their children comfortable far away? (June 2017)

**Fallen Angel** 1945 Otto Preminger 2.5 Dana Andrews as well-dressed drifter who arrives in small California town somewhere on the coast looking for fortune; Linda Darnell smashing as diner waitress, who dates a lot of men and resists commitment unless her partner can offer marriage and lots of money; Alice Faye a bit fay and goodie-two shoes as conservative girl in town with some money; Anne Revere as her old-fashioned and rather forbidding sister; Charles Bickford as rather brutal police investigator, who turns out to be a criminal; John Carradine in bit part as séance con man trying to make a buck. Intended as a follow-up to the popular “Laura”, this film mixes personal melodrama (will Andrews ever find love and settle down) with a murder mystery. First half of film has the viewer following the low-key, taciturn, evasive, dapper, suit- and fedora-clad, cigarette-smoking Andrews around town wondering who he is, where he came from, and what he wants. Since he wants to marry the reluctant Darnell, he hatches a thoroughly incredible plot – marry Faye (you have to overcome the resistance of her straight-laced sister), get her money, and then divorce her! When she is discovered murdered, the rest of the film is devoted to finding the guilty party – we even think it might be Andrews, another suitor, or even Anne Revere, who thoroughly disapproves of Darnell. It turns out to be Bickford, who is arrested at the end, and a remorseful and wiser Andrew throws in his lot with his wife, Faye – he won’t divorce her after all! Film is generally well-acted, Darnell is deliciously sultry and hard-to-get, and Andrews has an easy laconic charm. Several incredible situations: Andrews’ plot to marry Faye for her money and then divorce her; Faye’s willingness to go along with him despite his ill treatment of her, and even Revere’s weak objections, which are hard to swallow after her strong initial dislike of Andrews; the resolution, which has a basic heel living happily ever after with the girl next door. Quite pleasurable is Preminger’s objective (we don’t get inside the heads of the characters) and elegant camerawork. Scenes are often shot in two shots, with the camera moving modestly to frame and reframe in smooth and soothing way. Some shadowed cinematography, but not many signs of *film noir*.

**The Fallen Idol** 1948 Carol Reed (writer Graham Greene) (Britain) 4.0 Ralph Richardson in strong performance as Baines, an “ordinary man” who is a butler in as larger London embassy; Michèle Morgan as pretty, simple embassy typist that Baines falls in love with; Sonia Dresdel as the autocratic, unhappy, Mrs. Danvers-like housekeeper and wife of Baines; Bobby Henrey as Phile, an innocent, brutally honest, and inquisitive child interacting with the world of adults (working with him during the filming was however an ordeal). Fascinating and impeccably executed film about a child trying to cope with an adult world. Most of the film takes place in an elegantly spacious mansion in London – a huge foyer, a sweeping staircase, a lot of banisters, potted plants, and large French windows all around through which pours bright light. The film is shot from the child’s point of view: we often see him through the posts of the railings; the camera is always with him, we hear and see the same things he does, and we are constantly comparing his perceptions and understandings with our own adult ones. The first half of the film establishes the characters and their relationships – particularly Baines’ adulterous one with Morgan – , Mrs. Baines unsavory nature, and Phile’s uncomprehending knowledge of Baines’ situation. With what we suspect are tall stories, Baines enchants the boy, who is deprived of his parents who are often away from the embassy. The second half deals with the rage of the wife, her accidental death, and the police investigation. The patterns of the narrative are confusing until one realizes that the true subject of the film is the difficulty of communication and understanding between adults and children. The lack of emotional consistency in the child’s performance contributes to the viewer’s impression that he does not understand what he is experiencing. He tries to keep the secrets valuable to his hero, but he rarely succeeds and in revealing them (e.g., using the word “they” when describing what Baines had been doing supposedly alone) he often makes things worse for his hero. He contributes to the roundelay of confusion surrounding the investigation of Mrs. Baines’ death. Since Phile erroneously believes that Baines pushed his wife down the stairs, he decides to lie again to protect Baines, but again the lie (again the use of “they”) temporarily incriminates him. The police are able to exculpate Baines through their own efforts,

and even then Phile has an observation – a true although irrelevant one – which the police won't listen to, since they are already convinced that he does not tell the truth. The film just comes to an end with the return of Phile's mother and father, and all of them still living with Baines; the incomprehension between the boy and the adult world lives on; one wonders whether he and the boy will continue to be such good friends. The pleasure of the film is largely in its impeccable classical style – smooth, expressive editing, expressive choice of mise-en-scène, a general impression of cinematographic elegance. The film is sometimes puzzling, but pleasurable and rewarding upon reflection. (2010)

**Die Fälscher** 2006 Stefan Ruzowitzky (Germany) 3.0 Karl Markovics with plain rather ravaged face plays a German Jewish counterfeiter, Sally Sorowitsch, in prison for his activities; August Diehl as Adolf Burger, the character who wrote the book upon which the film is based, an idealist who plays against the opportunism of Sorowitsch; David Striesow as German SS officer in charge of the counterfeiting operation. Interesting and sometimes moving film about a German Nazi counterfeiting operation, in which the Germans "employed" Jewish prisoners in concentration camps to counterfeit British and American currency in an attempt to undermine the Allied war effort; they have some success with the British pound, but the war is over before they make much progress on the dollar; the pound forgery was so good that it was never discovered by the British authorities. The film is shown in flashback, starting with Sally disconsolately gambling in postwar Monte Carlo with apparently forged money (tango music is used to show his hedonistic proclivities); most of the film takes place in the concentration camp of Sachsenhausen. The members of the counterfeiting team were treated much better than the regular Jewish prisoners -- they even had mattresses and sheets on their beds, and Striesow treats them decently, even giving them a ping pong table for recreation. The main issue is moral: what is the duty of the Jewish prisoners – Are they morally allowed to cooperate with the Nazi authorities and risk being contributors to the destruction of the Allied economies (Sally)? Or must they resist the authorities and sabotage the project at the risk of their own lives (Burger). They end up cooperating on the pound project, but then sabotaging the dollar project (although it would have made little difference since the dollar could not have been ready until the last months of the war). In the course of the film Sally evolves from his egotistical indifference to everyone and everything around him to at least a sense of solidarity with his fellow prisoners; e.g., he always refused to compromise any prisoner to the authorities. Vivid portrayal of brutal SS behavior toward the Jewish prisoners. (2007)

**Familia rodante** 2004 Argentina: Pablo Trapero 2.5 Features a host of non-professional actors: the grandmother is played by Tablero's own grandmother. 'Typical' Argentine film – obviously low budget (no professional actors, no special effects, no sets, etc.) about a working class family living in the suburbs of Buenos Aires that decides to travel all the way to Misiones – in sight of Brazil – to attend a wedding. Twelve very disparate people – the elderly grandmother, a collection of daughters, sons-in-law and grandchildren, one of whom in dreadlocks has a small baby – pile into an over-the-hill homemade camper on a 1958 Chevy chassis (the film was made in 2004) to drive the 800 miles or so. At first they are on pretty modern-looking paved highways, but when they get into Corrientes and Misiones, they find themselves on almost impassible dirt tracks. In the process they pass hundreds of fearsome-looking trucks (no wonder the death toll on Argentine roads is so high!), and once deep into the provinces every man appears to ride a horse; they also visit a small town which was allegedly the birthplace of San Martin. The film kind of follows the little intra-family dramas – the wife of the driver of the camper (known as 'Fatso') almost has sex with her old boyfriend; one teenage boy is obsessed with sex and he makes out heavy with his two adolescent cousins; Fatso gets into a blustery, but fairly harmless, fight with the n'er-do-well boyfriend of his daughter; the camper breaks down and Fatso has to find a gasket head in a nearby village for repairs; one of the daughters has a terrible toothache – hence the trip to the San Martin village to visit the dentist (who seems competent enough – he pulls out the tooth). The portrait of the family is not particularly affectionate: there is a lot of bickering and fighting, sex experimentation with one's cousins, with few demonstrations of solidarity or affection aside from the care of the baby. The film ends with a very long shot held on the face of Grandma, who says not a word and stares toward the Brazilian horizon; she is perhaps above the bickering (although she has done a fair amount of it herself), or perhaps she is just too old to do anything about it. The style is very 'realist' – a

lot of handheld camera shots, hyper close-ups that make it sometimes difficult to know what is happening, an episodic plot structure, a tendency never to finish the current vignette, but just to cut to another with perhaps not returning to resolve the little story. (2008)

**Fanny** 2013 Daniel Auteuil (France) 4.0 Daniel Auteuil as the childlike, quick-tempered César, father of Marius; Victoire Bélézy as Fanny, beautiful, serious, emotional, no trouble at all shedding copious tears; Jen-Pierre Darroussin in outstanding performance as the sincere, kind-hearted Panisse, in love with Fanny and willing to do anything to help her; Marie-Anne Chazel over-the-top emotional and confrontational as the Fanny's mother, Honorine, mortified at the possibility that her daughter might give birth out of wedlock; the glamorous and flat-acting Raphael Personnaz, Cesar's son and father of Fanny's baby – he appears only at the end to claim Fanny and the baby for himself. Highly emotional, nostalgic, and sentimental adaptation of Pagnol's famous play. The film consists largely of picturesque, animated exterior shots that appear to be on location in the Marseilles harbor. The narrative stems from Marius' impulsive decision in the previous film 'Marius' to take to the sea rather than stay and support his impregnated girlfriend. The story of course requires that the viewer place himself in Pagnol's magical world: the sacrosanct important of family and of producing offspring in an age (1920s) when French families were very small; the shame of giving birth to a child out of wedlock; the small-shop nature of the economy – Cesar owns a bar, Panisse a sail-making shop; the romance of the sun, the sea, and the cicadas buzzing outside your bedroom window; the child-like good-heartedness and sincerity of the characters, despite colorful verbal pyrotechnics. The dialogue is outstanding – colorful, confrontational, humorous, nostalgic, and insightful. The best scenes include Cesar's unsuccessful and transparent attempts to hide his suffering stemming from the departure of his son and his failure to write frequently; Honorine's hysteria at learning that Fanny is pregnant without being married and her suggestion that Fanny marry Panisse without telling him of her pregnancy; the conversation between Fanny and Panisse, in which the latter not only agrees to marry her, but is delighted to accept her baby as his own; the ill-tempered exchange between old friends Panisse and Cesar, in which the latter agrees eventually to accept Fanny's marriage and to co-parent the child as the godfather. The ending is a bit contrived, but still enjoyable. Marius returns out of the blue to claim Fanny and "his" son from Panisse; he is however refuted by the devotion of Panisse and the verdict of Cesar – the real father of the child is not the man that gave him life (that night he was after all mainly seeking his own pleasure), but the man that nurtures and loves the child; Panisse is the real father and the baby will stay with him. Although demurely silent through most of the exchange, Fanny comes to life to express her devotion to Panisse. Heart-warming film with excellent performances, lively dialogue, and a moving nostalgic trip into the French past. (2015)

**Fanny and Alexander** 1982 Ingmar Bergman (Sweden) 4.0 Bertil Guve as Alexander; Pernilla Allwin as Fanny Ekdahl; Jarl Kulle as Gustav Adolf; Christina Schollin as Lydia Ekdahl; Pernilla Wallgren as Maj; Jam Malmjsjo as Bishop Vergerus; Erland Josephson as Isak Jacobi. Extraordinary 3-hour film loosely based on Bergman's own childhood. Charts Alexander's experiences from 1) happy although mysterious days in the Ekdahl household, 2) terror and hatred in the Vergerus household when mother marries the Bishop, 3) happy resolution after the Bishop dies and the children and mother return home. Acting and characterization are extraordinary – practically every character is rich and believable – especially true of Alexander, the Bishop, and Grandmother Lydia. Sets and photography are striking with rich color and pageantry: the richly furnished home of Lydia, which provides every sort of pleasure and stimulus for the children; the Spartan and forbidding bare walls of the Vergerus household – even with bars on the windows; and the impossibly cluttered home of Isak after he rescues the children from the Bishop's home by a clever stratagem. Film appears to convey the biographical path of Bergman through the odyssey of Alexander: the pleasure loving and imaginative life of his grandmother's family; contrasted with the harsh, unforgiving, and pessimistic vision of the world of the Calvinist (Lutheran?) stepfather, who watches for sin in his stepson, exacts confession from him (by punishment if necessary), and then assigns him punishment; the women in the Bishop's family are truly scary, contemptible and atrocious. The film then returns to the Ekdahl household, where the philandering Gustav Adolf delivers an impassioned speech in favor of freedom and pleasure in the context of family and loyalty: we cannot be sure of the big questions and the big mysteries (raised in forbidding fashion by

the priests), so we just have to do our best and live in the moment, and enjoy the happiness and pleasure that God sees fit to give us. The happiness of the Ekdahl family includes acceptance of Gustav Adolf's mistress, Maj, and the child she has with him: the film ends with a beautiful celebration of the birth of two baby girls. Film also makes much reference to the theater, since the family actually owns and operates one: imagination and fantasy is one of the great pleasures of life and perhaps a substitute for the certainty of religious faith. The sequence in Isak the Jew's house, in which Alexander sees a mummy with moving head and eyes and in which he befriends a bizarre androgynous son, who appears to bring on the death of the Bishop, is puzzling and difficult to untangle. Also a lot of references to ghosts and phantoms, which seem to lurk everywhere – Alex is constantly visited by his dead father, although the latter does not say anything to his son; in the end Alex is bumped by the ghost of his stepfather, who tells him that he is not rid of him yet (and from our knowledge of Bergman's pessimistic films, we know what he is referring to). It is difficult to know whether these ghosts are real or exist only in the mind of Alexander and express his imaginativeness and philosophical uncertainties. The film's strength: it immerses us deep into the life and culture of a family of a bygone era; it bonds us firmly to the characters, dividing the innocent and life-affirming clearly from the destructive and life-denying; it leaves the viewer on tenterhooks as we fret over the plight of the children and cheer when they are rescued; we are moved as the movie delivers Bergman's mature message of happiness – be thankful for the happiness you have, and don't ruin it. The film is similar to Thomas Mann's 'Buddenbrooks'. (2007)

**Fantastic Mr. Fox** 2009 Wes Anderson 3.0 George Clooney as Mr. Fox, very amusing in his larcenous, lying, self-justifying, bull-shitting ways – he feels he has to live up to his name as the wiliest, smartest animal (i.e., “fantastic”); Meryl Streep as the somewhat up-tight, thunderstorm-painting mom keeping things respectable and under control; Bill Murray as sensible, unimaginative Badger; Wally Wolodarski as Fox's skittish, not too intelligent sidekick and partner in crime; Michael Gambon as the evil Mr. Bean; Willem Dafoe as the guardian rat; Jason Schwartzman as Fox's disrespected son Ash, who wants above all to be considered an athlete; Eric Anderson as Kristofferson, Fox's able and cool visiting nephew – he is a good athlete, knows karate, and he meditates. Entertaining stop-animation film based on Roald Dahl's book. Mr. Fox and his wife steal chickens; he goes straight to her insistence, and then relapses, endangering the whole animal community; the revenge of the three farmers is relentless, but of course the good guys triumph in the end. The strength of the film is not in the rather hackneyed plot. The characters are charming and amusing, particularly Mr. Fox, who puts all the animals in danger with his irresponsible actions – the farmers fanatically pursue them with shovels, guns, dynamite, back hoes, floods, etc. – and Kristofferson, who can do no wrong. The animation is not as smooth or convincing as 'Coraline' – the movement of the characters is often jerky, the eyes are made of glass or porcelain, Fox's exposed teeth look like plastic, the animals spend too much time digging tunnels very rapidly, the scenery often looks flat and like paper cut-outs. But the expressions of the animal characters are real, even eloquent – mouth movements, hair bristling, ears turning as they scan the environment – and the voice performances draw us into the characters. Music is catchy and amusing – some rock, some Beach Boys, some country banjo strumming, and the child's nursery rhyme about the farmers: *Boggis and Bunce and Bean./One fat, one short, one lean. /These horrible crooks, so different in looks./Were nonetheless equally mean.* The focus of the film is yet another Wes Anderson dysfunctional family: Will Fox give up his larceny act and be a good husband? Will Ash overcome his inferiority contest vis-à-vis Kristofferson? Will he be assured of his father's respect and affection? The end of the film has order restored with the animals now living comfortably in the sewer instead of in their former tree and now provided with free (stolen?) food since they now have access to the farmers' super market. Predictable plot drags a bit; otherwise delightful. (2010)

**Fantômas: In the Shadow of the Guillotine (Part I)** 1913 Louis Feuillade (France) 3.0 René Navarre as Fantomas with the manic piercing eyes and beard and upturned mustache – the master of many disguises, he appears in evening clothes and leaves his calling cards at the scene of his crimes; Edmund Breon as Inspector Juve of the Sureté – calm and methodical, rather resembles Adolphe Menjou; Georges Melchior as Jerome Fandor, journaliste; Renée Carl as Lady Beltham, mistress of Fantomas – she plots to get Fantomas out of prison after his arrest. The first of the ground-breaking three-part

mystery series. The first episode is the robbery of a wealthy lady in a Paris hotel; he manages to escape by disguising himself as an elevator operator; the second is the kidnapping of Lord Beltham, apparently because he is the husband of Fantomas' mistress; he is later found murdered in a trunk; Fantomas (Gurn) is then arrested by the implacable Juve and condemned to death; third episode has Lady Beltham plotting to get Fantomas out of prison by bribing the prison guards and exchanging her lover for an actor, Valgrand, that plays him in the theater; as Valgrand is about to be executed, Juve recognizes him and saves him from the guillotine; the hour-long film ends in a cliff-hanger with Juve haunted by his adversary, who appears in a fantasy scene taunting Juve with outstretched hands to be handcuffed; Juve vows that he will get his man. The print is extremely good – detailed with a minimum of imperfections; scenes filmed on location in Paris are juxtaposed with scenes shot on conventional sets. Acting is generally naturalistic, although there are moments of histrionic exaggeration. Feuillade uses mostly long takes with no camera movement, although close-ups are sometimes used for important information, often contained in telegrams or letters. The story is told visually with a minimum of intertitles. Entertaining, interesting, suspenseful, sometimes surprising. (2014)

**Fantômas II: Juve vs. Fantômas** 1913 Louis Feuillade (France) 3.0 Usual players (see Part I); beautiful Yvette Andréyor as Fantomas' confederate Josephine – she stands out for histrionic acting in a company of natural players. Further adventures of the implacable, ruthless criminal Fantomas and his duel of wits with Inspector Juve of the Sureté; perhaps not as consistently interesting as first installment, but ending with a bang. Lots of memorable on-location outdoor shots; picturesque working class quartier; following suspects in the metro and through streets of Paris and on to PLM train; Fantomas plots to kill Juve by luring him to the wine market at Bercy, where there is a big gun battle around the wine barrels. Action then shifts to the nightclubs of Montmartre, where Juve locates Josephine and Chaleck (presumably Fantomas) and arrests him, but he escapes mocking Juve from the back of a taxi. Juve then focuses on Lady Beltham's for-sale house, especially the central heat furnace in the basement, which Juve uses to spy on the reunions between Fantomas and Lady Beltham; Fantomas's attempted assassination of Juve by snake occurs in a hotel. This episode contains several internal cliffhangers: the impending crash of the Simplon Express; the raging fire at Bercy; Fantomas' arrest in the nightclub and escape in a taxi; Fantomas' attempt to assassinate Juve with a big slithery snake (from one of the stories of Sherlock Holmes?); and then final cliffhanger when Fantomas causes Lady Beltham's house to explode, leaving us wondering whether Juve and Fandor might have been killed. Effective visual depiction of action; camera never moves; mostly long shots lasting a long time; at one point, a nice, although unrealistic model of train puffing along and then the wreck of the Simplon Express. Music better in the second installment. Appeal of the character Fantomas: master of myriad disguises; crime, violence, murder just because he likes it; when his mistress asks him to renounce crime and leave with her, he refuses – he will go along only after he kills Juve; sleek, masked, and mysterious in his black tight suit he sometimes wears; the equal match of wits between Fantomas and Juve (Holmes and Professor Moriarty) intrigues. (2014)

**Farewell** 2009 Christian Carion (France) 3.5 Guillaume Canet as low-key French industrialist living in Moscow about 1981; Emire Kusturica high level KGB administrator motivated to betray massively important secrets to the French (who will pass them on to the Americans) in order to bring down the frozen Communist system; Alexandra Maria Lara as Canet's wife, who puts great pressure on him to get out of the impromptu spy business; Fred Ward looing too young but doin an often hilarious impression of President Reagan; Philippe Magnan as Francois Mitterand; Willem Dafoe as dceadpan, deadly serious CIA higher up; Niels Arestrup ('Prophete") as head os the French Internal Security agency that handles the transmission of the secret documents (the spy agency is infiltrated by the Soviets). Thoroughly enjoyable, often suspenseful, realist, and sometimes slow-moving film about an affair that helped bring down the Soviet Union. The official narrative is that Reagan's challenge, e.g., 'Star Wars', did it, but this film (based on a best-seller in France) opines that the sclerotic Soviet system was able to survive as long as it did only because it was able to steal industrial and technological secrets from the West (spying ate up 40% of its security budget!), and that the moment it lost its extensive network of agents, the system was doomed. Kusturica is absolutely determined to bring down the system for the sake of his son Igor (Evgeniu Kharlanov), and he meets Canet in various public places to hand over to him

photographed copies of inflammatory documents. Canet is drawn somewhat reluctantly into the scheme, and he must deal continuously with the impassioned opposition of his wife, to whom he lies regularly. An important side plot is Kusturica's affair with an office employee, who generates tension since we fear that she will go overboard emotionally and betray her boyfriend to the KGB. Simple but effective outdoor scenes apparently not photographed in Moscow, but looking very much like it. Denouement is a surprise: Canet is warned by his spying housemaid to leave ("partir" written in lipstick on the mirror), and after driving through an endless snowy landscape, the family with the two children is able to make it through the checkpoint at the Finnish border in an effective Hitchcockian moment as we wait to see whether the guards will be tipped off (another example of "pure cinema" is the scene in the Moscow subway, where Canet is frightened by policemen coming in his direction [he has documents in his briefcase], but at the last minute they finger a woman next to him at the newsstand and hustle her off to prison). Kusturica is arrested, tortured, manhandled, and he gives information only when Canet and his family are safe; he is then shot in the snowy woods (the scene with the shots reverberating through the hills is first scene at the very beginning of the film). When Canet visits CIA agent Dafoe in Germany to ask for Kusturica's release, Dafoe informs him that the CIA itself turned Kusturica in so as to protect the CIA Moscow network; ends on disillusion with the *Machtpolitik* of the Great Powers handing over their greatest source with no moral compunction, but perhaps with the understanding that such underhandedness is necessary for a good cause. (2011)

**Farewell, My Lovely** 1975 Dick Richards 3.0 Robert Mitchum dominating the film as Raymond Chandler's Philip Marlowe; Charlotte Rampling mumbling a bit and looking a bit slight and washed out as supposed *femme fatale* Helen – she doesn't live up to the precedent set by Claire Trevor in 'Murder'; John Ireland as Marlowe's buddy detective lieutenant; Harry Dean Stanton as hostile police detective; Jack O'Halloran as the big, hulking romantic Moose Malloy; Anthony Zerbe. Remake of 1944 Dick Powell 'Murder, My Sweet' that gets the Chandler business better than the original and certainly better than the incomprehensible 'The Big Sleep'. Even though in color, the film captures well the dark streets and 40s interiors of the novel – excellent consistent art direction. Moose kicks things off demanding Marlowe to find "my Velma", and his convoluted searches through the streets of LA begin; after many complications, the trail leads eventually to rich girl Rampling, who it turns out is Velma! When Moose discovers that his Velma has really double-crossed him, it doesn't make any difference to him: Moose is either too faithful or too stupid to recognize the truth. Unlike other Marlowe-Chandler versions, the tricky narrative line is not too difficult to follow – we're always just a little bit behind the eight ball but not so that the exercise is frustrating. Nice updated film noir – *femme fatale*, dangerous urban streets, story told in flashback, except that the protagonist is not dumb nor is he condemned by fate to failure. The success of the film depends mostly on Mitchum's performance – laconic, relaxed, weary, cynical, sometimes a little hangdog as the persistent, honorable Marlowe; he told Moose he would find his Velma and he won't rest until he does.

**A Farewell to Arms** 1932 Frank Borzage 3.0 Gary Cooper, Helen Hayes, Adolphe Menjou. Adaptation of Hemingway novel that, as you would expect in a Borzage movie, puts most of emphasis on the love story between Cooper and Hayes. Does have a persistent anti-war theme, as we encounter in the hospitals and on the road ample evidence of the destruction of war; when the grand Italian victory comes, it is hollow with the implication that the cost is too great. Cooper does as well as he can with his obsessed romantic love with his awkward and taciturn delivery; he is at least tall, dashing and handsome. Hayes fares somewhat better as soft, beautiful, dedicated nurse, who falls hook, line and sinker for the beautiful Cooper; cf. moving camera scene where she follows him through the streets to witness his departure on the train. Menjou excellent as Cooper's carousing buddy, who plots out of jealousy to block Cooper's and Hayes relationships without realizing that Hayes is pregnant (and perhaps secretly married), and then repents and partly makes up for it in the end. Hayes dies in end from botched childbirth. Best aspect of movie is Borzage's direction – he conveys lovers being hostile to society and its corruption (mainly war), inhabiting its own space away from the troubles of the world, Hollywood version of "amour fou." Close-ups extensively used with soft focus of Hayes (who doesn't really need it). In end Hayes can die without fear, since she is convinced that their love will be eternal, and that Cooper will not ever forget

her even though she is dead. Print is fair to poor; all outdoor shots are faked, undermining somewhat the believability of the film.

**Fargo** 1996 Coen Brothers 4.0 Frances McDormand, Steve Buscemi, William H. Macy, Peter Stomare (murderous), Herve Presnell. Totally delicious Coen confection. Black humor. memorable characters – Buscemi! especially Macy, and McDormand, but basically everyone. Almost vicious, sinful satire on upper plains culture – Norwegian accent, the snow, the hats, the flat characters, deliciously set off by the murderous characters. The little whore and their matter-of-fact gab! Excellent little thriller where more or less everything goes wrong; ends with many murders and capture of Macy who is despicable as usual. McDormand is moral center who just doesn't understand why there has to be so much violence (about six dead!). Deadpan black humor that reaches its paroxysm with Stomare feeding Buscemi's body into the wood chipper and not being phased by the red stain all over the white snow; also look at the wife's shenanigans when she is kidnapped; she doesn't know how to be terrified. (2005)

**Fat City** 1971 John Huston (writer Leonard Gardiner) 3.5 Stacy Keach as down-and-out alcoholic, former boxer living on skid row in Stockton CA; Jeff Bridges in early teenage role as clueless kid about to graduate from high school – he would like to become a fighter; Susan Tyrrell in high-impact role as expressive, insulting, motor-mouth alcoholic barfly who takes up with Keach when her steady boyfriend gets thrown in jail (AA nomination); Candy Clark in small role as Bridges' girlfriend, who pressures him to marry her; Nick Colusanto as manager of amateur boxers – he has a heart of gold although little success with his boys despite his devotion to them (he drives them all the way to Monterey and back for amateur matches). Memorable small film about dead-end poverty on skid row in Stockton Ca about 1970. Virtually all the film takes place in seedy bars and rooming houses (dirty windows, peeling wallpaper, trash strewn throughout the apartment, etc.) among the derelicts in a declining American city; boxing and back-breaking agricultural labor are the main activities. The film follows the fortunes of Bridges, who is a young boxer of mixed prospects and whose career is interrupted when Clark ropes him into a teenage marriage. Huston focuses more on Keach, who appears to be a hopeless alcoholic but who would like to get into shape and relaunch his career as a boxer. In the meantime, he takes up with Tyrrell, who does little else but complain and lie around in their run-down room drinking (she prefers cream sherry but will drink anything). He does win a tough fight at the end of the film with a Mexican boxer with serious kidney problems (we see him peeing blood into the toilet before the bout), but when he returns to his room, Tyrrell's old boyfriend is back; with decent politeness he hands him his belongings in a box. The Mexican, who never utters a word, arrives on a Greyhound bus in the Stockton bus station, loses the fight, and then wordlessly walks out of the venue. Walking down the street, Keach runs into the married Bridges, who tries unsuccessfully to elude him. They go into a community center for street people, where they have a cup of coffee together. The ending of the film is sensitively shot and edited: Keach stares at an old Asian server who can barely walk obviously thinking about his own inevitable destiny; as he looks at other bums playing cards at a nearby table, the film freezes with only Keach's eyes moving and blinking; when Bridges tries to leave, Keach pleads with him to stay and chat a little longer; he does, and the end of the film arrives after about a half a minute of the two sipping their coffee in absolute silence. Nothing to say, nothing to do. Keach is near the end of his cycle of poverty; Bridges doesn't realize yet that the future has the same fate for him. Film is realistic in textures and style, and sometimes moves slowly; Tyrrell's and Keach's performance are outstanding; and the ending is moving and true.

### **Fatty Arbuckle**

**The Bellboy** 1918 R. Arbuckle 3.0 Fatty Arbuckle, Buster Keaton.

**The Butcher Boy** 1917 R. Arbuckle 3.5 Fatty Arbuckle, Buster Keaton. Both produced by Joe Schenck at Paramount. Among first pairings of Fatty and Buster Keaton. Arbuckle still definitely the star with BK in supporting role. Both about 25 minutes. A few verbal (title) jokes, but most are slapstick with pratfalls, fights between enemies and sometimes friends, quite a few acrobatics. 'Butcher Boy' a better movie; has flour fight in grocery store, routine with molasses (acting like fly paper), Fatty's knife juggling routine (funny), putting on his Russian hat to go into the freezer, etc. and ends with forays



into the girls' boarding school to rescue his girlfriend – Fatty very funny dressed up in frilly dress and Mary Pickford curls. 'Bellboy' has good routines in the beginning, including shaving routine where Fatty turns Rasputin into Gen. Grant, Abe Lincoln and then into Kaiser Wilhelm II! Ends with less inspired, interminable bank robbery routine. Fatty is sweet tempered, baby faced, endearing, who does cause chaos but doesn't mean to harm anyone. He likes girls and usually ends up getting the cutey.

**Out West** 1918 R. Arbuckle 3.0 Fatty and Buster  
**Moonshine** 1918 R. Arbuckle 3.0 Fatty and Buster

**La faute à Fidel!** 2001 Julie Gavras (France) 3.0 Nina Kervel as Anna, a poker-faced, dead-serious nine-year-old big talker who aggressively asks questions; Julie Depardieu as Marie de la Mesa, Anna's mother and Marie Claire journalist, who later decides to write a book on abortion; Stefano Accorsi, good-looking guy as Fernando de la Mesa, Anna's Spanish father (although he speaks native French); Marie Kremer as Isabelle, Marie's sister-in-law. French coming of age film about a girl – Anna – growing up in the household of a politically radical family in the early 1970s. The film begins in the country home of Anna's wealthy grandparents, where the meaning of the *jeune fille bien rangée* is brought out by her being taught to peel an orange properly with a knife; the family then moves to a small apartment (painted a glossy deep red) in Paris so they can militate on the left against Franco, in favor of Allende in Chile, and in favor a legalized abortion. Anna is a rebellious, independent, and sometimes pouty child that doesn't accept her parents' point of view uncritically (Mickey Mouse is a fascist, down with American "imperialist pigs", horror at the use of napalm in Vietnam, etc.); she constantly challenges her parents, asks lots of questions, and insists on staying enrolled in a Church school run by 'les bonnes soeurs', although her parents have her excused from catechism class. The parents tell her that social justice is superior over charity (the Church's approach), and that she should have an "esprit de groupe" (for radical causes) and not an "esprit de mouton" (for bourgeois pursuits). The radical activists who visit the apartment are unsuccessful in their attempt to win Anna over to their point of view, but they are good-humored when Anna shows skepticism and a natural inclination for capitalism and profit-seeking in her economic ideas. The parents sometimes seem distracted and inattentive, but they are devoted to their two children, they are usually patient with Anna's objections and arguments, and they take the children along when they go out for political meetings. The children are able always to preserve their sense of fun and family companionship, loving it, for example, when their parents read stories to them that give mythological explanations of the life. The question is constantly posed as to whether the parents' ideology will win over Anna: will she imitate her parents in seeing the world as a drama of struggle between exploiters and the exploited, or will she retain her childish independence and openness. The ending seems to opt for the latter in a relaxed way: Anna comforts her father when he learns the devastating news of the death of Allende, and then she returns to the schoolyard, and watching the other children play together heedlessly, she at first hesitates, and then joins in with a smile. The future is open.

**The Hayseed** 1919 3.0 Fatty Arbuckle, Buster Keaton. Fairly amusing short film according to Fatty and Buster formula. Plot revolves around whether Fatty gets girl, and of course he does in the end. Keaton for once does not laugh. Incredible number of pratfalls and stylized, ritualized violence. Last dancehall scene is funniest, with manic dancing and one particularly long-suffering young woman dressed in dowdy clothes, and Fatty singing: he cracks everyone up with his very sentimental song, and then experiences rejection since he had eaten a lot of onions, which, according to BK, would strengthen his voice!

**Fearless** 1993 Peter Weir 2.5 Jeff Bridges doing the best he can as San Francisco architect who is transformed emotionally and spiritually following near death in a harrowing plane crash; Isabel Rossellini solid as his beautiful (snaggle-toothed?) wife who notices the difference and suffers the most from it; Rosie Perez looking like a teenager with a Puerto Rican accent – she is overcome with guilt because she lost her child in the crash; Tom Hulce using his Mozart mannerisms as hearse chasing lawyer who precludes every announcement about getting more money for his clients with "I know I am terrible, but..."; John Turturro in low-grade role as grief counselor hired by the airlines; Benicia Del Toro as venal

husband of Rosie – all he cares about is getting money out of the accident. Curious film that does not focus on the accident, but on the psychological and spiritual aftermath in the souls of Bridges and Perez. Bridges did not receive a scratch and he looks fine, and yet his behavior and affect are transformed: he has a beatific smile, he says that he has faced death and is no longer afraid, he feels a kinship with the survivors (aside from Perez there is another woman and a small boy who returns to visit him because he says he feels safe with Bridges), and he wants to help them.... And that is the problem: the sensible thing to do would be to help them return to the loving embraces of their everyday lives (children, spouses, etc.), but Bridges, who is distant from his wife and son and who spends large amounts of time away from them doing such things as walking perilously on the ledge of a skyscraper, seems to revel in being distant in some sort of higher reality (reinforced visually by illustrations from Dante's 'Paradiso') where one is alone, stands alone before God and does not need anyone else (Hieronymous Bosch's explanation of Paradise). He develops a close relationship with Perez, which seems at first destined to be romantic, and yet it becomes a supportive friendship in which Bridges tries to free her from her guilt – for example, by driving a Volvo full speed into a brick wall to show her that there was no way she could have held on to save her son(!). In the end Bridges starts a reconnection with his wife and son after he has an allergic reaction from eating a strawberry; but the viewer's confusion remains.... Terrifyingly realistic scenes of the airplane crash that are recreated at various intervals in the film. Some truly hackneyed scenes, e.g., Bridges and Perez go on a shopping spree in an Oakland mall to buy presents for their deceased loved ones – "I never gave my dad a present when he was alive"! The acting is good throughout. Weir however has largely missed the mark in his investigation of alternative psychological-spiritual states. (2009)

**The Felony** 2013 Matthew Savile (writer Joel Edgerton; Australia) 2.5 Joel Edgerton as Mal, intense and efficient Australian cop (some big city) with a wife and two children; Jai Courtney as fellow detective, Jim, watchful, inflexible, holier-than-thou; Tom Wilkinson as chief detective Carl, profane, in-your-face, representing unshakable, come-what-may loyalty to the police force. Morality drama about the conflict between honesty and telling the truth on the one hand and tribal loyalty and self-preservation on the other. A bit inebriated, Edgerton injures an Indian Australian boy riding his bicycle; he dies a few days later in the hospital, much mourned by his mother. Wilkinson corrals him at the scene of the crime and makes sure he doesn't tell the whole truth: the two convince most everyone that Edgerton found the boy lying in the road and that he acted aggressively to get him medical attention. Courtney is the fly in the ointment, suspicious of Edgerton's story, questioning Wilkinson closely on why he didn't pursue the investigation more thoroughly by conducting a complete forensic examination of Edgerton's car. The film focuses on Edgerton's enormous conscience qualms about killing a child and not coming clean about it. Wilkinson has the best scene, when he lectures Edgerton pungently about his responsibility to his family and the importance of not discrediting the police force. A rather silly subplot has Courtney becoming romantically interested in the grieving mother, who responds mostly with trembling chin and implied rejection. When Edgerton and Courtney decide to tell the truth about the incident, Courtney and Wilkinson have a fight that results in the latter having a stroke or a heart attack; it is not clear at the end whether he is expected to recover. There is a bit of redemption when the mother declines to pursue Edgerton for his negligence and lies -- one supposes, let bygones be bygones since it was an accident. At the end, Edgerton remains secure in his job, although still guilt-racked by the experience. The film has a nice sequence in the beginning, wherein Wilkinson's and Edgerton's conversation following the accident is first recorded by Courtney wordless from a distance and then a second time up close with the camera registering Wilkinson's plan to cover up the incident. Film has an intriguing, well-filmed beginning, good dialogue, and percussive acting by Wilkinson. The second half suffers from an unbelievable subplot and drawn-out breast-beating about moral issues. (2015)

**Female** 1933 Michael Curtiz (Warners) 3.0+ Ruth Chatterton as dominant woman running an automobile factory ("That'll be all.") and preying on the good-looking young men that work for her – she speaks with modified British accent; Johnny Mack Brown appears briefly as handsome hunk that Chatterton seduces; George Brent as design engineer who is also a handsome hunk but who doesn't give into Chatterton's seduction – he thinks "love and marriage go together like a horse and carriage";

Ferdinand Gottschalk as British-talking personal assistant and guy Friday of Chatterton; Lois Wilson as rather flighty friend of Chatterton; Douglas Dumbrille as employee who wants Chatterton to marry him (in vain). Hollywood women's film that is exceedingly frank about sexual matters. Alpha female Chatterton starts off by ignoring love and family in favor of efficiently running her automobile factory (mid-Depression) and seducing attractive young male employees by inviting them over to her (spacious, luxurious and impressively Art Deco) house for consultations. Amusing and frank sequences have her throwing pillows in front of the hearth as a sign that she is ready for sex; the butler (Robert Greig) is instructed to bring vodka into the seduction room as a means of "fortifying" the men for energetic sex à la Catherine the Great; any man that becomes attached to her is transferred to a distant office such as Montreal. She boasts so openly about her aversion to romantic devotion and marriage that the viewer knows that she will be severely disciplined by the Hollywood Code. She finds her match in Brent, who refuses to bed down with her, saying that he came to the company to work and not be a gigolo, and that "I am a man and I prefer to do my own hunting." Consulting advisor Gottschalk, who tells her that with a strong male figure like Brent she has to be more vulnerable and womanly, she begins to court him. A crisis ensues when she refuses to marry him and she has an emotional meltdown in front of her board of directors. Realizing that she is "just a woman" and that the job is too much for her, she sets off on a reckless drive cross-country (on dirt roads!) in pursuit of the fleeing Brent; catching up with him at a country fair, she says that she is quitting her job, marrying him and having nine children, while Brent will run the company from now on (will the Board of Directors like that?). Traditional sex roles are thus reestablished. Beautifully produced film with strong performances, interesting, incisive dialogue, eye-popping decors and costumes. The artificial resolution is a little hard to swallow. (2011)

**Les femmes de l'ombre (Female Agents)** 2008 Jean-Paul Salomé (France) 2.5 Sophie Marceau as ruthless, dedicated female agent working for the British SOE; Julie Depardieu as one of her recruits, an ex-prostitute that sacrifices herself for the mission at the end of the film; Julien Boisselier as Pierre, Marceau's brother in charge of the mission; Moritz Bleibtrau convincing as more or less evil SS colonel; Maire Gillain, Déborah François, Maya Sansa as the other female agents. Often entertaining TV-style movie about beautiful, surprisingly kick-ass female British agents sent into France in 1944 to help maintain the Germans' misapprehension about the location of the impending Allied landing. Although an attempt is made to distinguish the identities and concerns of the five women, it is difficult to keep their identities straight. The film is reminiscent of "Charlie's Angels" with five beautiful women (whose breasts are often bared for the viewers' delectation) shooting their way through half the German army in northern France; an important difference is the casualty rate – all the conspirators are killed with the sole exception of Marceau. In the first part of the mission, the women rescue a British geologist, who is recovering from wounds in a German hospital (don't ask why); the extended firefight in the hospital is bloody and entertaining. The women are then tricked into going to Paris to murder the SS colonel, since the Brits somehow suspect that he is trying to convince Hitler and Rommel to concentrate their forces in the Normandy region. Marceau finally shoots him in cold blood (normal for her) in a train station, but the price is high – she will be the only survivor of the expedition (of course the viewer knows that the Normandy landings went off well). An awful lot of establishing shots in Paris public places with spotless 40s luxury cars toting around SS bigwigs and swastika flags fluttering in the breeze; the shots of the Rue de Rivoli and the Place de la Concorde must have been taken very early on a summer Sunday morning. The film tries a bit too hard to please lower middle brow tastes, and the editing and staging of the action scenes too often strain credibility. The actresses, scenery, cityscapes, and action scenes are entertaining. (2016)

**Femme fatale** 2002 Brian DePalma 3.5 Rebecca Romijn-Stamos, Antonio Banderas, Peter Coyote. Wild and crazy cinematic ride peppered with trademark sleaze, bravura set pieces, clues that may or may not refer to anything, seemingly nonsensical plot twists – in sum, completely fascinating cinema with minimal concern for characters and plot! Wonderful set pieces: long opening sequence on the theft of an outrageously revealing gold and diamond studded serpentine top worn by a super model, and presumably lifted from her by Laure (Romijn) as they make lesbian love in the (clean!) women's room at Cannes Film Festival; outrageous sexually seductive dance sequence

featuring a near naked Romijn (DePalma is not afraid of frontal nudity!) and ending with copulation with Banderas; near suicide scene when Lily (almost?) commits suicide and we are nerve-racked as Laure watches (and she intervenes in second version of story). Also encounter between the large truck driven by French fellow with the prism hanging from rear view mirror: first version has him strike model; second version has him swerve, miss the model, and impale two bad guys on sort of fork lift contraption – blood spurts from bodies, mouth and eyes! Film studded with wondrous clues, which may or may not make sense: Catholic kids walking down the street like Madeleine following a nun; the prism; overflowing bathtubs, aquarium, and glasses; the black guy, when released from prison, is still wearing his bloody shirt from seven years before (!). Characters are pretty standard stuff; there isn't much good acting – I prefer Romijn's performance to Banderas', who undoubtedly didn't know what to do with the script! Plot is almost ridiculously inconsistent. In the end we are led to believe that Laure dreamed the whole "Seven Years Later" sequence as a sort of psychic prediction while she was submerged in the bathtub (near death?) – this part was extremely detailed and elaborate, and has Laure going to USA and returning with a ransom con to bilk her kind-hearted husband for \$10 million (!); and the final sequence has the French double leaving and never coming back (what did Laure do in the ensuing seven years?), revealing to us that the model (who of course is not really dead) and Laure collaborated to bilk their fellow thieves of their necklace (also \$10 million!), and the two of them shocked at the end at the death of the bad guys, and Laure willingly mating up with Banderas (she a loyal wife?). Perhaps movie, which opens with scene from *Double Indemnity*, plays best as parody of *femme fatale* sub-genre? Don't think so. DePalma plays with doubles, dreams, etc., which are not extensively developed by Hitchcock. As Ebert says, observe "the glee with which De Palma manipulates images and characters for the simple joy of being good at it." (2006)

**La femme infidèle** 1969 Claude Chabrol (France) 3.0 Stephane Audran. Michel Bouquet, Michel Duchaussoy. Completely minimalist film about a husband's jealousy about his wife's casual affair, his impulsive murder of the lover, and the aftermath. The most understated of the three big films of 1969-70. Bouquet and Audran don't say much; you have to read the progress of the story in their eyes and facial expressions. The surface of the film is calm and ordinary as these members of the upper bourgeoisie pursue their apparently placid and perfectly modulated life in home, office, trips to Paris, Bouquet dropping his wife off for her appointments, parenting their child, amusing themselves with their friends in a boîte, etc. Both spouses are always impeccably dressed and coiffed. The camera often focuses on the front of the Norman-style mansion with its perfectly manicured park-like setting, and on the inside with its tastefully appointed (decorator executed) traditional rustic décor with olive green walls, and the sky blue headboard in bedroom against the brick red walls. Behind this façade lurks Audran's boredom and Bouquet's jealous passion that leads to murder: he does not however intend to murder the lover when he visits his Neuilly flat, but he snaps when he sees that his wife has given the lover an oversized cigarette lighter that Bouquet had given her for their 3<sup>rd</sup> wedding anniversary. Camera follows murder with understated matter-of-factness, and follows Bouquet's disposing of the body in detail – perhaps a bit too much (the reluctance of the body to sink in the overgrown pond is an obvious tribute to 'Psycho'). The second perverse twist is that when Audran finally realizes what has happened and that her husband is responsible for it, she appreciates his act: she destroys incriminating evidence she discovered in his coat, gazes at him with loving affection, accepts his assurances of love for her when the police come, and then stands with her son on a hillock as he is led away. Contrast between placid, normal exterior and interior drama is very engaging. The connections between the two levels are perhaps a bit too subtle and understated for most people. (2007)

**Das Fidele Gefängnis** 1917 Ernst Lubitsch (Germany) 3.0 Kitty Dewall as pretty, very forgiving wife, Harry Liedtke as wayward husband who doesn't suffer major circumstances, Emil Jannings as somewhat annoying hammy drunken jailer. Four-reeler (46 minutes) based on Strauss' "Die Fledermaus." Husband likes to party, wife is suspicious, she goes to party with mask, husband heavy flirts with her, and she unmask him when he returns home the next morning. Merry, "lustige" atmosphere – everyone is expected to have a good time, and we don't worry too much about infidelities: wife goes to party alone with mask on; the maid is saucy and flirtatious, and mimics the behavior of her

betters; when husband is discovered, the couple kisses and makes up and there are no repercussions (one supposes he will be back to doing the same thing when he gets the chance). Although set in wartime Berlin, there is no mention of war, no sight of a military uniform, no clicking of heels, etc.; a completely civilian upper class society, perhaps a manifestation of Lubitsch's Jewishness, perhaps escapist fare served to the German public to forget the hardships of the war. Well photographed and appropriately paced on mostly indoor sets. A number of set comic pieces, such as the card-playing in jail with stumbling Jannings who kisses men on the mouth, or the two men fighting so much over a cab that the driver gives up and drives on, or the two lovers at the end high jacking a rich man's cab for themselves. Acting style is demonstrative and expressive, always expressing happiness and pleasure, at the worst humorous befuddlement. One "Lubitsch Touch" – wife, who can't find her husband, phones the police at her husband's desk; camera then pans down and ... discovers the husband in a drunken sleep under the desk. (2009)

**The Fighter** 2010 David O. Russell 4.0 Mark Wahlberg as quiet, decent, loyal Micky Ward, who thinks he might want a shot at the welterweight world crown; Christian Bale in AA performance as his manic, antic, nervous, gauntly skinny, crack-addled younger brother, Dicky, who was once a boxer himself (he claims that he once knocked down Sugar Ray Leonard); Melissa Leo (AA) as rather detestable mother of the Ward brood – energetic, foul-mouthed, ferociously possessive of her sons, bouffant hairdo and very tight skirts and pants, smoking like a chimney; Amy Adams successfully adapting her mainstream sweet personality to a tough-talking bartender broad in a fading industrial town; Jack McGee as the sweet and sensible father of Micky – he regularly stands up to Leo to defend the future of his son Micky. Terrific boxing movie set in depressed Lowell, Massachusetts in the early 1990s: sagging storefronts, crack houses, weeds in the front yard, too many young people with not enough to do, hard, bitter, although humorous personalities cracking jokes in the bar or on the street corner. Micky has boxing talent, but not a great future so long as he is managed and trained by his mother and brother, both of whom are ambiguous about whether they are promoting his career or just making sure that he never succeeds where his brother didn't (Leo clearly prefers Dicky over Micky). One story line follows the fortunes of the clownish, crack-addled Bale, who spends some time in the local jail when he tries to raise money by posing as a cop; when he emerges clean of drugs, he is transformed (somewhat mysteriously) into a positive force for his brother. Another is a love story between Wahlberg and Adams, who sees Micky's potential, fights with an iron will to free him from the tutelage of his mother and siblings, and plays an important role in his final rise to the top. Her moments of confrontation with Leo and her daughters are classic, crowd-pleasing in-your-face profane defiance. The central narrative is of course Micky's Rocky-like rise against great odds to defeat a brutal Scottish (?) boxer in London for the welterweight title. Somehow the narrative reconciles all opposing forces – Leo and the family on one side and Adams and Micky's supporters on the other – to help Micky find his confidence again and to enable his triumph. The film is compelling from start to finish: the viewer is drawn in by affection for Micky as played by the quiet but deep Wahlberg, amusement at Dicky's unpredictable behavior and admiration for Bale's impactful performance, outrage at the ferocious dominating energy of Leo backed up by her chorus of seven daughter harpies, etc. The boxing matches are gripping; since Wahlberg actually knows how to box, his punches and moves are realistic and convincing. The film stays within the broad outlines of the rags-to-riches boxing genre, but it enriches the genre by placing it in a fresh context of working class culture and family conflict. (2011)

**Fill the Void** 2012 Rama Burshtein (Israel) 2.5 Hadas Yaron as Shira, young, pretty Hasidic Jewish girl living in Tel Aviv; Yiftach Klein as Tochai, her essentially kind widowed brother-in-law seeking to marry her; Irit Sheleq as Yaron's harsh and manipulative mother, anxious to have the two marry so that her grandson won't move to Belgium; Chayim Sharir as Shira's kind father who doesn't want to pressure her to marry Tochai; Hila Feldman as Frieda, red-headed girlfriend who marries an older man. Film made by Orthodox director about marriage customs set in an Orthodox community in Tel Aviv. The film remains entirely within the Orthodox community, focusing on Shira's dilemma as to whether she should follow her mother's wishes and marry her dead sister's widower. The film focuses so much on marriage customs that it often seems more of an ethnographic study than a personal drama. The

weight of tradition in Hasidic society is enormous: married women have to cover their hair with oval-shaped wraps; they walk behind their husband or father in the street; the guys wear furry cylindrical black hats and two curls down each side of their face; men do a lot of singing together even at meals while women remain silent; everybody does a lot of rhythmic bowing when they are praying, which happens often; the only thing that seems to matter for the women especially (but men too) is getting married and breeding (parallel to Jane Austen?). When some girl announces wedding plans, celebration, dancing, and singing break out all around (won the lottery!)! The environment has some modern Israeli elements – comfortable houses, cars, kitchen appliances; also marriages are merely proposed by parents or matchmakers, and most people expect the girl and the guy to have the final say. But Shira and Yochay are both pushed into marriage – she because she is that age, and he so that his motherless baby will get a mother and so that Shira’s mother will not be deprived of the presence of her grandchild. The strong point of the film is a kind of slow, agonizing sacrifice of Shira – the secular viewer yearns for her to have more maidenly fun, to develop an independent life, to defer marriage and to find the man she loves to spend the rest of her life with. But the film ends with a detailed ethnographic account of the wedding, and when the couple returns to their bedroom for their wedding night and Yachoy takes off his furry hat, the camera focuses on the anxious face of Shira leaning in her wedding dress against the wall. Her sacrifice is completed, but one supposes that she will adjust and find some happiness in her life. With a couple of exceptions, the mood is consistently somber and meditative. Film is beautifully shot with a lot of exquisite close-ups of faces, especially of the lovely Shira, and a tendency to cut off scenes without obvious closure; long takes with slow movements and leisurely dramatic development. It is difficult to know how to react to the film and the ending: sacrifice of a girl? Or just a realistic presentation of Hasidic culture? (2013)

**La fille du puisatier** 2011 Daniel Auteuil (France) 3.0 Daniel Auteuil as proud well-digger in 1930s Provence who is raising five daughters on his own; Kad Merad as Felipe, Auteuil's bluff, good-hearted assistant; Astrid Bergès-Frisbey as his innocent, delicately pretty eldest daughter; Nicolas Duvauchelle as the well-off kid in the village who is an aviator in the French air force; Jean-Pierre Darroussin as the essentially kind father of Nicolas under a crusty bourgeois exterior. Effective sentimental romantic melodrama based on a novel by Marcel Pagnol set in a sunny, picturesque Provence right before and during World War II. The camera pans over the sunny, semi-arid landscape as attractive, thoughtful peasants walk through the countryside and down the streets of the traditional village with 30s Citroens passing by. The narrative is classic Pagnol -- sentimental story about a naive 18-year-old girl who gets pregnant making love in the bushes with the son of the local owner of the general store; the boy's parents are protective of their son's independence and the jealous mother prevents him from finding out about Astrid's condition; pregnant she gives birth to her cute baby boy while Nicolas goes missing in action; Astrid is expelled from the paternal foyer by a mortified Auteuil, but after the birth of the baby he wanders back to his daughter, is charmed by the baby and takes mother and child back into his home; all ends well with the reconciliation of the two families when Nicolas returns alive (joyful surprise!) and the two young people are married. Old-fashioned story in which externally crusty provincial locals really are good people underneath and show their kindness and happiness facilitated by the good-hearted Felipe; the film however lacks the dramatic and Greek tragic punch of Claude Berry's 1980s 'Manon des sources'; although you feel the pain of the ostracized Astrid, you never doubt that things will turn out alright. The film is beautifully and tastefully shot taking in the landscape, the nostalgic historical environment, and the emotional moments on the faces of the attractive characters. Auteuil is close to priceless as the pater familias, challenged in his task of raising five daughters, crusty and paternalistic in the management of his family, speaking in a bluff Provençal accent, exiling his daughter to another town when he learns she is with child, reclaiming the baby however as his own in a rush of paternalistic ownership, then finally with difficulty accepting Nicolas' family as the baby's parents when the moment comes to give him up to his true parents and change his name from Amoretti to Mazel (Nicolas' name). Copious tears may flow at the end. (2012)

**La fille sur le pont** 1999 Patrice Leconte (France) 3.0 Daniel Auteuil as circus knife thrower who rescues Paradis from suicide on the bridge of the Seine and makes her his cible in his act; Vanessa

Paradis as sexually promiscuous girl who allows herself to be taken under Auteuil's wing. Felliniesque romantic drama with a fatalistic feel that makes us think it is moving toward tragedy, but surprises us pleasingly with a happy, romantic ending. Auteuil claims that he wants the beautiful Paradis only as an assistant and through most of the film he acts as her father figure protecting her against destructive relationships, but he inexorably falls in love with her; the two of them develop a metaphoric sexual relationship when he throws knives at her while she trembles with (obviously sexual) pleasure; he experiences something similar when he uses the telepathic relationship between them to guide her toward winning big at the gambling tables in Monte Carlo and San Remo; and after they separate (she falls for yet another glamorous looking young man), Auteuil wanders disconsolately through Athens and Istanbul, where on the verge of committing suicide himself, Paradis suddenly appears and the two are reunited, one assumes in eternal happiness; Paradis has used the telepathic connection, which apparently is indissoluble, to come to Auteuil's aid and to save him with the same words that he saved her with in the beginning of the film. Film is photographed in exquisite black and white (recalling the films of Carné and Renoir?). It seems to owe a lot to the fantasy style of Fellini – the circus setting, the happy music, the circus performers (the contortionist, the dwarf, etc.). Film can be off-putting with its self-conscious artiness and fancy camerawork, but it comes together resoundingly at the end as a moving romantic drama: Leconte seems really to think that human destiny is made bearable only through a romantic union of two souls. (2009)

**The Firemen's Ball** 1967 Milos Forman (Czech) 3.0 A great variety of adult male players and quite a few young unmarried women participating in the "beauty contest"; all appeared to be non-professionals, although one cannot be sure. Droll, more or less plotless film about goings-on at a firemen's ball held in Communist ruled Czechoslovakia in the mid-60s. The film has virtually no individualized characters and almost no plot development from beginning to end: you start with planning for the ball, you have the well-attended ball briefly interrupted by a fire next door, and then the conclusion in which all the participants have left. The focus is on the amusingly bumbling and incompetent activities of the Entertainment Committee organized by the local firemen's league. Practically nothing goes right: they burn up the cloth mural as they are trying to put it up (they can't figure out how to use the fire extinguisher!); they grouse, complain and fight over details as they try to organize a beauty contest with local girls attending the ball; the beauty contest is a disaster – the girls are unattractive and clueless, and the attempt to get them on stage for voting engenders chaos in the hall; they fight the next door fire by trying to shovel snow onto it (the whole building is destroyed) – they are successful in rescuing the single occupant; all of the raffle prizes lined up for display on a table are stolen by people attending the ball – an obvious commentary on the prevalence of stealing in this particular Communist workers' paradise. The parallel between the Entertainment Committee and the Politburo of Czechoslovakia's Communist Party is obvious; it is apparent that the filmmakers do not fear repression and arrest, since the country's rulers are presented as incompetent objects of ridicule rather than something to be afraid of. At one point, one of the Committee members shouts that he doesn't care about honesty, but only about the reputation of the Firemen's League (i.e., the Politburo). Film makes the viewer a bit uneasy, since it seems to have contempt for the provincials who act in the film: Czechs seem clueless, overweight, slow to understand, and impossibly provincial – the beauty contest, for example, seems a boring parody of a real version that you might see in Hollywood or Cannes; the film does not have an altogether affectionate view of its subjects. Film builds momentum after a hesitant beginning; a frequent source of chuckles; but it would be more engaging for the audience with principal characters and a real plot line. Academy Award for Best Foreign Film. (2009)

**The Firm** 1993 Sidney Pollack 1.5 Tom Cruise annoying, clueless, vapid as newly recruited associate in a Memphis firm, where everything is not quite right (his hair however is outstanding); Jeanne Tripplehorn semi-competent, pretty, but superficial as Cruise's unhappy wife; Gene Hackman as the only member of the Firm with a conscience – but he still can't pull it off; Hal Holbrook in virtual cameo role as seemingly avuncular, but actually disquieting senior partner of the Firm; Wilford Brimley in uncharacteristic role as the heavy – the Firm's ruthless chief of security; Ed Harris wasting his talent as FBI agent that yells very loud when he loses his temper; Holly Hunter skinny, meth-seeming, chain-

smoking as young woman whose romantic fate we are supposed to care about; David Strathairn as Cruise's brother, who gets sprung from prison because of Cruise's steely dedication and domination over Harris; Gary Busey as motor-mouthed private investigator – the most entertaining character in the film, who unfortunately is killed off after a few minutes of screen time. Overly long, poorly acted, poorly directed adaptation of the Grisham potboiler – textbook example of Hollywood ruining a thriller with a pretty good plot (interesting premise, echoes of the 'Stepford Wives', lots of twists and turns, etc.). With the partial exception of Hackman, characters are superficial and poorly drawn, this from a talented cast. One must ask the question whether a thriller with a glamorous, immature, self-conscious actor like Tom Cruise playing the energetic, dedicated underdog has any chance of success. The film starts well with the recruiting of Cruise by the Firm (they must have something up their sleeves to be offering him a \$100,000 starting salary), but it soon degenerates into inanity: presumably to pump up suspense, the film is intercut into small gobbets that kill off any plot consistency or character development; it has too many subplots so that often the viewer does not understand where the action is taking place or what the relation of the subplot is to the main one; the ability of the neophyte Cruise to outfox and dominate some supposedly clever antagonists like Holbrook and Harris strains credibility to the limit (the most egregious being Cruise's "plan" to copy the Firm's files and give them to the FBI in order to convict the lawyers of overbilling their clients, instead of promoting prosecution for cooperation with Chicago mafia bosses and assisting in the murder of several people); the decision of Tripplehorn to go to the Caymans to pretend an affair with Hackman is confusing; one could go on indefinitely. Very surprising that Pollack allowed himself to be associated with this mess. Resembles a poorly constructed TV film. (2014)

**First a Girl** 1935 Victor Savile (Britain) 2.5 Jessie Matthews as London seamstress aspiring to go into show business; Sonnie Hale as wannaba Shakespearean actor that pays the bills by performing female impersonation; Anna Lee resembling Ginger Rogers as glamorous, cynical, rich Russian princess; Griffith Jones as elegant fiancé of Anna Lee – he falls for Matthews. Based on a German comedy, the film is a typical 30s British musical with mostly derivative, unmemorable music composed by Bretton Byrd; enjoyment of the film depends generally on one's appreciation of female impersonation (not this viewer'. Narrative is romantic comedy enlivened, one supposes, by cross-dressing. Desperate for income, Matthews teams up with Hale, posing as a man performing female impersonation. They become successful with performances in Paris and Nice. The situation is complicated by encountering Anna Lee and Jones; the romantic comedy ends with Matthews coupling with Jones (her relationship with Hale had always been platonic despite their bedroom-sharing arrangement) and – rather improbably – Anna Lee pairing off with Hale. Matthews, cute with a nice body but a receding chin, has a rather reedy voice but performs convincingly as a dancer and a rom com lead; her charm is based on her femininity – not for a moment does she look like a man. Sonnie Hale – effeminate with bad teeth – seems born to be a cross-dresser. Much of the comedy is based on misunderstandings and awkwardness arising from the cross-dressing – smoking a cigar, slapping on the back, knocking down a brandy, having to sleep in a bedroom with two other men, one of whom doesn't know her gender; Matthews' behavior is always extremely proper by British cinema standards. The musical numbers seem to reflect the reigning Hollywood style – corny ballads sung by Matthews ("Everything's a rhythm in my heart", "Close your eyes and visualize"), rather short and stilted Busby Berkeley-style chorus numbers, dance numbers that remind the viewer of Astaire-Rogers films – tap duos, a ballet number danced by Matthews (not bad). The film ends with the true impersonator – Hale – reprising "Rhythm" with supposedly hilarious pratfalls that have the audience screaming with approval. Competent 30s-style British musical, but lack of memorable music (compare Irving Berlin and the Gershwins) and of star performers makes the film sometimes hard to stick to. (2015)

**Fish Tank** 2009 Andrea Arnold (Britain) 2.5 Katie Jarvis as Mia, vulnerable, lost, aimless, emotionally confused, beer-swilling, potty-mouthed teenager living in a depressing British public housing project in Essex; Kierston Wareing as her sexy, carousing, (probably) alcoholic, and ultimately vicious mother, who is carrying on in her apartment with...; Michael Fassbender as Mom's good-looking but superficial boyfriend, Connor, who works as a security guard and has his eye on Mia. Good example of British miserabilism – depressing social-economic surroundings, divided family with no father present, a miserable main character without direction, whose only solution is the geographical fix. Mia is hostile to



everyone – no good relationships with other girls, trades insulting epithets with her sister (the latter does show regret when Mia decides to leave in the end), hostile relationship with her slutty, alcoholic mother, who even tells Mia to fuck off and get on with it when she decides to leave. Not much happens in the film: long stretches showing Mia's alienation and her affection for hip-hop music; the growing attraction between her and opportunist Fassbender results in quickie sex on the couch while Mom upstairs sleeps off her inebriation. In another long sequence Mia finds out that her man is married and has a daughter, for whom he has a lot of affection; overcome with jealousy, Mia kidnaps the little girl and leads her on a long-winded chase across the marshes; she almost drowns her, but relents at the last minute and takes her back to her family. No remaining hope at home – she rejects becoming a go-go dancer, and her favorite horse in the neighborhood (a symbol of beauty and strength to her) has died. She then packs her bags and bugs off to Wales with her nice boyfriend (Harry Treadway is her own age), much to the satisfaction of her mother. The film is consistently depressing (no humor allowed), slow-moving with the wobbly, jerking handheld camera following Mia around in her baggy sweatpants for long periods as she walks or runs outdoors or practices her hip-hop moves in her room. Jarvis does a good job generating some sympathy for the poor child, but the film doesn't have enough pathos to compensate for its lack of entertainment value. This viewer is happy that he is not a member of the British underclass. (2015)

**A Fistful of Dollars** 1966 Sergio Leone (Italy) 3.0 Clint Eastwood. The first of the spaghetti westerns by Leone and the first collaboration with Ennio Morricone. Based on 'Yojimbo' by Kurosawa (1962?). Main interest is the quirky, colorful score by Morricone, used by Leone throughout as characterization (the downward figure in the flute, e.g.). Pretty good western, extremely violent (how many dead bodies?). No serious themes. Eastwood is guy with decent instincts, but he kills absolutely without compunction. Loner who belongs to no one, and rides out of town by self at end of movie. Women absolutely peripheral to movie. Plot has several surprises; you never quite know what is going on inside the head of Joe. Eastwood as icon – taciturn, wry, cool stare, poncho, small cigar burning in mouth. Movie very poorly dubbed! Film score by Morricone, however, is piquant.

**Five Easy Pieces** 1970 Bob Rafelson 3.0 Jack Nicholson fairly restrained in early role as angry oil field worker alienated from his highbrow musician family; Karen Black gum-cracking working-class country girl that clings to Nicholson for dear life; Susan Anspach has a brief fling with Nicholson as fiancée of one of the family scions; Sally Struthers very plump as good time girl partying with Nicholson and his friend in the first part of the film. Rather plodding and predictable family drama that has oil field worker Nicholson persuaded to return to the Pacific Northwest to spend some last-days time with his father paralyzed by a stroke. The film is brightened by good performances (one might prefer that Nicholson appear a little less like himself), by vivid locales from dusty agricultural fields of Bakersfield to the mist-shrouded mountains and fjords of Puget Sound, and by pungent comic sequences, including Nicholson playing a classical piece on a piano in the back of an agricultural truck, the motor-mouth complaints of Helen in Nicholson's car and Nicholson's famous sarcastic confrontation with a diner waitress on the way to his father's house. The first, working-class part of the film is vivid and engaging, but as soon as we find out that Nicholson is a frustrated concert pianist it becomes existentialist and predictable. The film sometimes encourages our contempt for the pretensions of middle-class musicians, as when Nicholson repeatedly defeats Anspach's fiancé in three games of table tennis, or when Anspach swoons over the feeling that Nicholson supposedly puts into his impromptu performance of an easy Chopin prelude, only to have Nicholson tell her that he had chosen the easiest piece he had learned when he was eight and that he experienced no emotion while playing it; or when a snippy, cynical intellectual friend of the family carries on pompously and insensitively in front of the family. On the other hand, the script plays Black as the village idiot when she arrives at the family manse, as she embarrasses Nicholson with her gaucheries, references to stupid TV shows, etc. The script wants us to believe that the hopelessly divided and alienated Nicholson might experience some redemption in his pursuit of romance with Anspach, but seeing his cynical unhappiness, Anspach puts a stop to it and continues her engagement to her fatuous fiancé. Ending is nihilistic: Nicholson and Black leave his family, and while she goes to the café to get a cup of coffee, he hitches a ride with a trucker, who pulls away from the gas station (belching clouds of black smoke) with Black in a long shot searches helplessly for her departed boyfriend. One

supposes he is returning to his life as a drifter, only now it is worse since he has abandoned the one faithful friend he had. (2014)

**Five Fingers** 1952 Joseph Mankiewicz (20cFox) 4.0 James Mason in one of his quintessential roles as sophisticated and arrogant valet – code name “Cicero” – working in the British Embassy stealing secrets for the Germans during World War II; Danielle Darrieux as beautiful and elegant impoverished Polish countess, who cooperates (apparently) with Mason in his schemes; Michael Rennie as no-nonsense British investigator that comes to Ankara when word of the documents leaks gets out; Oskar Karlweis as the fatuous German bureaucrat serving as Mason’s contact with the German government. Gripping spy thriller set in Turkey during World War II. The film is directed in neutral Mankiewicz fashion, but it builds a lot of suspense about the fate of Mason and it features an excellent script focusing on the hidden struggle between Mason and Darrieux for power and status. Much of the film is quite matter-of-fact – extended sequences of Mason performing necessary tasks in the embassy (opening the safe, retrieving the documents, looking at them to see if they have any value, walking over to a table, replacing the lamp bulb with a brighter one, pulling over a chair and placing the documents on it, pulling a camera out of his pocket and photographing the documents, and then going through the reverse sequence to put the documents back in the safe). The narrative however picks up the pace at the end, when the information leak is discovered by British counter-intelligence: Rennie racks up the pressure on the Germans and Mason, Mason has to escape in the neutral streets of the Turkish capital; and even when the Germans find out about the date and place of D-Day, they don’t act on it, since they are convinced that Cicero is a British agent feeding them false information (historically this is apparently true). Action then shifts to the streets of Ankara and Istanbul, where Mason plays cat and mouse with British and German goons until much to Rennie’s frustration he escapes on a ship bound for Rio de Janeiro. (Most of the film is filmed in 20c Fox studios, but the outdoor scenes are filmed on location with principals being replaced by doubles.) The strongest points of the film are the acting of the suave, arrogant Mason and the beautiful but calculating Darrieux, their dialogue, and the evolution of their fundamentally competitive relationship. In a memorable scene in Darrieux’s shabby Ankara apartment, a self-confident Mason enlists Darrieux to help him store his money (he gives it all to her for safe-keeping) and to prepare their escape to a life of upper-class pleasure in Brazil. Although Darrieux appears to go along with him, the viewer detects through her sense of class superiority and her emotional coolness that she may have something else in mind. In fact, she is offended by Mason’s ambition to dominate her in the proposed marriage, and when she absconds alone to Switzerland with all of the German money, Mason is shocked and humiliated. He scrapes up another 100,000 pounds to support his solitary lifestyle in Brazil, but once settled in Rio the Brazilian authorities discover that his banknotes are counterfeit (See the recent German film ‘Die Fälscher’). The film ends with Mason laughing hysterically when he finds out that the counterfeit money has also turned up in Switzerland – his present discomfiture is mitigated by his Schadenfreude that the condescending countess will be suffering even more than he! Memorable film: fine actors, interesting exotic locations, mature adult characters, and fine dialogue to match them. (2014)

**The Five-Year Engagement** 2012 Nicholas Stoller 3.0 Jason Segel (co-write) as pudgy, bluff, laid-back sous-chef in San Francisco; Emily Blunt, toothy, charming Psychology graduate student who gets Segel to accompany her to Ann Arbor, Michigan (presented as a desolate cultural Sahara) when she is offered a post-doctoral fellowship; Chris Pratt as Segel’s close friend, the light-hearted guy with the killer smile; Allison Brie (‘Mad Men’) comic and lively with an equally infectious smile as Blunt’s sister; Rhys Ifans as show-off, ingratiating U Michigan professor that stand in the way of Blunt’s happiness with Segel; Mindy Kaling (‘The Office’), Randall Park, Kevin Hurt amusing as other students of Ifan; Chris Parnell (‘30 Rock’) very amusing as hyper-domesticated house-husband in Michigan. Light-hearted, observant, engaging romantic comedy that instead of tracking the target relationship from meeting to the decision to marry, instead focuses on the rocky road from the decision to the final, belated tying-of-the-knot five years later. The obstacle an earlier consummation is the confluence of Blunt’s professional ambition to move ahead in her academic career and Segel’s laid back willingness to sacrifice his interests for the woman he loves. But never fear – we know from the beginning that they are destined for one another (a combination of the requirements of the genre and the good chemistry between them), and after

a brief separation when Segel returns to San Francisco and suffers through an acrobatically sexual relationship with xy, he reunites with Blunt and start their “happily ever after” with a cutesy wedding celebration that includes a choice of officiants (priest, rabbi, justice of the peace, etc.). No doubt that the four principals are cute and charming, forever commanding the approval and attention of the audience with the assistance of a soundtrack of popular songs emphasizing Van Morrison. The screenplay makes a stab at contemporary relationship issues, such as what happens when the guy puts his career on indefinite hold to follow his fiancée into the snowy wilds of the Great Lakes; this romantic comedy dispatches the problem efficiently with Blunt returning to the West Coast to marry and support hubby, who has opened his own taco truck after working as second fiddle to other chefs throughout the film; nary a hint of the difficulties that might arise after the wedding glow has worn off. Supporting players provide much merriment in several scenes: the post-doc kids conducting Psychology experiments about whether their subjects would eat stale doughnuts or wait for the new, fresh ones several hours later, Parnell in his absurd self-knitted sweaters turning house-husband Segel into a slovenly hunter with untended facial hair that serves his table guests venison everything and bee honey juice (?), the classic feminine distribe about elderly lovers delivered by Segel’s other girlfriend when he breaks up with her, Segel’s meeting his parents near the end of the film whereupon they tell him to give up his bimbo who “doesn’t even know who the Beatles are” and to marry Blunt, the hilarious interchange between Blunt and Brie in which they disguise the adult nature of their conversation by imitating the inflections of the Cookie Monster and Elmo. Heart-warming, entertaining, and occasionally insightful film about contemporary young adults.

**Flags of Our Fathers** 2006 Clint Eastwood 3.5 Ryan Philippe as the sensitive, quiet, and rather introverted Doc Bradley, the Navy corpsmen (medic) with the soldiers, who returns after the war to be a successful undertaker; Jesse Bradford as the extroverted, handsome and very youthful looking Marine, who marries, then divorces, his sweetheart, and spends the rest of his life as a janitor; Adam Beach as conflicted Indian victim of racist remarks and actions, becomes an alcoholic and dies early of “exposure” in a horse corral. Wonderfully sensitive, sad, and moving film about the cost of war. Film begins quietly as we are introduced rather haphazardly to the main characters, but it comes back to the main story so that we become attached to them. Film has three focuses: a rather thin focus on Doc’s relationship with his father, which (as in the book upon which the film is based) the narrative link of the film; the three survivors of the famous flag raising who are being trotted around the country to rally flagging war enthusiasm and sell enough war bonds (they were successful -- \$36 billion); and then their reminiscences of the operations on Iwo Jima. The film does not give a linear treatment of the battle but dips back to the battle in bits and pieces according to the reminiscences and memories of the survivors (it does give a clear account of the famous flagpole raising sequence). The battle sequences are grizzly and unsparing: mangled bodies – mostly Americans but also Japanese – and a gripping sense of how bullets and shells cut your life off haphazardly and without warning – it makes little sense why one person survives and not another; battle scenes filmed in Iceland in barren, craggy locations with little color in the images. The film seems to have some hostility against the home front – the way the men are exploited to raise money for the government; the most egregious tactic was the construction of a papier maché model of Suribachi in Soldier Field for a war bond rally (but after all the politicians weren’t using them for their political purposes, but to advance and finish off the war effort – unlike Bush!). Film includes a moving postscript about the postwar lives of the three survivors – the two sad lives, and the story of “Doc”, who would never talk about what happened to his son (who wrote the book upon which the film was based). What resonates is the suffering and arbitrary deaths of the soldiers, which are particularly pathetic because of the fresh youth and good looks of all the actors. Eastwood strikes just the right tone between sentimentality and distance – sensitively reserved. I have a feeling the movie might have been improved by removing the Doc and his Dad flashback story, and cutting some scenes. The film stands out with its honest portrayal of the price the soldiers pay for war. (2007)

**Flame and Citron** 2008 Ole Christian Madsen (Denmark) 4.0 Thure Lindhardt handsome, charismatic and very Nordic with long red hair as Flame, ruthless Danish resistance assassin who develops unexpected qualms about his job; Mads Mikkelsen dark-haired, scruffy with crumpled fedora hat as Citron, who is family man with initial reservations about assassinations; Stine Stengard as

Resistance courier who may have ties with both sides; Peter Mygind as Winther, wealthy Resistance leader who may or may not be a double agent for the Germans; Christian Berkel as the sometimes sympathetic Gestapo chief in Denmark. Unsentimental, hard-hitting, action-packed film about Danish Resistance assassins during the German occupation of Denmark, 1940-45; Flame and Citron had been active in the Finnish War against the Russians, and they naturally fall into a violent Resistance role against the Germans, even toward the beginning when the Germans are treating the Danes nicely and many Danes still have cordial relationships with the occupiers. Flame and Citron work for Winther, who presents himself as working for the British and sends them off on missions to assassinate Danish collaborators; at first he wants them to leave the Germans alone. The killings are done at close range and with great brutality – shots through the head that leave brains and blood all over the walls and furniture behind the victim; one wonders why the victims don't catch on and take measures to protect themselves. The film also observes their romantic lives. Citron is married with a child, but he is a completely absent father, although fond of his daughter; Flame is a loner, who however falls in love with Stengard, which appears to get him into trouble because of her ambiguous loyalties. The two men's personalities are distinct: Flame begins a ruthless killer assassinating collaborators without compunction (although one time he covers a female victim's eyes before he shoots her in the head), but then he develops hesitations that lead him inexplicably to spare two important German targets, Gilbert and Hoffmann; Citron is Flame's driver and at first cannot pull the trigger, but with great hesitation and emotion he learns to do so. In the final shootout in the Charlotten Palace he pulls an arsenal out of a chest at the foot of his bed and takes down at least a dozen German soldiers before he confronts the remaining soldiers and then raises his pistol arm to invite execution. At the end Flame poisons himself rather than be captured by the Germans. The political situation among the Resisters is extremely confusing: one never knows which information is reliable, who somebody is working for – the British, the Americans, the Communists, the Germans (double agents)? The prime example is Winther, whose behavior is very suspicious, but the narrative never decides whether he is a German agent. The filming is exquisite: deep, dark, rich, shadowed colors set picturesquely in the Danish countryside; intense, eloquent close-ups of the principals. The film is expertly paced and edited to provide maximum suspense and absorbing, exciting action. A very unsentimental look at the business of resistance – lots of blood, dirty work, necessary ignoring of morality, never sure whether you are working for the right people and killing the right villains, whether the people you work with or love are loyal to you or will betray you. A film to remember. (2011)

**The Flame of New Orleans** 1941 René Clair 3.0 Marlene Dietrich extremely glamorous, competent comedienne but deprived of her mysterious hauteur, Bruce Cabot callow and uninteresting (although with his wise guy, macho toothy grin recalling a bargain basement Clark Gable) as her blue collar suiter, Roland Young English and humorous as the cluelessly fey rich banker courting Dietrich, Theresa Harris beautiful and competent as ever as Dietrich's resourceful maid and confidante, Andy Devine annoying as one of Cabot's simple slapsticky sailors, Anne Revere as forbidding cousin of Young, Laura Hope Crews her usual dotty old aunt who is hard of hearing, Franklin Pangborn as man about town, Mischa Auer pretty hilarious as womanizing adventurer from St. Petersburg. Intermittently amusing romantic comedy by René Clair in his American career. His use of Dietrich is generally dull – what could the master of wit and sparkle do with the essentially static icon of von Sternberg? And in any case the romantic lead – Cabot – is flat and boring. Clair however shines through fairly often. The motif of the wedding dress floating in the Mississippi at the beginning, and then flashing back all the way through the story to have it thrown out of the honeymoon barge at the end; another motif of fainting – begins with Dietrich fainting in the opera performance (wonderful movie camera and editing in the beginning scene while a Donizetti duet is sung on stage) to draw the attention of banker Young; in the party scene she is identified by her tendency to faint (after it is predicted, she faints at the end of the scene), and to save herself from marrying Young, she faints midway through her wedding then to be whisked to romantic bliss by the sailors attending the ceremony. The most sparkling moment is the party scene in the middle (3606-4430) beginning with Auer's arrival as Zolotov with Pangborn at the party (Auer eyeing all the girls), Dietrich singing the mock folk song "Blush of May" to the guests, the camera following the travel of the rumor about Dietrich from whisper to whisper until it reaches the ear of the distraught Young, Auer trying to wriggle out of Young's challenge to a duel (it is against his religion),

then Auer's escape after a business with the wrong top hat. The escalating complications toward the end are unconvincing (Dietrich disguising herself as a sort of twin sister slut). The final wedding scene is quite amusing as we return to the fainting and the floating wedding dress motifs. Beautifully produced; has potential as a masterpiece, but doesn't make it over the top. (2006)

**The Flat** 2011 Arnon Goldfinger (Israel) 3.0 Flat, slow-moving, but interesting, and ultimately moving documentary about memory and denial in German and Israeli families. While cleaning out his grandmother's apartment in Tel Aviv after her death, Arnon in the company of his mother Hannah discovers that his grandparents, the Tuchlers, who were from Germany, had been friends with a pro-Zionist German member of the SS, the von Mildensteins, and that although the grandparents were safely emigrated to Palestine before the war, the grandmother's mother had refused to leave Germany and had been deported from Berlin in 1942 and murdered by the Nazis. Despite this knowledge, the Tuchlers remained friends with the von Mildensteins after the war, traveling many times to Germany to maintain the connection with their homeland and their friends. The third-generation Arnon is a persistent investigator, refusing to let go of the story and somehow persuading the daughter of von Mildenstein in Germany to talk with him openly on camera about her parent's relationship with his parents. By far the most interesting aspect of the film is the refusal of the second-generation individuals in both families – the Israeli Hanna Tuchler and the German Edda Milz von Mildenstein – to acknowledge the past of their families, and to show a desire to get to the bottom of it. When Arnon in the beginning of the film speaks to his mother about her parents, she seems lost and non-responsive – she says with her characteristic pout that she never talked to her parents about their past, she doesn't remember anything, there was no reason for her to bring it up since her parents didn't want to, and even now she shows little interest in pursuing the matter. In the last part of the film she accompanies her son to Germany, but even in the end she shows no emotional reaction to what Arnon found out about her parents, and when he tries to elicit a response from her, she remains speechless. Something similar goes for Edda van Mildenstein (who speaks very good English since she and her husband had lived many years in England). With the vaguest shrugs and circumlocutions she denies on camera that her husband was active in the Nazi Party after about 1936, and even when Arnon confronts her with documentary evidence proving the contrary, she tries to get off the hook beating around the bush. The film ends with a downpour in a Berlin cemetery where Arnon and Hannah are looking for the grave of a relative – which they don't find, and a pan through the empty apartment in Tel Aviv, where Arnon is carrying off the portraits of his grandparents: the passage of time appears to make the past irrelevant. The film has many slow moments that allow attention to wander, but ultimately the issues are emotional and gripping. One wonders how Goldfinger managed to get all those absent-minded people to talk on camera and even more important, remain tellingly silent when faced with difficult questions. (2012)

**Flesh and the Devil** 1927 Clarence Brown 3.0 Greta Garbo in her breakout role as sincere, heartfelt *femme fatale*, John Gilbert as her lover, Lora Lee Hanson as Gilbert's childhood bosom buddy who marries Greta instead of Gilbert leading to enormous tension. Rather long silent romantic melodrama about extremely loyal and affectionate childhood friends – Gilbert and Larson – who have the misfortune of falling in love with the same woman. Takes place in upper class circles sometime between 1900 and 1930 in Bavaria, thus fitting the 1920s romantic cliché of steamy stories situated in Europe to make them more acceptable to American audiences. All the romantic leads are dashing and handsome/beautiful. The black and white film is beautifully restored with only a few bad sections; the original symphonic score (composed for TCM by a young composer) is memorable and effective in the tradition of great 30s and 40s Hollywood film scores. Film is directed in successful commercial fashion with imaginative decors (often the beneficiaries of special effects), lingering romantic close-ups, somewhat soft focus shots of the principals, melodramatic scenes (e.g., of duels when the duelists disappear beyond the sides of the frame, smoke billows, and we don't know who was killed until later) and sentimental. Most of the scenes with Garbo are memorable: her smoldering looks at Gilbert from the carriage after her arrival at the train station, their tryst in the heavily shadowed garden, where their faces are lit by Gilbert's match (no, she doesn't really want a cigarette) and she takes most of the initiative in the passionate kiss. Characterization of deep male friendship between Gilbert and Larson is sentimental and rather touching;

it is the energy that drives the story to the end – both men are racked by guilt and unhappiness because they are betraying one another with Garbo. Garbo is young-looking and very beautiful in her wispy way – many close-ups of her looking at us with her smoldering eyes from beneath her wrap-around 20s hat. She is a slave to love – there is no way she can give up Gilbert even though her marriage to Larson and her sympathy for him gives her every reason to do so; but then she also is racked by guilt at her betrayal of one of the men she loves. Film has moral foundation – the pastor who warns Gilbert to give up Garbo, and then thunders at them from the Lutheran pulpit (quoting the Old Testament's condemnation of David) for their immorality. Film ends tragically with the two men meeting for a duel on the Île de l'Amitié, Garbo falling to her death through the melting ice while rushing to prevent them from fighting, and the men being reprieved by a mysterious impulse they felt simultaneously (apparently the voice of God as previously expressed through the pastor). (An alternative ending that has Garbo saved from drowning at the last minute by the men was never used.) Although film has genuine tragic feeling at the end, overall impact is a romantic vehicle for the two great MGM stars. (2005)

**La Fleur du Mal** 2003 Claude Chabrol (France) 3.0 Suzanne Flon as Tante Line, Nathalie Baye as Anne, Melanie Doutey as Michelle, Benoit Magimel, Bernard Le Coq. Latter day Chabrol film again skewering the haute bourgeoisie for its pretensions (including Le Coq's sneering at American culture), hypocrisies, hiding dark secrets, capability for cruelty. About family that has been intermarrying for six generations! whose grandfather was a Jew-hater collaborator during Vichy regime, two of four parents died in 1981, and the two remaining spouses (Le Coq and Baye) then married one another. Now the two step siblings (really cousins?) love one another, and get it on at the vacation house with full approval of practically everyone. Le Coq is true bourgeois creep hated by practically everyone in the family; he resents Anne's political ambitions (constant sottovoce insults), but who chases after available single women while his wife campaigns; when he tries to rape Michelle at end, she kills him with a lamp (!), but Line decides to take blame as revenge against him and as somehow righting the terrible wrong she committed when she killed her father (parricide!) for his connivance in the death of her brother Francois. The death and the guilt of Michele is previewed in first steadycammed sequence of camera entering the house and gliding up the stairs (later replicated by Line and Michele painfully dragging Gerard's body up the stairs) and discovering the body. Chabrol truly despises the French bourgeoisie, since he can't seem to stop making movies about their faults! Film script slowly reveals the awful past of the family through family revelations, especially Tante Line, who has spontaneous flashbacks (making clear that she suffers from guilt). Style rather minimalist – logical and spare development of present and past background – but cinematography is beautiful color, lyrical outdoor shots (again I think in Bretagne and near the ocean) and interior shots of perfectly appointed small chateau. Cameos of Anne visiting disgruntled public housing denizens are very amusing – a satire on electoral politics on either side of the Atlantic. Line's explanation of why she wants to take blame for Gerard's mother is quite vague.... (2008)

**Flight** 2012 Robert Zemeckis 3.0 Denzel Washington looking middle aged as an arrogant airline pilot with a serious drinking problem; John Goodman in percussive role as outrageous, fast-talking, foul-mouthed druggie brother (?) of Washington; Nadine Velazquez with delicious body strutting in front of the camera in film's first scene -- she is killed in the airliner crash; Kelly Reilly as drug-addicted porno actress who eventually gets clean and has a good influence on Washington; Brian Geraghty as straight-arrow, Bible-thumping co-pilot initially shocked at Washington's condition when he first enters the cockpit; Don Cheadle as efficient, no-nonsense lawyer, who labors to get Washington off the hook despite a damning toxicology report. Often gripping, overlong, uneven, but eventually uplifting film about an airline pilot that flies under the influence and yet by a daring flight maneuver manages to save the plane (and 96 passengers) from sure destruction (it is doubtful however that inverting a commercial airliner would take it out of the dive); the rest of the film is devoted mostly to the process Washington must go through to recognize that he needs help for his constant binge drinking. Suspense and tension are added through the NTSB's investigation of his potential criminal culpability for the death of six people; he is eventually found guilty, and the film ends with him in prison explaining to fellow inmates the transformation he has experienced. The initial scenes inside the plane are gripping, to say the least, in their portrayal of the experience of being in a plane on its way to destruction -- the extreme

turbulence frightening the passengers, people bouncing around the plane when it enters its dive, some adhering to the ceiling when it is inverted, etc. The bulk of the film is overlong with slack acting from many of the participants, including Washington, who seems to wander through a lot of scenes clueless and mumbling; 15-20 minutes of cutting would have been of great benefit. The real drama is whether Washington will finally tire of his daily drinking, his compulsive lying, and his personal hubris to experience redemption. Will he respond to religiously grounded indications (from Reilly and Geraghty) that the crash experience includes a message from God that it is time to begin a new life. His moment of truth comes when he is asked in a NTSB hearing whether he thinks his dead girlfriend consumed some incriminating alcohol on board the plane; he hesitates, looks around the room, and after what seems like an interminable delay he cracks, exclaims that he cannot tell another lie, and admits that he consumed the alcohol and was intoxicated while piloting the plane. The film ends in uplifting fashion with Washington coming clean and beginning a reconciliation with his ex-wife and son; his new life is about to begin. (2013)

**Flirting** 1991 John Duigan (Australia) 3.0 Noah Taylor as Danny, Thandie Newton as Uganda girl attending the school across the lake, Nicole Kidman as Nicola, the seemingly priggish snobby girl who finally however expresses an interest in sex. Coming of age comedy about life in a boy's prep school in rural Australia and the girl's boarding school across the lake. Focuses on the exploits of Danny, a nonconformist who reads Sartre and Camus (and Marx in the film's postscript), is the butt of a lot of jokes by cruel classmates (this is high school, after all), and then develops a searching, eventually sexual relationship with the also non-conformist, half African girl played by the beautiful Newton. Fairly standard adventures -- caning by the sadistic teacher (Jeff Truman), Danny's challenging the school jock to a boxing match and getting the shit kicked out of him, a debate between the two schools that unexpectedly leads to bonding between the two principals because of their nonconformist presentations, Danny rowing across the lake to visit Thandie, the two of them running away to a motel, having sex and then being caught and humiliated by the teacher authorities. Fair amount of emphasis on sexual discovery -- Danny's ejaculation with his clothes on, the two in bed, etc. Tone is the kids are wiser than their elders give them credit for -- they are searching, learning in the process, and growing up. Seems to be focused on the insular, backward nature of Australian society -- the sexual revolution has come (it seems about 20 years after it came to the USA) and the adults better recognize it; also the insularity and white snobbishness of Australia is challenged by the African student, and the kids are supposed to have learned something by the tragedy of Thandie's father far from the shores of Australia. Film grates at times because of the know-it-all tone of Danny's statements and of Thandie's attitude.

**Flirting with Disaster** 1996 David O. Russell 3.5 Ben Stiller as neurotic adopted New Yorker, who sets out cross-country to find his birth parents; Patricia Arquette as his cute, low-key wife beginning to lose patience with her conflicted, distracted husband; Tea Leoni very effective as the neurotic, although sexy adoption worker who accompanies the couple in their quest for Stiller's parents; Mary Tyler Moore very funny as the shrill adoptive mother of Stiller; George Segal as her husband trying in vain to calm her down; Richard Jenkins hilarious as federal officer who bites off more than he can chew when he interrogates Stiller for "destroying a U.S. post office"; Josh Brolin in early role as Jenkins partner -- his bluntness about sexual matters provides much of the film's humor (he tells Arquette why her nursing technique gives her nipple irritation); Lily Tomlin and Alan Alda as absolutely kooky birth parents of Stiller -- they are still using LSD (they have a hidden basement to store it); Celia Weston as expansive, Southern-talking woman in San Diego that Stiller thinks at first is his mother. Hilarious latter-day screwball comedy featuring over-the-top weirdo performances from a cast of stars. Stiller and Arquette are not able to name their newborn son because of Stiller's anxiety about his true identity; they set off with Leoni to find his mother; they pass through San Diego, Michigan, and finally to New Mexico, which they visit with Jenkins and Brolin in tow (?); after more aimless (and very funny) anarchy at the Schlichting's home (Alda and Tomlin; Moore calls them the "Shitheads"), the movie ends suddenly with a group picture of the players left after Alda and Tomlin have fled to Mexico to avoid again going to prison; Stiller has found -- and lost -- his (crazy) birth parents, and he somewhat reluctantly reconnects to his adoptive parents and names his son "Garcia". The film appears inspired by the crazy, anarchic

screwball comedies of the 1930s, although here there is no mocking of the ways of the rich. All the characters with the exception of the steady Arquette are humorously erratic and unstable and take turns engendering chaos on the set. Stiller is the straight, vulnerable guy constantly beset with problems and surprises; Mary Tyler Moore flashes her breasts to the camera to demonstrate to Arquette the importance of wearing a support bra; Leoni stands out as the neurotic, needy woman going through a divorce, who wants to throw herself into an affair with Stiller; hard to equal the Jenkins-Brolin duo – they portray a fussy gay couple, they fight in a Michigan restaurant about whether they are ready to adopt a baby, Brolin tells Arquette that he has a curved penis and that he is against penetration in sex, Jenkins is hilarious when his buttoned-up policeman’s persona is punctured by a heavy dose of LSD; a very amusing sequence in Michigan where the film satirizes the price one has to pay for staying in a bed and breakfast (boredom and fussy old ladies). Dialogue is scintillatingly funny. Narrative and theme are pretty irrelevant in this zany, humor-driven romp.

**Florence Foster Jenkins** 2016 Stephen Frears (Britain) 3.0 Entertaining, frequently hilarious, sweet-hearted treatment (celebration?) of the last year of Florence Foster Jenkins life in New York (actually filmed in Liverpool). Meryl Streep in another excellent performance portraying the oblivious tone-deaf New York diva; Hugh Grant as always smooth, good-humored and charming as Jenkins’ supposed husband and die-hard supporter, St. Clair Bayfield; Simon Helberg as Jenkins’ piano accompanist Cosmé McMoon, also good-humored, constantly embarrassed, stifling smiles and laughs at Jenkins’ off-key screeches; Rebecca Ferguson sleek and pretty as Grant’s lover; Nina Arianda hilarious as showgirl married to an older industrialist – she brings down the house with her floor-crawling merriment during one of Streep’s performances; David Haig as music critic, who writes a searing review of Jenkins’ famous 1944 Carnegie Hall performance. The film covers Jenkins’ last year from her absurdly hilarious tableaux vivants at the Verdi Club, through her decision to sing again on the stage after she hears Lily Pons sing, her painstaking preparation with McMoon and Bayfield, and the final debacle at Carnegie Hall, immediately after which she collapses from a heart attack when she learns of Haig’s hostile review in the New York Post. Streep is her usual triumphant self, singing and screeching shockingly off-key but still ingratiating herself through her love of music, kindness and honesty (she suffers from the latter stages of syphilis and gets extremely nervous before performances). Although Grant sneaks off when he can to “play golf” with Ferguson, he seems to love Jenkins; he supports her through thick and thin, smiling and ingratiating in his encouragement, distributing bribes and pointed invitations to keep the “scoffers” away from her public performances. Much of the humor is filtered through McMoon’s good-natured giggles and double-takes. Throughout the film the viewer wonders how such rotten singing can win the admiration of large numbers of people. Doesn’t the public appreciate beautiful music? The answer is that, carried away by her enthusiasm, Jenkins just doesn’t notice, especially since her syphilis may have damaged her hearing (and her good sense?). Older socialites seem to think she sings beautifully, but the scoffers and the soldiers that attend her concerts and buy her records, enjoy her ironically by laughing at her yelping and squawking (perhaps a key to understanding how classical music could have been so popular in the 1940s). Film is benignly hilarious – Streep’s wildly incompetent performance of “Der Hölle Rache” from *The Magic Flute* is not to be forgotten. (2016)

**The Fog of War** 2004 Errol Morris 4.0 A tall, fit-looking 85-year-old Robert McNamara with thin dark hair and still wearing his trademark glasses being interviewed by Errol Morris. Outstanding film documentary recording Robert McNamara’s experiences from his birth, college at Stanford, serving under Curtis LeMay in the Air Force in the Pacific in World War II, where he brought his Harvard-impacted statistical method to bear on maximizing the efficiency of the bombing raids against Japan in 1945 (he agrees with LeMay that they both would have stood trial for war crimes if the USA had lost the war), his innovations at Ford Motor Company in the 1950s where he seems to have been most proud of introducing safety features into Ford cars, and the focusing on his experiences as Defense Secretary – the Cuban missile crisis and of course his contribution to the Vietnam War. McNamara looks old, but he is fit, clear, definitive, informative, concise, sometimes eloquent as when he warns about nuclear war, sometimes emotional as when he recalls choosing the grave site in Arlington Cemetery for John Kennedy; for some reason Morris films him up close a lot revealing his rather rickety lower



bridgework. He is bent on drawing the lessons from his long experience, which are presented to the viewer as 11 lessons, about four of which are memorable and useful. The film begins with a harrowing account of the Cuban Missile Crisis: McNamara asserts that we missed nuclear annihilation through a combination of luck (American leaders had only the vaguest notions of what was happening in Cuba) and “empathy with the enemy”, i.e. knowing how to deal with the insecure Khrushchev; he emphasizes on several occasions that during the Cold War and unlike the past, generals could not afford to make mistakes since it could easily have led to complete destruction of the developed countries of the world. He is reticent about his responsibility for the Vietnam War, indicating that he was the loyal subordinate serving a president elected by the people of the USA. He and Kennedy essentially decided in 1963 to withdraw most of the American military advisers from South Vietnam, but the accession of Johnson changed that. The attack against the USS Maddox in August 1964 was probably genuine. On several occasions he proposed to Johnson – sometimes formally in writing – that the USA wind down the war or begin a withdrawal; Johnson always refused, saying that no further countries in Southeast Asia would fall to the Communists; his relationship with Johnson gradually worsened until he was fired (he thinks) in early 1968. The style of the documentary is riveting: as usual, there is no narrator; the only voice aside from McNamara’s is Morris’ callow one occasionally asking a question; when McNamara is recalling a particular period, Morris adds fabulous archive footage, one of the more memorable shots being of Curtis LeMay standing before a map in 1945; Philip Glass’ score, sounding like virtually any other he has written, adds urgency and a sense of nervousness. An enlightening documentary that draws the viewer into its heart.

**Food, Inc.** 2008 Robert Kenner 3.0 Well-known muckraking documentary on the "industrial food system" now gaining increasing currency in the USA. Essentially the day of the small and medium independent farmer is over, and ever since MacDonaldis put on the screws for lower costs (1960s? when they firerd their carhops), big-scale efficiency has been the name of the game. The program cites some convincing statistics to indicate concentration, and then interviews a number of individuals to prove its point. The woman whose sons was killed by salmonella poisoning testifies on her grief (heart-wrenching) and recounts how her efforts to have Congress pass a law giving the FDA the power to shut down offending businesses have been blocked by lobbyists. Individual meat growers are interviewed to show how the major meat packers force them to follow their efficiencies; if they don't, they are dropped, harassed, and they often are run out of business; since cattle waiting to be slaughtered stand for days on end in their own feces and urine, one wonders about the impact on the health of the consumer; incidentally, the author throws in several sequences in which animals to be slaughtered are mistreated cruelly. Soy bean growers tell us how the success that Monsanto had in patenting their modified gene (due perhaps to the likes of Justice Clarence Thomas; it makes their plants immune to Roundup) have forced almost all soy bean farmers in the USA to knuckle under to the company. They are no longer allowed to save seed for the following year's crop; if they do, they are sued by Monsanto, and even if Monsanto loses in court, the little guy is ruined by legal costs. Long segment on corn cultivation: since all grains in the USA are heavily subsidized by the Feds, grain merchants are able to deliver their product to food processors at exceedingly cheap prices, which in turn enables the marketing of cheap, calorie-rich foods responsible for much of the obesity and other chronic ill health in the country; one Mexican family testifies that they are forced to feed fast food to their children since it is so much cheaper than buying vegetables(carrots and vegetables are really that expensive?!). The program has a surprisingly positive attitude toward Walmart, following extensively their decision to market milk free of artificial additives and to sell organic yogurt; the Walmart spokesperson says that in doing so they are just following the wishes of their consumers. The program finishes with a praise of natural, organic foods, and pleads with the consumer to vote three times a day by eating healthy foods and giving the farmers of America the opportunity to go back to their roots and produce good food that will improve the well-being of Americans. One suspects a little bias in the presentation and choosing interviewees who agree with the author's position. Nevertheless, eye-opening and sometimes eloquent.

**A Fool There Was** 1915 Silent Frank Powell 2.5 Theda Bara, Edward Jose. The debut vamp film of Theda Bara, based on Kipling poem, “The Vampire.” Jose is wealthy lawyer destined for

even high things, when he is seduced by scheming, cunning, ruthless Vamp Bara; he goes to seed drinking himself into insensibility, abandoning all his professional duties and his family, and completely subjecting himself to his mistress; he cannot return to his former life, and finally dies. Bara is outrageously campy in her home wrecking role – dark hair (Bara was naturally blond), pale with heavy dark makeup, proud, pitiless, money hungry, mocking in her harem clothes, gold lamé and feathers, not an ounce of softness, mercy or pity in her -- the ultimate femme fatale. Seduction is constantly intercut with pictures of suffering wife who is not going to abandon her husband under any circumstances, little dramas in the sunlit home (all of Jose and Bara's scenes are very dark), and scenes of his little girl playing innocently, praying piously for the return of her Pop, etc. Climax in successive visits of wife, who is trumped and humiliated by Bara, and then of the child, who must look on in horror as her father collapses begging on the shoulders of his mistress, who remains hard and pitiless and reveling in her power over her lover and over his wife. No nudity and no sex, barely even a kiss until the end. Tone is very sentimental – comparing the corruption of Schuyler's life with the innocence, fidelity and happiness of family life, and showing the wages of sin – degradation and death; but of course we may enjoy the scandal and titillation until the end. (2005)

**Foolish Wives** 1921 Erich von Stroheim 4.0 Erich von Stroheim, Maude George, Mae Busch. Amazing early silent feature produced by Carl Laemmle; first movie to cost more than \$1 million, thanks to EVS' financial profligacy. Print is very poor, even hard to see, especially toward the end; apparently a lot of footage is missing. Wonderful atmosphere evoking Monte Carlo, the gambling, gay social life, the soldiers hanging around, etc. EVS pulls out all the punches as actor, and is usually effective and moving as the virtually conscienceless Old World crook. Very advanced film technique: EVS is an effortless visual storyteller with interesting and effective close-ups, expressive editing; titles are both dialogue, and poetic interludes evoking the values and the life of the place. Theme is meeting of morally corrupt old Europe, especially the corrupt Russian aristocracy, and the naïve and often clueless Americans, who are more or less sitting ducks. EVS obviously has no affection for the old upper classes, who stoop to corrupt practices (promiscuous seduction, escroquerie, etc.) in order to survive. Reminds you a little of Henry James, but without the affection for the European upper classes. The evil pay in the end – EVS murdered after raping (?) a mentally retarded girl, and his two accomplices arrested. One supposes the married couple will restore their relationship and move on, but certain ambiguity at the end. (2008)

**Footlight Parade** 1933 Lloyd Bacon 4.0 Premier Warner Brothers backstage musical. Jimmy Cagney aggressive, forward-moving, energetic fast-talking impresario of company (New York?) that makes live "prologues" (live shows) for local movie theaters; Joan Blondell as his very cute, sensible assistant obviously destined to be Cagney's romantic partner; Dick Powell still in his sweet crooning stage in two of the main numbers; Ruby Keeler emerges from secretarial job as a performer – just as cute, energetic, and dorkily dancing as ever; Guy Kibbee as Cagney's crooked boss pulling financial fast ones on the company; Hugh Herbert as fussy, effeminate dance master; Billy Barty the good-humored midget sometimes wandering around the stage. The main song numbers composed by Harry Warren and Al Dubin. The film is ultimately a romantic comedy with Cagney and Blondell moving beyond their professional relationship and ringing wedding bells at the end. The plot has the company constantly in danger of failure because competitors are stealing their best numbers and the boss is pilfering the kitty. Cagney's survival is made to depend on three numbers that he invents and presents to a wealthy investor, who watches them at the end of the film. The film is all about backstage activities – Cagney coming up with new ideas, the piano playing, girls in scanty costumes lounging, practicing everywhere, sleeping in cots in transparent gowns, rehearsing under Herbert's irritating command – always high velocity, hurrying to meet a deadline. Four main numbers, the last three of which choreographed by Busby Berkeley: 1) "Sitting on as Backyard Fence" (non-Warren) silly and kind of sexy – midget participates, the idea being the guy is as horny as a tomcat waiting for his girl. \*\*\* 2) "Honeymoon Hotel" (Warren and Dubin) kind of sequel to "Shufflin' Off to Buffalo", in which Powell and Keeler are honeymooners checking into a hotel for honeymooners (actually any couple that can pay the room rate – they all sign in as Smith); catchy tune by the principals, followed by various semi-titillating scenes in the hotel, in which the service personnel introduce themselves, singing relatives met in the bedroom, the lovers have a

misunderstanding, then reconcile and end up in bed under the covers together! Always dancing. \*\*\*\* 3) “By a Waterfall” (not Warren). Quintessential Berkeley number with intricate arrangement of girl swimmers diving off the side of a huge pool, sliding down water slides, swimming underwater, making the usual intricate patterns on the surface. \*\*\* 4) “Shanghai Lil” (Warren) with sailor boy Cagney looking for his true love, Ruby Keeler dressed up sexily as Chinese girl; a lot of editing among the multi-national patrons of the bar (somewhere in Asia); Keeler (as wooden as ever) and Cagney dancing famously on the bar and a table; sailors and girls dancing the intricate Berkeley patterns; the number ending with a bird’s eye shot of the American flag and a portrait of President Roosevelt, and then a facsimile of the NRA symbol. Entertaining comic film with classic dance numbers. \*\*\*\* (2016)

**For Your Consideration** 2006 Christopher Guest 3.5 The usual line-up of Guest players – Guest as the rather distracted director of the film being made; Catherine O’Hara in a bigger role as an experienced but extremely insecure actress who thinks she is up for an Academy Award; Fred Willard in his usual hilarious bit as ‘ET’ type TV talking head with a modified Mohawk and one corny, offensive wisecrack after another (“Oh, that French movie. Drives me crazy with the writing on the screen.”); Parker Posey in her usual hysterical role as a young actress whose head is turned by buzz that she might also get an AA nomination; Ricky Gervais hilarious as the president – “suit” – of Sunfish Classics who puts pressure on the writers (one of whom is Bob Balaban) to “tone down the Jewishness” so the film will sell (“The title change would be great!” “I’m a gentile and I don’t say ‘Hey, come and look at my foreskin!’”)(The title of the movie gets changed from ‘Home for Purim’ to ‘Home for Thanksgiving’); Eugene Levy, also with an outrageous hairdo, is an incompetent agent who specializes in getting commercials for his clients and who is always covering up his ineffectiveness. For once, there are too many characters – Guest barely walks past the camera several times; the two writers are underdeveloped, and the incomparable Levy would have savored more exposure (the movie is only 80 minutes long). A send-up of movie-making in Hollywood (the company, Sunfish Classics, is making an independent movie); it is not the usual mockumentary approach, but a narrative of the making of the movie punctuated by a lot of viciously satirical excerpts from celebrity-type Hollywood TV shows such as ‘ET’ and ‘The Tonight Show’. ‘Purim’ is an outrageously sentimental Southern drama about Catherine as the Jewish mother who is dying of consumption (?) during the family Purim celebration; the daughter has returned with a lesbian lover and of course she has a painful discussion with her mother in her bed; all players have fake Southern accents reminiscent of Bette Davis in ‘Little Foxes’, which O’Hara is watching on TV at the beginning. But most of the attention is on the publicity campaign being ratcheted up including Posey being interviewed by smartass, potty mouth disc jockeys, rap dancing with a black music host, etc. O’Hara gets a lot of laughs when she dresses up with major make-up and screaming décolletage for the publicity campaign. Willard’s great scene – he goes out to interview the three losers after they are not nominated: Posey is caught in a diner, the actor playing the father is already back to making commercials, and Willard catches O’Hara drunk in front of her house throwing liquor bottles into the trash. At the end the actors have returned to stand-up nightclub acts (Posey’s ‘No Penis Intended’), working in commercials (“hula balls”), or teaching acting. Very funny if not quite up to the dramatic standards of ‘Best in Show’. (2007)

**Footnote** 2011 Joseph Cedar (Israel) 4.0 Shlomo Bar-Aba as Eliezer Shkonik, an older Talmud researcher, a quiet, reserved, envious man; Lior Ashkenazi as Uriel Shkonik, Eliezer’s son and successful, popular author; Alma Zack as Uriel’s wife. Dramatic and suspenseful Israeli family drama that includes a vivid picture of the world of Talmud scholarship. The film takes place amidst academic middle class life in Jerusalem, in the rather shabby digs of department offices and the Ministry of Education, at academic meetings and events in which prizes are distributed. The personalities of the characters are vivid: the “autistic”-acting Eliezir has been conducting his basic “scientific” research for 30 years without publishing a major work and without receiving an important academic distinction; his son has written several books that seem oriented toward history and sociology and he is lionized throughout Israel delivering a lot of lectures and conducting television interviews. He and his father are distant from one another. A major misunderstanding sets off the narrative: the Israel prize for Talmudic scholarship is awarded to Uriel, but since a clerk makes a mistake, Eliezir believes he is the recipient. Uriel tells the

prize committee that the prize must be awarded to his father – to do otherwise would be a frightful humiliation – and he finally persuades the forehead-furrowed professor Grossman (Micah Lewenson) to go through with the award. Irony – at the same time Eliezir gives an interview in which he severely criticizes his son’s work; then (!), Eliezir discovers through a series of well-filmed and well-edited philological investigations that his son is the author of the committee statement explaining its decision. Both of them go to the award ceremony (the usual careful security procedures), but it is unsure whether the father will accept the award; whereupon the narrative breaks off. The focus of the film is the relationship between father and son: oedipal tension, the rivalry between researchers, and the refusal of the stubborn father to make concessions (the film suggests he has mental problems – autism). In the beginning the son comes across as facile and arrogant (basking in the adulation of the public), but one of the many surprises of the film is how he rises to his father’s defense when the mistake is discovered and how he labors over the appreciation text (the Hebrew characters seen on the screen); he subsequently refuses to tell anyone about the mistake except – eventually – his mother. Uriel is mum and loyal until the end, whereas Eliezir continues his self-centered and isolated path; he doesn’t say a word when he finds out that Uriel wrote the comments, and the chances of his renouncing the prize in front of a large audience at the end seem remote to this reader. Both men have poor relationships with their wives: Eliezir appears to be having an affair with another woman, and Uriel and his wife seem to take pleasure in hurting one another. The film style is interesting and appropriate to the subject matter: light-hearted music to emphasize the satire of the academic establishment, and quick shots of computer screens and book pages to illustrate the work of the scholars. First-rate film. (2012)

**Forbidden Planet** 1956 Fred Wilcox 3.0 Leslie Nielsen (!) as Skipper, Walter Pidgeon as Morbius, Anne Francis as Alta. Landmark 1950s sci-fi film that transcends the typical monster picture of the epic, although it has a good, though invisible, monster. Excellent print. Perhaps first A sci-fi film, MGM, in Cinemascope, with often impressive special effects – space ship miniatures moving through spectacular space close to the planet (impact on Kubrick?), well-designed spaceship interiors, machinery, and laboratories, a little Bauhaus 50s, but obviously high quality; the flying saucer is one of the few of the epoch that looks like it is really flying. Robby Robot is good-natured, benevolent servant robot programmed to have no emotions and to work at our beck and call; he simply obeys with the limitation that he cannot harm human beings; reminds one a little of HAL in ‘2001,’ except that he never turns against his masters, but remains supinely obedient (cannot harm even the Id of a human) as the life and limb of humans are threatened by the Id monster at the end. Acting is positively wooden and campy (Francis!), except perhaps Pidgeon, who enjoys thundering out wisdom and predictions; hilarious to see Leslie Nielsen in very early serious role (his character has no sense of humor!). Uniforms are Star Treky, smooth and unattractive. The weapons are the silly-looking ray guns of 50s pop culture. Some of the sets look too much like a Hollywood sound stage – the set in Morbius’ home and the one surrounding the landed spaceship look as if they were made from cutouts (but once he takes the officers into the underground Krel chambers, the design improves immensely). The direction is also clunky and wooden. What saves the movie are the ideas. After 20 years on Altair IV Morbius has taken on the intellectual and technological heritage of the Krels, except that he does not account for the continued existence of the primitive destructive Id that must have destroyed that civilization. Since he has the power of the Krels, he then uses that power to destroy the rest of the crew of the Belerophon (his pride or megalomania thus objectified into destructive monster), and then to attack Nielsen’s ships, this time because Alta has fallen in love with Nielsen, and the father (unconsciously?) wants to keep her for himself. The mid-1950s script however does not explicitly recognize this sexual rivalry. Thus final confrontation is between the forces of rationality and destruction, with the former winning when Morbius renounces the evil within him. He dies a noble death programming the planet and its dangerous secrets for nuclear destruction. Ends happily with crew, Nielsen, Alta, and Robby (who is now an enthusiastically obedient crew member) safely in the spaceship watching the distant explosion. Morbius and the suddenly more intelligent Skipper opt for slow progress for mankind so that we can grow into our knowledge and solve our problems responsibly; we will some day be “like God.” Film obviously warns us of the danger to our planet coming from ourselves (the Id) and from excessive dependence on technology. There is nothing apparently paranoid about it. The parallel to ‘The Tempest’ does not leap to the eye. (2008)

**Force majeure** 2014 Ruben Östlund (Sweden) 3.5 Johannes Kunke as Tomas, a troubled Swedish businessman on vacation with wife and two children in the French Alps; Lisa Loven Kongsli as Ebba, his wife – although she has an apparently perfect family, she has anxieties about her relationship with her husband; Vincent Wettergren and Clara Wettergren as the two children, Harry and Vera; Kristofer Hivju as the heavily bearded Mats, friend of Tomas and also on vacation with his cute, younger girlfriend, Fanni (Fanni Metelius). Arresting, visually brilliant, although puzzling analysis of the troubles of a marital relationship. All seems perfect when the perfect Swedish family arrives in the breathtaking scenery of the ski resort – they are affectionate and cute as buttons when the official photographer takes photos at the top of the ski lift. A chance occurrence breaks the spell of perfection – when a runaway avalanche almost inundates a ski lodge terrace, Tomas runs away without showing concern for his wife and children (the avalanche did no harm). Most of the rest of the movie is devoted to the halting communication between spouses, Ebba insisting that Tomas admit what he did and explain it, and Tomas refusing stubbornly to fess up. Matters are particularly intense when the two have a long, adversarial discussion in the presence of their two friends, who themselves get into an argument about what might happen if Mats were confronted with a situation in which he had to protect his family against a force majeure. Thereupon Ebba gets into a discussion with a new acquaintance about whether marital fidelity or an open marriage is better; Tomas breaks down into a noisy crying fit when he realizes how unhappy he is. The ending is arresting, although confusing. When Tomas insists that the family ski in deserted, very foggy conditions, Ebba gets lost; this time, though, Tomas rises to the challenge and rescues her (the children are relieved, but Ebba seems unimpressed). In the last scene, the man driving a bus down the terrifyingly precipitous mountain road begins to act and drive erratically; Ebba hysterically insists that he let her out, and when he opens the door, she bolts on to the road without regard for her children; the rest of the passengers then vacate the bus, and the film ends as they walk down the road toward their destination; as before, Tomas and Ebba say nothing to one another. Deciphering the film is difficult. Obviously it is an analysis of a marriage in trouble; the husband has a kind of macho pride that prevents him from admitting his failing; the wife is indirect, and without explaining herself clearly she pushes obsessively for her husband's confession; her leaving the bus at the end is surprising and exciting, but certainly not consistent with her protective maternal psychology in the rest of the film. The clean, crisp color cinematography is stunning – the blinding white snow, the jagged mountains against the deep blue sky, flashing stars in the deep, black night sky, the booming of the avalanche cannons, the avalanche tumbling down the mountain menacingly, the family skiing in the white-out conditions where only the sound of the skis is noticeable. The film moves slowly, seemingly stretching out the scenes with long silences, empty spaces, hesitant dialogue, suddenly broken by spectacular alpine scenes accompanied by loud, symphonic excerpts from Vivaldi. It almost seems that cosmic forces dominate: the pagan gods of nature are in charge toying with the motivations of the humans, not a bit concerned with their petty problems, but having a good time with them; the willful fickleness of fate. (2015)

**Force of Evil** 1948 Abraham Polonsky 3.0 John Garfield as slick, amoral lawyer in charge of scheme to bring big city numbers racket under the control of a single gang; Thomas Gomez as nervous, decent brother Leo, who is also involved in numbers business; Beatrice Pearson in one of her few films as decent girl trying to draw Garfield back into legal and moral respectability; Roy Roberts as one of the gang bosses; Marie Windsor as bombshell brunette wife of Roberts; Howland Chamberlain as wimpy bookkeeper caught in the transition to the new regime. Famous crime movie about city mafia gangs that casts an implicitly negative light on American business and other institutions. The film starts as an apparent attempt to legalize the numbers racket under the authority of one of the gangs, but soon turns to a struggle between two gangs for control over the illegal racket. The film takes place in New York, where criminal activity seems ubiquitous and the dividing line between legitimate business and organized crime seems arbitrary. The film takes the viewer into the offices of the criminal organizations and the secretarial and bookkeeping employees who are not sure whether they want to be connected to big crime, even though they stand to lose their jobs. Since the film asserts that organized crime is getting more and more like legitimate business, many commentators have treated the film as a critique of American capitalism; in any case, both Polonsky and Garfield subsequently had a lot of trouble with the authorities

in the Hollywood anti-Communist witch hunt. The fast-talking, womanizing Garfield has a soft, respectable side – he wants to make sure his brother is included in the new arrangement and he is constantly tempted toward morality and respectability by his ambiguous and inconclusive conversations with Pearson; in one scene he expresses his reservations about a permanent commitment by putting Pearson high on a mantelpiece and then leaving her there bemused as the scenes fades out. The restored film features high definition, high contrast black and white cinematography with expressive mise-en-scene (e.g., low angle shots of a desk drawer containing the tell-tale telephone or shots of guns going off directly into the camera lens). The film ends with a deadly fight between members of two gangs, and then the murder of Garfield's beloved brother, Leo; Garfield and Pearson then descend to the water's edge (the River Styx) under the George Washington Bridge to collect his body; they begin climbing back up the rocks to cooperate with the district attorney in his campaign to clean up the city, something of a cop-out ending for such a hard-hitting film. A lot of striking tough prose forcefully delivered by Garfield. (2012)

**Foreign Correspondent** 1940 Walter Wanger 4.0 Joel McCrae, Laraine Day (her most prominent role), Herbert Marshall, Robert Benchley, George Saunders, Albert Basserman (as noble and much abused Dutch political leader who possesses the McGuffin), Edmund Gwenn (as a quirky assassin!). Print is first-rate. Outstanding light-hearted Hitchcock entertainment about Nazi espionage in Britain and Holland with heavily patriotic statement at the end urging the USA to build battleships to defend civilization! The whole cast seems perfect, despite Hitchcock's opinion that McCrae was too passive – script gives him a consistent personality that seems befuddled but that goes for the goal as soon as he is challenged (woo Day, find out who the assassin was, etc.). Day, who lights up the screen, is charming, dressed in impeccable fashions (favorite is the flower burst headdress and trim dark dress she wore at the Peace Society dinner); Marshall is the heavy who is betraying the peace movement, but he is sincerely attached to his daughter (he sacrifices himself at the end to save her when he is floating on the wing), and daughter explains to us that he may be misguided but he was being loyal to his own country (unspoken Germany). Script blends romance between McCrae and Day, a geographically kinetic script like '39 Steps', 'Saboteur,' and 'North by Northwest,' danger (that we don't take too seriously), a sense of humor throughout (Benchley in his self-written boozy, cynical character, Saunders a bit less cynical than usual), and a patriotic ring that urges Americans to admire (and rally to the defense of) Britain. Something of a return to director's British movies: initially antagonistic relationship between guy and gal that soon melts, the trick of the missing kidnapped individual ('Lady Vanishes'), the McGuffin whose exact nature no one cares about (all of them!), quirky little cameo characters that add humor (the Latvian gentleman with the Jack Benny smile, who is attached to the Peace Society, reminds us of Peter Lorre in 'The Man Who Knew too Much'), etc. Most impressive are the set pieces, all of which show verve and imagination. The meeting of the Peace Society has seamlessly editing and moving camera, quirky characters, a mysterious occurrence, and the beginning of the romance between McCrae and Day. The assassination scene in the public square in Amsterdam is first rate: enormous, highly detailed (!) 10-acre set, the rain pouring down, the surprise assassination by the man with the revolver next to the camera, the flight of the assassin through the sea of umbrellas identified from a crane shot (later imitated by DePalma in 'Bonfire of the Vanities'), etc. The windmill scene with its outstanding murky, dusty, decayed interior, the initial gimmick of McCrae noticing that the windmill blades are reversing directions (a signal to the plane), unexpectedly stumbling upon the real Van Meer (surprise – who was assassinated?!). Less compelling and more standard perhaps is the suspense scene at the top of the Westminster Cathedral tower, where we wait for Gwenn to push McCrae off to his death (but of course he steps aside and Gwenn takes his place). The best is the final sequence: the realistic detail of the interior of the Pan American Clipper cabin; the German warship shoots down the plane with anti-aircraft fire, whose explosions one can see through the plane windows; the panic of the passengers; the impact scene with water rushing into the cockpit without a cut; the mortal predicament of the passengers as the plane fills with water and begins to sink; their precarious situation on the remaining fragment of the wing with massive seas raging around them; Marshall's sacrifice for his daughter and future son in law, of whom he approves; their rescue. On several occasions the camera peers through a window at the beginning of a scene and then enters the room through the pane (Hitchcock's voyeur instinct). The script defends the intrepid initiatives

of the press, and celebrates the Shirer Battle of Britain broadcasts in the last (probably tacked on at the last minute) scene. How is it possible to have more fun watching a movie?! (2007)

**Forgetting Sarah Marshall** 2008 Nicholas Stoller (producer Judd Apatow; writer Jason Segel) 2.0 Roly-poly Jason Segel is a marginally competent TV music composer unable to get over his breakup with girlfriend Sarah Marshall; Kristen Bell in one hopes her last movie as Sarah Marshall, annoying perky TV actress (she plays in a send-up of CSI) that dumps Jason and takes up with...; Russell Brand as clownish, unpredictable English musician that accompanies Marshall on a vacation to Hawaii; Mila Kunis (Ukrainian) as cute girl working at the Hawaii hotel – she takes a liking to Jason (!); Jack McBrayer plays the same silly, backwoods, Christian guy as in '30 Rock'; Paul Rudd in small role as brain-fried surfing instructor; Jonah Hill as obsequious waiter at the hotel. Perhaps the most forgettable edition of the Apatow comedies focusing on the trials of immature young men. Segel, who is emotionally devastated by his breakup with Bell (good riddance!), discovers to his dismay that he is vacationing at the same Hawaii resort as she and her new boyfriend Brand. There ensues a seemingly endless back and forth between Jason's pining for Marshall and a growing attachment to the friendly Kunis. The script resolutely fails to move forward for the majority of the film, repeating Segel's inchoate attempts to amuse himself by learning to surf (totally incompetent), to reconnect with Bell, and to inch forward in his relationship with Kunis. Perhaps the most amusing sequence is the sexual one-up-man ship competition that the two couples pursue in adjoining rooms, both Jason and Kristen faking loud orgasms that can be heard by their former partners through the wall. It is pleasant for the viewer to bask in the Hawaii sun and to enjoy looking at the bubbly Kunis, but not the whitewashed, prominent upper teeth of Bell. All ends well when Segel returns to California, overcomes his writer's block to finish his vampire puppet musical (debuted to rave reviews of course), connects with Kunis, who follows him to finish her college career, while Sarah finds another TV show to star in as an animal psychic. Some good moments (funny satire of TV culture), but uninteresting, annoying characters going nowhere. (2014)

**The Founder** 2016 John Lee Hancock 3.0 Interesting, compelling story about the origins of McDonald's fast food chain under the impetus of "founder" Ray Kroc. Michael Keaton center stage throughout as the genial, enthusiastic, open-faced, aggressive Kroc, who takes no prisoners in his campaign to develop the McDonald's chain; Laura Dern as his long-suffering wife, Ethel; Nick Offerman and John Carroll Lynch as the down-home McDonald brothers, Nick (calm and organized) and Mac (tall and emotional); quietly charismatic B.J. Novak as the financial genius that set Kroc on the path to financial glory. Movie gives an interesting and entertaining account of the genesis and early development of the company. Floundering salesman Kroc (trying to sell milk shade machines to old-fashioned hamburger drive-ins) is blown away when he encounters the fast food ethic of the McDonald brothers in San Bernardino (quality, organization, speed, no waiting, no plates or utensils), and with some difficulty he persuades the brothers to allow him to franchise the operation in the Midwest; he makes only slow progress until Novak convinces him that the key to riches is owning the real estate that the restaurant buildings are placed on. There ensues constant tension between the old-fashioned brothers and Kroc (the McDonalds are scandalized by Kroc's decision to replace real milk with a powdered product in their milkshakes) until the latter, after ignoring and then divorcing his wife, steals the company from them, promising on a handshake that he will pay them royalties in perpetuum; they never receive a dime. In contrast to the seedy drive-ins prevalent in the mid-1950s, Kroc conceives the restaurant chain as an extension of Americana, inspired by churches, American flags, and families of happy parents and children consuming hamburgers, fries, and chocolate or vanilla milkshakes, an irony of course given the ruthless maneuvering Kroc was given to. The film is beautifully shot and edited, the best sequence being perhaps the humorous montage illustrating the narrative of the McDonald Brothers about the origin and development of their hamburger stand. The film avoids commenting on the chain's considerable social influence (e.g., what about breaking up families?) and focuses on the ambivalent personality of Kroc (beautifully played by Keaton) – invasive and charismatic, caring nothing about the people he is associated with except when they contribute to his business success (when speaking with his divorce lawyer about the financial settlement with his wife, he is clear that he will give her anything she wants, but she is not to lay hands on his business. Bright and entertaining, even informative. (September 2017)

**The Four Feathers** 1939 Zoltan Korda (Britain) 3.5 Adventure spectacular singing the praises of military courage and British imperialism in the Sudan. C. Aubrey Smith excellent performance as crusty retired general constantly telling an (inaccurate) tale of the Battle of Balaclava and praising having “your head blown off” if it is a patriotic death; John Clements as young officer who resigns his commission before assignment to the Sudan under Kitchener (he likes to read poetry!); Ralph Richardson memorable performance as friend of Clements who is blinded by sunstroke in Sudan; June Duprez mainly decorative as Smith’s daughter who can’t make up her mind – first in love with Clements, then Richardson, and back to Clements. Colorful, spectacular, well-acted, and well-written epic; Clements refuses to go to war in the Sudan; when with the delivery of the four white feathers he is humiliated by three friends and Duprez for cowardice, he is so ashamed that he decides to go to the Sudan on his own to rescue his reputation; he succeeds admirably, disguising himself as a Sudanese tribesman, leading Richardson back to the British army after he is blinded, then leading prisoners of the Mahdi (apocalyptic, pre-ISIS sect vying for control of the Sudan) in a revolt that helped Kitchener at the Battle of Omdurman. After the triumph of the imperial forces, he returns to Britain, relieves Duprez of her decision to wed the blind Richardson, and, once his four feathers are disposed of, laughs heartily as he and his bride look to their future together. Film has spectacular action footage shot in Technicolor on and around the Upper Nile (all that cinematic equipment in the Sudan!) – desert landscapes, great crowds of Mahdi warriors and their allies, the Fuzzie-Wuzzies (hair teased like an Afro hair style), long columns of British troops in khaki uniforms and pith helmets, convincing violence in the battle scenes at the end. Although the screenplay is focused on the fate of Clements, Richardson is a standout, portraying movingly a blind man who doesn’t let his fate get him down; scene in which Clements leads Richardson silently back to the Nile while vultures circle patiently overhead is memorable. Due probably to the reported 25 minutes of cuts in the film, some scenes are puzzling, e.g., why the anti-war Clements suddenly decides to redeem his honor through military action. In the year of the beginning of World War II the film is unabashedly enthusiastic about the British colonial adventure: allied with the Egyptians and their Sudanese friends, the British represent civilization and order against the “Arab” (?) fanatics, who mistreat their prisoners and ride wildly waving their big swords in their attack on the British line. There is no inkling that World War II would within a few years bring an end to British colonial rule. A 50s-style epic film made in the 1930s. (January 2018)

**Four Months, Three Weeks, and Two Days** 2007 Cristian Mungiu (Romania) 3.5 Anamaria Marinca as college roommate of girl getting an illegal abortion in Romania in the 1980s; Laura Vasiliu as the extremely innocent and clueless 23-year-old seeking the abortion; Vlad Ivanov memorable as the insistent, focused abortionist. Memorable film about a young girl seeking an abortion in Ceausescu Romania. Film is a classic realist ethic – long-running scenes with no cuts (the one with the family of Anamaria’s boyfriend is the most memorable: 10 minutes?), extended sections on mundane activities such as getting dressed, chatting about various subjects at a birthday party, walking down a deserted street (true, it can evoke tension and an awareness of potential danger), lying in bed waiting for the abortion procedure to take effect, long, repetitive instructions about lying still and the possibility of hemorrhaging from the abortionist, etc. Characters are clearly and interestingly drawn – the maddeningly passive and whiny Vasiliu, her more proactive friend who has to make a number of sacrifices (tension with her boyfriend, having instant sex with the abortionist) to help Vasiliu secure the abortion, the matter-of-fact abortionist who seems competent but vaguely threatening. The picture drawn of Ceausescu Romania seems dead accurate – gray and featureless, decaying, unkempt high rise apartment buildings, surly bureaucrats working at the hotels, a general sense of oppression and fear, especially since abortion is punished severely at that time, etc. Film is gripping, since it effectively evokes tension associated with the abortion procedure – will they be caught by the authorities (but it turns out that the bureaucrats working at the hotel reception could not care less), will the abortion procedure that is performed in the hotel room lead to the death of the girl (especially since the abortionist speaks at length about the possibility of hemorrhaging), etc. True to its realist commitments, the film does not appear to have any definite point of view about abortion – it shows the grisly physical effects (the aborted fetus lying on the bathroom floor) and the emotional toll (at the end the girls are silent and promise never to talk about it); it



also focuses on the price society pays for making abortion illegal – the sneaking around, exposing one’s life to a person with questionable qualifications, etc. A gripping, memorable film. (2007)

**Framed** 1947 Richard Wallace (Columbia) 3.5 Engrossing misogynistic, film noir ‘B’ thriller probably inspired by ‘Double Indemnity’. Glenn Ford as unemployed alcoholic, tough-talking, alone, doomed-looking mining engineer looking for a job in small western town – he is the fall guy; Janis Carter thin, blond as suspiciously elegant femme fatale turning the heat on Ford; Barry Sullivan good-looking in his fedora as bank officer plotting to murder Ford and make off with a lot of his bank’s money; Edgar Buchanan portly and good-humored as mining prospector. Superior B movie with good performances, dialogue, and a snappy narrative. Ford is stuck in small town, where he falls for Carter, who of course turns out to be a femme fatale involved in plot with her husband Sullivan to murder Ford and use his disfigured body to convince police that Sullivan is dead. The plot goes awry when Carter begins to fall for Ford, and the latter puts two and two together to conclude that she is more than she appears – she is just too prosperous and cultivated to be a waitress in a dive bar (Ford spends a lot of time in bars getting drunk); when at Sullivan’s country cabin, he also notices Carter’s bathrobe hanging in his bathroom. Twists and turns continue: at the last minute Carter decides not to murder Ford (she is in love) and kills Sullivan instead; the female snake tells Ford that he was the one that murdered Sullivan while Ford was drunk, but Ford’s moral conscience surfaces when his friend, amiable Edgar Buchanan, is accused of the murder; Ford’s subsequent investigation turns up Carter as the guilty party. After almost poisoning Ford, she decides she loves him after all (a passionate kiss overturns the teacup with the poisoned tea); in the final scene in the bank where Carter is retrieving the embezzled money for flight, Ford rejects her overtures that he accompany her, and the police close in on her, obviously called in by Ford, who has rejected riches and the girl in the name of the Hayes Code. The narrative thus ends on a non-standard film noir note: although at first bamboozled by the scheming woman, he recovers in time to serve justice. The not-very-well-known Carter delivers a convincing spider-woman performance. Ford is solid as the lonely male. The film has an obvious debt to 1944’s ‘Double Indemnity’: a murder to collect money (except that here the plot boomerangs on the perpetrator); the camera holds on Carter’s satisfied expression as the car goes over the cliff carrying her little-loved husband to his death. The non-melodic soundtrack effectively punctuates mood and action. Neat, entertaining, taut film noir. (2016)

**Frances Ha** 2012 Noah Baumbach (co-wrote with Gerwig) 4.0 Greta Gerwig awkward yet spontaneous, disheveled, sincere, wry sense of humor, loquacious especially when she has been drinking, and totally charming as 27-year-old Frances waiting somewhat passively for meaning to come to her in New York; Mickey Sumner with glasses and long nose as her droll roommate and in a sense the love of her life; Adam Driver as a guy friend that lets her live with him and his roommate; Michael Zegen as Benji, good friend who has a romantic interest in her but constantly repeats that she is "undatable". Charming, spontaneous-seeming, New Wave-inspired short feature about 20 somethings looking for mates and meaning in New York. Frances loves living with her roommate and bosom buddy Sophie at the beginning of the film but after Sophie leaves for a better apartment and then decides to marry her boyfriend Patch, Frances is cut adrift. Although quite awkward, she wants to be a dancer in New York (most of her friends have some sort of artistic ambition), but when she loses her position as an apprentice in the dance company, she goes in circles for a while: she visits her parents in Sacramento (played by her actual parents living on Camellia Avenue; shows the degree to which film is inspired by Gerwig), spends a weekend doing nothing in a friend's apartment in Paris, spends the summer as an RA "pouring" wine at social receptions in her old college upstate, and finds a series of temporary living situations in the apartments of friends. The ending of the film is knockout charming. No boyfriend, but Greta is happy that Sophie is abandoning Patch and returning to New York and she gets a choreographing job at a local school that is a big success (praise from her old teacher and employer at the dance company). The last scene has her moving into a new apartment in Brooklyn; as she tries to slip the piece of paper with her name on it into the slot on her little mailbox, she discovers that her whole name doesn't fit; so she cuts off the end, fits the paper in -- it reads "Frances Ha". Nothing is really decided, there is no triumph, but the smile has returned to her face and she seems to be moving in the right direction. Frances has the virtue of looking ahead with some optimism even if there is nothing specific waiting for her. The film is charming

and delightful. Shot in black and white, it moves at a rapid pace recalling the New Wave style of Francois Truffaut -- Frances runs through the streets of New York like 'Bande a part' or Jean Seberg with Belmondo in Paris, often to the accompaniment of music by New Wave composer Georges Delerue. Charming moments: the two girls talking about their boyfriends' sexual issues; Frances telling her dance employer that she is happy with herself for having asked to be in the company, even if she was turned down; Frances monopolizing the conversation rattling on about relationships when she has had too much to drink, etc. A wonderful fusion of a charming lead actress, an amusing and insightful script, and apt direction. (2013)

**Frankenstein** 1931 James Whale 2.5 Colin Clive, Mae Clarke, Boris Karloff. Pretty klunky original version of the tradition. Noteworthy primarily because it was groundbreaking. Impressive is the laboratory scene with all the electricity and the operating table with the body on it being lifted toward the ceiling and through the roof. Karloff gives famous performance in which he learns to be angry and destructive; he doesn't start out that way, but he shows fear of fire and a desire to be friendly and sweet to the little girl, but he throws her in the water without understanding the danger. Sets are German Expressionist, although more cluttered than the German ones or the later ones in the series; the Tower is impressive, especially on the inside. Set in Central Europe with lots of peasants (borrowed from a Victor Herbert operetta?), but they become bourgeois in top hats when they chase and catch up with the monster. Special effects (Karloff's makeup, the burning windmill, etc.) must have been startling at the time (nothing like it before?), but they look distinctly fake and cheesy to modern audience. Acting is uneven, from moving (Karloff), to dead and unconvincing (Clarke and Clive), to overheated -- the Burgomeister and especially Henry Frankenstein's father. The film does not appear to have a music soundtrack, leaving several scenes with a vacant feeling. Film is not in good condition; I suspect some scenes are missing, e.g., the visit to the deaf hermit. Interesting as beginning of historical tradition in monster movies. (2008)

**Frankweenie** 2012 Tim Burton (music Danny Elfman) 3.5 Voices by Catherine O'Hara, Winona Ryder, Martin Short. Inventive, quirky, endearing black and white animated film that is a tribute to American horror films. Victor (surnamed Frankenstein) is deeply attached to his dog Sparky, who however is killed in a traffic accident. Victor is overjoyed when he is able to revive Sparky with the traditional Frankenstein apparatus -- tapping the electricity in an electrical storm with a kite that he flies through the attic skylight of his parents' house. Things go awry when some neighborhood toughs (one looks like a skinny Frankenstein monster, another like Peter Lorre, another is sinister Asian) decide to imitate him so that they can win the high school science fair, giving birth to a killer bat, a homicidal rat, a bunch of gleeful, giggling Gremlin-like creatures, and a huge Godzilla-like monster that wreaks havoc on the town. The monsters are of course luridly confronted and defeated, and Victor is reunited with his beloved pet. The movie is a multi-faceted homage to horror movies. 'Frankenstein' is of course at the center -- Sparky has a bolt through his neck and is stitched together rather loosely so that various body parts fall off during the action, but there are also 'Gremlins', Godzilla (or perhaps the Beast from 20,000 Fathoms?) and the unforgettable science teacher (Mr. Rzykruski pronounced 'Mr. Rice Crispies') who with his sententious, precisely pronounced statements and long face has an uncanny resemblance to Vincent Price. The film takes the usual shots at middle class society -- the town is called New Holland where everything is neat and orderly, most of the children imitate the conformist ways of their parents (Victor has no friends), the gym teacher at school tells her class that one of the most dangerous things is to think too much. Mr. Rzykruski tells his class that the key to being a great scientist is always to ask questions, and that an experiment will turn out right if you love it (and not do it just to get it over with); he also insists that science is neither good nor bad in itself but that the result depends on who's using it -- Victor with loving intentions or the town kids motivated by envy and jealousy. Making the film in black and white is surely a tribute to the old Hollywood movies, but often especially toward the beginning the viewer yearns for some expressive color. In the final analysis, it is the feeling that is most eloquent: the endearing animation of the characters -- the light-bulb-shaped heads with small chins and bulging eyes with dots in the middle for the pupils, the pranking, leaping gait of Sparky accompanied by the muffled percussion of his steps on the floor of the attic; the shadowed but not really scary world of New Holland, Victor's affection for Sparky, the dog's frisky and affectionate behavior even when he is sewed together

like the Frankenstein monster, the ecstatic delight of Hund und Herr when the two are united after Sparky's second resurrection at the end (delayed to make us wonder whether Burton would subject us to a sad ending). (2012)

**Frantic** 1988 Roman Polanski (Britain) 3.0 Harrison Ford quiet, determined and often woodenly inexpressive as American doctor in Paris whose wife mysteriously disappears; Betty Buckley also underacting as his wife whom he dearly loves; Emmanuelle Seigner as beautiful, tempting, flighty as free-spirited young sidekick who hooks up with Ford chastely in the search for his wife. Moderately entertaining, well-made Polanski film about an American whose wife disappears out of a Paris hotel room; the rest of the film is essentially a linear search for her through the byways of Paris; Ford becomes progressively involved in international intrigue until he is finally reunited with Buckley next to the Seine; Seigner is shot by the bad guys – her death in Ford's shocked arms is her best scene in the film. The film starts off with a long low-key sequence that shows Polanski's unpretentious skill: Ford and Buckley arrive more or less uneventfully at the hotel, they check in, settle into their room, Ford takes a shower while Buckley puts away her things as seen through the open door to the bathroom, the shot past Ford and through the shower door shows her moving off the frame to the left; and when he emerges with his towel, she is nowhere to be found. The film has obvious Hitchcock debts – the shower scene from which we observe the disappearance of Buckley; the rooftop vertigo scene in which Ford is trying to get into Seigner's apartment and then recuperate the model of the Statue of Liberty that he has dropped; the statuette itself is the McGuffin that contains the nuclear widget that the bad guys are trying to get their hands on; the piquant, amusing little scenes that frustrate Ford in his search – his extremely poor French that leads to a florist thinking that he is trying to buy flowers for his wife; the fussy embassy bureaucrat (John Mahoney) who follows regulations and fills out forms rather than take action; a Jamaican in a night club thinks Seigner wants to buy cocaine when she ask some questions. Entertaining tour of Paris in the late 80s with a lot of commercial streets, parking garages, barges on the Seine next to the mock-up of the Statue of Liberty (McGuffin again), cool night clubs, the showdown under a Seine bridge. Film has considerable suspense since we don't know what happened to Buckley; but it lacks thriller punch and shocks, and the performances, especially Ford's, are flat. It does portray a sense of paranoia and obsessiveness. (2010)

**Frantz** 2016 François Ozon (France) 4.0 Moving drama set in postwar 1919 that explores the destructive impact of war, cross-cultural romance, and the effect of lying on human relationships. Paula Beer pretty soft-spoken young German woman grieving for the death her fiancé, Frantz, in World War I; Pierre Niney as slight, mustachioed ex-French soldier conscience-stricken about his killing of Beer's fiancé; Ernst Stötzner in marvelous soft-spoken performance as the forgiving father of Frantz; Marie Gruber as the cheerful, loving, uncomplicated wife of Stötzner; Cyrielle Clair in excellent performance as the dignified, intimidating mother of Niney. Film is photographed in black and white with short sections in color. It opens with memorable, quiet scenes in Frantz's graveyard, where Paula witnesses a young man putting flowers on the grave of her fiancé. He claims to have been a friend of Frantz, and he is soon accepted with some happiness by Paula and Frantz's parents; it is obvious that after a while, a romantic feeling is developing between Paula and Pierre, but it is broken by the first of Ozon's trademark surprises – he actually killed Frantz with his own rifle when the two found themselves in the same trench (shades of 'All Quiet on the Western Front'). When Pierre suddenly leaves, Paula lies to Frantz's parents, preserving the fiction that he was friends with Frantz and telling them that Pierre has returned to France where he is doing well; they accept her account, hoping that the two will eventually marry. Meanwhile, Paula journeys to France to find Pierre; she eventually finds him living with his mother in a lovely chateau in the provinces, where Ozon springs another surprise – after intimating that Pierre is still free, we learn that he is engaged to a woman he doesn't love. Despite their continuing affection for one another, Paula and Pierre separate (the goodbye scene at the train station is very tender); Paula then approaches the trademark Manet painting of *Le suicidé* in the Louvre and expresses her intention of not returning to Germany and starting her live anew in Paris. The ending differs from the Lubitsch film based on the same story, in which Pierre goes back to Germany and marries Paula (a more bankable ending than this one). The film is a lovely and moving meditation. The viewer ruminates on the impact of lying on

relationships – Pierre is a damaged guy who although conscience-stricken finds it impossible to tell Paula and Frantz’s parents the truth; Paula’s lie to the parents is more defensible since its effect is to make them happy for the remainder of their lives. The most moving theme of the film is its attack on war: patriots sing their patriotic songs on both sides (both are ironic commentaries on the famous bar scene of ‘Casablanca’); Paula is courted by a bitter German nationalist (salient contrast with Frantz’s parents); young men have died by the millions; relationships across frontiers are ended forever. The common ground of France and Germany is emphasized by the love between Paula and Pierre, and by the love of characters on both sides for classical music. The film is done in impeccable taste – quietly glowing black and white images whose meditateness is emphasized by the lovely, low-key soundtrack. Only serious objection – Paula’s sudden decision in the last scene seems insufficiently prepared. (August 2017)

**Freaks** 1932 Tod Browning (MGM) 2.5 Olga Baclanova as the normal human trapeze artist Olga on the prowl for money; Leila Hyams pretty as Venus; Henry Victor (Schulz! from “To Be or not to Be”) as Hercules, the insensitive, guffawing boyfriend of Olga; Harry Earles as German midget Hans (many of his lines are auf Deutsch); Daisy Earles as his sensitive midget girlfriend Frieda, who looks out for Hans; a troupe of circus “freaks” including Siamese twins, several microcephalics, a limbless man who rolls on the ground, half man-half woman, etc. Rather lifeless, infamous film about love, betrayal, and revenge among “freaks” in a traveling circus. The film features parts for all the “freaks” that are included in the freak show in a circus or a state fair They are all presented as good people with a strong code of solidarity; the two villains in the piece are both normal people. In the first part of the film, the freaks parade in front of the camera – the limbless man rolling along the ground, the legless man walking sprightly on his hands, the Siamese twins navigating life’s experiences in common (the second one seems sexually aroused when her (attached) sister kisses her fiancé), etc. The film focuses on midget Hans’ infatuation with the corrupt (normal) tightrope artist Olga, who with her boyfriend Hercules plots to marry Hans and then murder him for his money (he has just inherited a small fortune from a relative). Olga’s plot is apparent to everybody in the freak community except for Hans, who marries her and then looks on aghast as his bride gets drunk and makes out with Hercules at the wedding party. When they poison Hans and he lies lingering in bed, the freaks, who form a community with their own unforgiving code of ethics, band together to exact vengeance for the wrong done to Hans. In an extended final scene as the circus wagons roll through roads muddied by a torrential downpour, the freaks descend upon Hercules and Olga; killing the former, the fate of Olga is left for a shocking postscript, where she is pictured to a gawking crowd sitting limbless in a pit decked out in chicken feathers – the revenge of the freaks! The film is notable mainly for its curiosity value – one of the most shocking and unpopular of all Hollywood 30s horror movies. In fact, the film has been edited so much to make it palatable to 30s audiences that most of the shocking material is left out (e.g., the sex scenes and the castration of Hercules): the holes in the horror narrative are palpable. The film also suffers from Tod Browning’s early sound direction – static camera, stilted dialogue and hesitant accents among almost all the players, virtually complete lack of music on the soundtrack that leaves a kind of sensory vacuum in the viewer. One of Thalberg’s losing productions. (2012)

**The French Connection** 1971 William Friedkin 4.0 Gene Hackman completely dominating the film as Popeye Doyle, wise-cracking, womanizing, obsessive, violent narcotics police office in New York – he will stop at nothing to get the bust; Roy Scheider a bit less crazy as his loyal partner; Fernando Rey as low-key, smooth-talking, aristocratic Marseillais, who is the elusive quarry of Hackman; Marcel Bozzuffi as balding gunman working for Rey – he is the one who throws his hands up with a grimace when he is shot in the back by Hackman at the end of the famous chase sequence. One of the most compelling hyper-kinetic, cynical police thrillers in the history of American movies. The plot has Rey bringing into New York 60 kilos of heroin hidden in his famous brown Lincoln Continental. At the other end, is the possessed, impulsive and violent narcotics detective Popeye, who knows he must stop Rey if his career is to continue. Shot in cold and wintry New York, the film takes place mainly in the shabby, trashy, decaying poor sections of Manhattan and Brooklyn – big 70s cars lumbering down the streets, the detectives abusing minor drug users (mostly Blacks) in dive bars, Hackman and Scheider huddling in freezing doorways, stamping their feet, blowing on their hands, as they keep the tail on the bad guys,

whom they can see through a window dining in a luxury restaurant – a policeman’s lot is not a happy one. The film has precisely planned and executed action sequences: the cat-and-mouse game between Hackman and Rey, as the latter feints back and forth about getting on the subway (a bit of humor as he waves sarcastically to Hackman when the subway pulls away from the platform); the bravura chase sequence down the elevated train tracks, as Hackman’s car careens wildly back and forth in his race to keep up with the train and to capture Bozuffi, who has just attempted to assassinate him. Also memorable is Hackman’s insistence that the goods have to be hidden somewhere in the Lincoln, despite the police mechanic’s impatient assurance that he has looked everywhere and found nothing. The film has a thoroughly downbeat ending: in the final shootout under the Triborough Bridge, a policeman is killed and Rey unaccountably escapes; titles at the end inform the viewer that Rey was not found, none of the perpetrators received long sentences, and both detectives were transferred out of narcotics to presumably lesser jobs. By saying that there is little moral difference between the good guys and the bad guys, and that there is little just retribution when the police get their man, the film fits well into the cynical, critical pattern of films in the early 1970s. The beautifully directed and well-acted film generates an enormous momentum that doesn’t allow the viewer to take his breath. (2014)

**Frenzy** 1972 Alfred Hitchcock (Universal; written by Anthony Shaffer) 4.0 Jon Finch as suspect in the London "necktie" rape murder series largely because of his ill temper and just being in the wrong place at the wrong time; Barry Foster rather slimy and sinister as the real murderer with a mother fixation (he is careful to introduce her to his mates); Barbara Leigh-Hunt as Finch's ex-wife murdered in the famous extended murder sequence; Ann Massey lively, prominent-toothed barmaid and girlfriend of Finch, the victim in the famous Steadycam murder sequence; Alec McCowen as the calm, understated chief police inspector; Vivien Merchant pungently humorous as his gourmet-cooking wife. Sometimes uneven, but highly ingenious and entertaining later Hitchcock vehicle packed with his signature humor, pungent, amusing characters, and deceptive and surprising camera work. Most of film is placed convincingly in the Covent Garden vegetable and fruit center in London. The narrative type is the tried-and-true wrong man plot: Finch is the prime suspect in the string of murders; he is even arrested, tried, and found guilty, but the prescient doubts of the chief inspector lead to a revelatory scene in which Foster is caught getting rid of the body of his latest victim (note parallel with 'Dial M for Murder'); McDowell notes that he is not wearing his necktie; end of film with prospect of Finch being released. Many famous sequences underline Hitchcock's devotion to suspense and surprise combined with his new emphasis on lurid sexuality and violence. Leigh-Hunt's murder is an extensive, hyper-edited 'Psycho'-shower-type murder sequence emphasizing her terror and pleading for her life, including a quick shot of her breast yanked out of her brassiere, and ending with the (tasteless?) shot of her lying dead with her tongue protruding from her mouth. Another tour de force sequence has Massey emerge from a building, camera in close-up on her face, then she moving her head slightly to show Foster suddenly behind her, who asks her if she has a place to spend the night; she then innocently follows him to his apartment, and after he closes the door behind them, the Steadycam camera refuses to accompany them but retreats silently down the narrow stairs, and backs out gracefully into the animated and noisy street to come to rest peering dispassionately at the apartment where the victim has disappeared. The humor appears in the first sequence that includes Hitchcock's cameo in a bowler hat in the audience listening to a speech on cleaning up the Thames and the whole crowd then distracted by the sight of a dead woman (pollution) floating in the river with a necktie around her neck. It is however most apparent in the two dinner sequences in the second half of the film, in which McDowell's wife refuses to feed him his favorite bangers, potatoes, and eggs, but instead presents him with pig's feet and little birds cooked with cherries and a gooey sauce; the non-plussed police inspector then cuts away frustratingly at the bony items. For a viewer used to traditional Hitchcock movies, the emphasis on sexual violence and nudity (three scenes perhaps not present in the original 1972 American release) is surprising and a little distracting. Nevertheless, well-rounded, interesting characters, a wrong-man plot that keeps the viewer in suspense, and the humor and cinematic legerdemain that one expects from master. (2014)

**Fried Green Tomatoes** 1991 Jon Avnet 3.0 Kathy Bates as overweight, unhappily married southern housewife who in a nursing home listens to the story told by..., Jessica Tandy tells the story that

took place in Whistle Stop Alabama back in the 20s and 30s, Mary Stuart Masterson cute and plucky as the young Idgy who has an obvious crush on..., Mary Louise Parker the tragic proper and pretty girl who dies of cancer, Cicely Tyson in rather colorless role as loyal black servant, Chris O'Donnell as the good ol' Southern boy who as sheriff of Whistle Town stands up to the Klan. Very sentimental, music-filled, flashback nostalgic story about friendship, love (it is suggested that the two women are lesbian lovers), courage, loyalty, tragedy (Parker is beaten by her husband, and just when she survives all the indignities of life, she dies of cancer!) taking place in a carefully reconstructed 'To Kill a Mockingbird'-style South in the 1920s and 1930s. A true woman's 'chick flick' that tugs inexorably at the heartstrings and has the women somehow surviving the indignities of life inflicted upon them by their menfolk, in a setting that the art directors lovingly created in the finest detail. Social setting reminiscent of 'Mockingbird' -- all the black folks are oppressed and noble, while the white folks are divided into nigger-hating sheet wearers (Klan) and the good whites (our heroines, naturally) who are thoughtful friends of their black servants and insist on serving the town blacks in the rear of the Whistle Stop Cafe. Alabamians build up their self-worth by sneering at the people from neighboring Georgia (Valdosta usually). Denouement is ridiculous - it turns out the body of the disappeared husband was barbecued by Big George and then served to the Georgia sheriff who declares it to be the best barbecue he ever put in his mouth! Perhaps most interesting part of movie is the development of Kathy Bates, who (somehow) under the influence of storytelling Tandy progresses from an overeating, unhappy housewife to a more confident version of herself and a better marriage, without of course having to resort to feminist self-realization (i.e., looking at her vagina in a mirror). Somewhat artificial, heart-warming, entertaining movie that shamelessly appeals to the feminine audience. (2007)

**The Friends of Eddie Coyle** 1973 Peter Yates 3.5 Robert Mitchum in convincing and moving performance as gentle, small-time Boston gangster at the end of his career – he mostly sells illegal guns; Peter Boyle as his friend Dillon, a bartender and hit man, who presents himself as a close friend of Eddie; Alex Rocco as Scalise, the leader of a gang of bank robbers, who always begins by taking the bank manager's family hostage; Richard Jordan a bit glamorous as a Treasury policeman, Foley, out to get the bank robbers; Joe Santos as one of the bank robbers. Realistic, methodically made, depressing crime story set in working-class Boston. The film has a documentary-like style – location cinematography in working-class Boston suburbs, straightforward mise-en-scène and editing, true-to-life dialogue, and a soundtrack of cheesy TV-style music. It follows essentially three related narrative lines, which until the middle of the film are difficult to untangle and connect. One is a series of methodical, well-observed, meticulously plotted, suspenseful bank holdups performed by masked men, whose faces we see fleetingly. Another is the efforts of two layers of gun dealers (Mitchum, Steve Keats) to get hold of illegal guns including M-16s and deliver them to customers, one of whom is Scalise and his men. The third involves the efforts of Foley to find a source of information on the gun runners and the bank robbers. Mitchum is a good candidate, since he is about to be sentenced to 3-5 years in New Hampshire for transportation of illegal alcohol (being an honorable thief, he had refused to turn state's evidence against his confederates) and he has a wife and three children that he does not want to go on welfare. Much of the film is a series of tense negotiations among policeman and crooks, in which everyone maneuvers, lies, and betrays at will to gain the advantage; it is often difficult to distinguish police from the bad guys. The central thread of the film is the character and fate of Eddie: although a sweet guy, he can't seem to do anything right. Because he lives on the thieves' code of omertà, he has to serve time; and yet his supposed friends either betray him or stand aside when he is in trouble; when he contacts Foley, the latter refuses to go out of his way to help him; when Coyle finally gives Foley information to help him nab the robbers, it is too late – someone else (Dillon) has already done it; and when the gang boss wants Dillon to kill the man responsible for squealing on Scalise, Dillon blames it on Eddie. In the long final sequence, Dillon takes his supposed friend to a Bruins hockey game, drinks beer with him and cheers the home town (lots of conflict on the ice), and then shoots him in the neck when Eddie falls into a drunken sleep in the car. Dillon's betrayal of Eddie is shocking. No redemption in this film; a bunch of guys with no future that will turn one another in to the cops if it's to their advantage. (2014)

**Friends with Money** 2006 Nicole Holofcener 4.0 Jennifer Aniston as single LA girl with low self-esteem working as a maid; Catherine Keener her usual charming self as unhappily married woman looking for some validation in her life; Joan Cusack as wealthy woman living a privileged existence in a happy marriage; Frances McDormand as (hilariously) angry young woman married to a nice guy with a child; Simon McBurney although physically unattractive the most memorable of the men as McDormand's nurturing, gay-seeming husband; Jason Isaacs, Greg Germann, Bob Stephenson as some of the less important men. Charming, insightful, thoroughly entertaining piece about four woman friends making their way through a small slice of their lives (what else would you expect from Holofcener?). The film does not have a strong thematic or narrative consistency, although there are small changes at the end. Cusack is just as wealthy and privileged at the end as she was in the beginning; McDormand seems a bit more aware of her issues and a bit less angry, but nothing essential has changed for her and McBurney; Keener manages to separate from her arrogant, unconnected husband, and Aniston, ever on the alert for a better boyfriend, has found one she likes and has money, but he is idle, overweight, and uninteresting and she seems aware that this is no sea change in her life. The film is a series of scenes developing the personalities of especially the female characters. Holofcener (who also wrote the screenplay) has a sharp comic eye for amusing neurotic behavior. The star is Aniston, who has such low self-esteem that she resigns herself to working as a maid, accepts offers for dates from any guy without reflection, has regular sex with a jerk who won't even look at her when they make love, and compulsively collects bottles of face cream (she even steals a large one from one of her customers). Keener is so deprived from her husband's hands-off behavior (they haven't had sex in a year, he "doesn't mind" when she takes three weeks to notice that he has shaved off his beard) that she has a look of gratification on her face when her housemaid asks if she is ok after she says "Ow!" in the last part of the film. McDormand is so angry that she gets into shouting matches with other drivers on the street and she has to be escorted from a store when she makes a scene because a couple allegedly broke in line in front of her; she then runs into a plate glass door and breaks her nose. McBurney is the only male character that gets significant development: although he has a "gay" affect (very focused on his clothes, a direct, nurturing personality), he is thoroughly hetero and devoted to his (difficult) wife, and when he encounters a male friend and even goes to his home to have dinner with him, romance and sexuality don't seem to cross his mind. Fresh, observant, witty film that yields many moments of personal realization. Since the film is primarily about female friendship, one wonders why "money" is in the title. (2013)

**From Mao to Mozart** 1981 (Isaac Stern) 3.0 Entertaining and interesting documentary on Stern's trip to China in 1979 -- invited by Chinese musical authorities. A lot of passages showing performances of Chinese musicians -- particularly impressive are the child prodigies -- and of Stern giving master lessons to Chinese students -- invariably praising them for their advanced technique, but adding that they have to put more emotion/feeling in their music and that they have to make every note "sing", etc. Interesting to see Chinese musicians so eager to learn from Western sources, especially from the avuncular and helpful, if sometimes pompous, Stern. Particularly moving is the story by the director of the Shanghai Conservatory of how he and the faculty of the school were imprisoned, humiliated, and (mostly mentally) tortured by the henchmen of the Cultural Revolution, who wanted to exclude all outside influence from Chinese music. Also excerpts from the virtuosic playing of native Chinese instruments by young musicians. (2010)

**From Russia With Love** 2003 Terence Young (Britain) 3.5 Sean Connery his usual cool, handsome, amorous, sartorially perfect self in the second of his Bond series; Daniela Bianchi (Italian) a bit too cool and flat-chested to be a first-rate Bond girl; Pedro Armendariz (Mexican actor mortally ill with cancer) as the British bureau chief in Istanbul; Lotte Lenya (yes, *the* Lotte Lenya) as the highly unattractive, lesbian, and ruthless Rosa Klebb, SPECTRE's Number 3; Robert Shaw convincingly ruthless and evil as Bond's nemesis -- his hair is dyed blond; Bernard Lee as M; Lois Maxwell as Moneypenny; Aliza Gur and Martine Beswick as the fighting gypsy girls. One of the best Bond flicks. The film sags a bit in the middle (the gypsy girl fight is clichéd, the shootout at the end of the gypsy scene is badly choreographed; the periscope into the Russian embassy is too incredible, as is the explosion scene in which Bond grabs the Soviet encryption device he is looking for; Bond's tender night with

Bianchi is not very sexy). But other scenes keep the viewer interested – extensive use of on-location shooting in Istanbul, including visits to the Grand Bazaar, the Constantinian cistern and Hagia Sophia); a long sequence of intrigue and suspense as the Orient Express steams through the Serbian countryside (excellent shots of the locomotive’s drive wheels); an expertly choreographed, convincingly violent, to-the-death fight between Bond and Shaw in a sleeping compartment; a patented Bond-style chase of a doomed helicopter pursuing Bond (actually filmed in Scotland); the spectacular finale of Bond and Bianchi in a speedboat pursued by three bad guys, who are finally incinerated in a huge gasoline explosion. Although there is no “Bond’s the name” and our hero never orders a drink, there a plenty of Bond one-liners, such as (in reference to Bianchi’s dress), “They’ve just passed some new laws [in London]”; (in reference to the man crawling through the mouth of Anita Ekberg in a big poster) “She should have kept her mouth shut”; (Bond catches his first sight of Bianchi) “From this angle things are shaping up.” The execution of SPECTER’S Number 5 through venomous boot kicks toward the end of the film is classic Bond. The role of Tatiana is handled in classic Bond sexist fashion: even though she is a Soviet agent, her job seems limited to looking pretty and seducing James; she does not respond to Number 5’s romantic attentions toward the beginning of the film. The train compartment scene with Bianchi and the pursuit by the helicopter owe an obvious debt to Hitchcock’s 1957 ‘North by Northwest’, although Cary Grant’s romance with Eva Marie Saint is much hotter. The characters certainly lack the psychological nuance present in ‘Casino Royale’, but the concatenation of exciting scenes is top-notch Bond. (2015)

**The Front** 1976 Martin Ritt (blacklisted) 3.0 Woody Allen playing his same stammering, unsure comic persona as a writer front in the Blacklist era, Michael Murphy as Communist-sympathizing writer looking for work, Zero Mostel (blacklisted) as Hecky Brown, television actor and comedian who can’t find work because he once marched in a May Day parade, Andrea Marcovicci as TV script supervisor who falls for the persona Howard Prince creates, Herschel Bernardi (blacklisted) as TV producer constantly under pressure to keep out the Commies. Film that indicts 50s blacklisting in TV and movies, but plays more like a comedy about Woody Allen’s unexpected rise and fall as a “front” for blacklisted writers. Allen has no political inclinations in beginning of movie; he is looking for money, success and sex. He warms to the money and adulation he receives as a result of his “writing;” a lot of energy goes into courting and landing the pretty woman (Marcovicci) who is taller than he is. Prince feels his oats as time goes on, he starts to front for more than one writer, and then he begins to screen and edit scripts before he turns them in to the network, since he has his “reputation” to protect. Most moving manifestation of the destructive impact of the blacklist was Hecky Brown (Mostel), who because of his past temporary association with Communists cannot get a decent-paying gig even in the Catskills; after Allen befriends him out of pity, he commits suicide after laying his champagne bottle on the sill of the hotel window he jumps out of. In the end Allen refuses to answer questions posed to him by HUAC (he responds to the questions in a befuddled and absent-minded way); he is hustled off to federal prison for contempt of Congress, and in the train station he is lionized by his old (Commie) friends and by a gaggle of hero-worshippers. Movie is interesting and often funny with classic Allen one-liners; it makes sacrifices (like the romance) to the American movie market. (2005)

**The Front Page** 1931 Lewis Milestone 3.0 Pat O’Brien (Hildy Johnson), Mary Brian, Mae Clarke, Adolphe Menjou (Walter Burns), Edward Everett Horton. Adaptation of Hecht and MacArthur Broadway play. Seems to be basically a filmed play; whole thing is set in the press room at a jail where an anarchist is awaiting execution (he is reprieved at the end); film focuses on rapid-fire dialogue delivered by a bunch of wise-guy journalists running in and out of the room, and no one is faster than O’Brien and Menjou! Film is in terrible condition with poor image and crackling, staticky soundtrack; obviously it has not been remastered. Wit is acerbic, with insults thrown at practically everyone (never would have made it to the screen after 1934!) including women (Menjou is a misogynist), politicians (both mayor and sheriff are ridiculous and venal and reduce everything to politics and the prospects for reelection), Blacks (“pickaniny” was born in a taxicab), and of course the Red menace. Plot involves whether dedicated newsman Hildy will actually marry Brian and move to New York; of course, Menjou is determined to prevent it (they are old newsroom buds), and even telephones at



the very end to have Hildy arrested at the first train stop on the way to his bliss. Of course, later remade as 'His Girl Friday' in 1940 with Hildy cast as a woman (Rosalind Russell) and Howard Hawks delivering the same rapid fire delivery; and then again in 1970s. (2006)

**Frontera** 2014 Michael Berry 2.5 Politically oriented film dramatizing the plight of Mexican immigrants crossing the border into the USA. Ed Harris as rancher on the Mexican border – he is stern, rugged, resenting the crowds of Illegals passing through his land, but fair; Amy Madigan as his kind wife – she rides along the path taken by the immigrants to pass out water and blankets; Michael Peña effective as saintly, good guy illegal immigrant wrongly arrested for the death of Madigan; Eva Longoria completely unrecognizable as Peña's poor wife; Aden Young as the current sheriff of the county. The film is in large part a detective thriller: Madigan has a fatal fall from her horse as a result of teenagers' horseplay with a rifle; Peña is arrested because he is on the scene (and he is Mexican); but the dogged fair mindedness of Harris uncovers the truth, and Peña and Longoria are reunited in their home, the boys are punished, and Harris prevents further shootings of Mexicans crossing the frontier. The film's narrative integrity is marred by an extended subplot that has Longoria and other Mexicans being exploited by "coyotes" and imprisoned in a suburban Phoenix garage (Longoria is actually raped but supported by her saintly husband after reunification). The film's moral center is the tall, handsome, rugged Harris, obviously presented as the true conscience of a westerner dealing with the issue of illegal immigration: he refuses to jump to conclusions about the guilt of Peña, he takes notice of the exculpatory evidence, and insists that the truth be recognized. The film has a hagiographic slant: all the main characters are good-hearted persons devoted to the search for truth and respect for others. At the end Harris brings Longoria and Peña back together, he hires Peña to mend his fence (all the immigrants are looking for work), and then stops a would-be assassin from pulling the trigger on another victim. The Mexicans are earnest and the Americans are mostly fair. The real villains are the "coyotes" who exploit their fellow countrymen when they try to cross the border. (January 2018)

**Frost/Nixon** 2008 Ron Howard 3.5 Frank Langella outstandingly convincing and entertaining as he inhabits the body and personality of Richard Nixon; Michael Sheen all smooth, toothy, and under-surface insecure as David Frost; Kevin Bacon as Colonel Brennan, Nixon's protective assistant. Outstanding talky movie based on successful Broadway play. Superficial talk show host Frost courts Nixon in 1977 to undergo 30 hours of interviews. Film progresses through the sessions in a local Republican congressman's house. In several scenes it becomes apparent that the theme is a contest of minds and will between Nixon and Frost, especially since Frost's research assistants are dedicated Nixon haters who are determined to make the bastard admit that he did wrong in Watergate. Nixon himself affirms the theme in a (fictitious) late night phone call where he proclaims that Frost and he are both victims of the snobbery of the beautiful people, and that the remaining interview about Watergate will be a contest which only one of them will win (Nixon later tells Frost that he has no recollection of the phone call). In the beginning the cunning, slippery Nixon gets the better of Frost with his rambling, folksy diversions, but Frost rallies in the end to force from Nixon the famous admission that he let down the American people and that it would haunt him the rest of his life. The film's balance is then restored by the pathos evoked by Langella in this scene – tragic, regretful, disappointed that he will never enjoy the respect due to the president who opened the door to China. Film makes outstanding use of close-ups, especially of course of Langella's face toward the end. Langella's powerful performance provides a kind of partial rehabilitation of Nixon – he is witty, always courteous and thoughtful (after the last interview he stops to talk sensitively with a bystander about her dog). Beneath his cunning and calculated exterior, he is disarmingly sincere in the confessions he makes to Frost about his failings and his regrets about never being liked – he envies Frost for his charm, his easiness with others, his enjoyment of company. Terrifically entertaining film about the thrust and parry between two worthy adversaries; Frost was the winner, but they both went away with their dignity. Nixon-haters will vary between outrage and disappointment in their reactions. (2009)

**Frozen** 2013 Disney: Chris Buck, Jennifer Lee 3.0 Idina Menzel (voice) as Elsa, the heiress to the throne of the little kingdom of Arendelle, which appears to be in Norway; Kristen Bell (voice) as

the clumsy, irrepressible, feisty Anna, her younger sister. Enjoyable Disney animated musical in the tradition of 'The Lion King' or 'Beauty and the Beast'. With its focus on two sisters, the romantic proclivities of one of them, and goofy accompanying animal characters – Olaf, the snowman, and Sven, the endearing, silly reindeer – the film is designed to appeal to pre-adolescent girls. Based loosely on Hans Christian Anderson's 'The Snow Queen', the film focuses on the plight of Elsa, who has a mysterious power that turns everything she touches to ice. Close to her sister when children, she has a falling out with Anna when the latter decides to marry a (supposed) prince the day she meets him. Elsa flees to a spectacular ice castle in the mountains; much of the film chronicles the adventures of Anna, an ice salesman (!) (Jonathan Groff), his grimacing reindeer, and the extremely corny, wise-cracking Olaf (Josh Gad), as they search for the icy Elsa. One rather sketchily prepared twist has the supposed true love of Anna suddenly reveal himself as an opportunist, interested in her only to get his hands on a Scandinavian throne. The film ends with a dramatic scene back in the city in which Anna shields her sister from an assassin; Anna thereby turns into an ice statue, but the act of love for her sister redeems everyone and everything so that Anna is restored to life and summer returns to Arendelle. Although the faces of the human characters lack subtlety, the animation is of course first-class, especially the pictures of winter – the radiant, bluish ice, ice crystals spreading along the vault of Elsa's castle, the gleaming, translucent castle itself towering above the surroundings, the transformation of Anna's flesh-and-blood body into an ice sculpture and then back to the colors of life. Disney finds a compromise between old-fashioned ('Snow White') and contemporary versions of princesses: true, the monarch is a young woman, the feisty Anna takes matters into her own hands, and she punches men in the face; on the other hand, Anna is a willing victim of a handsome prince's face, and the principal lesson of the story seems to be that women-girls need to love – and be nice to – one another. The musical score includes trendy songs that seem ready for the presumed Broadway production; the best of them is the touching, "Would you like to build a snowman?", and the showstopper ballad, 'Let It Go'. (2014)

**Frozen River** 2008 Courtney Hunt 3.0 Melissa Leo plays Ray, a lower-class white woman struggling to support her family in upstate New York (her Mohawk husband had taken off with the money she has saved to buy a better mobile home); Misty Upham as Lila, a bitter Indian woman who has lost her baby to her mother in law and who smuggles illegals across the border from Canada; Michael O'Keefe as a sympathetic trooper; Charlie McDermott as Ray's teenage son, who has to babysit his younger brother and who makes mistakes being on his own. Interesting and ultimately moving realistic film. Made with no frills, it realistically depicts life among poor folk in and around the Indian Reservation: the depths of winter, it is always cold with snow covering everything along the barren streets; most everyone lives at or below the poverty line and has to struggle to make ends meet; Indians and Whites do not get along – Upham tells Ray that she doesn't usually work with whites and state troopers stop Indians on the road when they let Whites go on by. The narrative focuses on Ray's need for funds so that her television set will not be repossessed and she will be able to buy a new "double wide" for her and her children to live in. When she and Lila meet, they are very hostile, but by necessity Ray soon joins her in the smuggling operation, contacting shady and dangerous characters across the St. Lawrence River in Quebec, and driving them over the frozen river (will the ice hold?) back to the drop off point in New York. The narrative focuses on the developing relationship between the two women – wary and hostile at first, but gradually thawing to a kind of tentative mutual respect because of their common status as poor, women, and love and worry for their children. Once when a baby belonging to some Pakistani immigrants gets left by mistake on the ice, Ray and Lila just have to look at one another to agree to set off to find it (they find it alive). The two are cornered by the police at the end: since one of them has to be arrested, Ray agrees that she will give herself up – being White she will get only a few months in prison. Meanwhile, Lila moves into the old trailer with Ray's children, the two little kids begin to play with one another, and the truck comes down the road with the double-wide that will be paid for by the smuggling proceeds. Wonderful acting; especially by Ray, who although she looks weather- and life-beaten, asks for absolutely no pity as she forges ahead in her campaign to improve the lives of herself and her children. Reminds us of the importance of Independent movies in American films. (2010)

**Fruitvale Station** 2013 Ryan Coogler 3.0 Michael B. Jordan (TV fame) smiling, good-humored and well-intentioned as Oscar Grant, conflicted 22-year-old killed in 2009 by the BART police officer in Fruitvale BART Station Oakland; Melonie Diaz as his girlfriend and mother of his beloved daughter – about 4 years old; Octavia Spencer with big round eyes in an affecting, emotional performance as his mother. Effective, often moving drama about the last day and then the shooting and death of Oscar Grant. The film begins with actual cell phone footage of Oscar's shooting, and then flashes back to record his last day. We learn that he is an ex-convict (no mention that he was in San Quentin for gun possession), that he cheats on his girlfriend/fiancée, that he has been fired from his job at a food store for being habitually late; despite his repeated assurances that he is turning his life around, one senses that his future is uncertain. On the other hand, because he is very attached to his mother, he spends most of the day helping her celebrate her birthday; he also loves children and spends a lot of time horsing around and caressing his little girl; the script also goes out of its way to show him nice to white people, in particular the girl in the delicatessen that he connects with his grandmother to get her a good fried fish recipe (the same girl is one of the passengers on the BART train that takes a picture of his shooting). Knowing that Oscar is going to be killed, the viewer can sometimes become impatient with the extended lead-up; one sequence of Oscar comforting a dead dog is perhaps too obvious a symbol of what will happen to him. The last 20 minutes of the film that chronicle the altercation with white supremacists in the station, the shooting of Oscar, and his treatment and death in the hospital are gut-wrenching: the tragedy and senselessness of the event is beautifully portrayed, especially in the grief played by Spencer. The film is even-handed in its approach to the subject: it makes no explicit political statements; it recognizes that Oscar had his problems (perhaps compensating for them with what appear to be fictional additions such as his helping the white girl), and although it portrays some of the BART cops as macho beasts, it makes it clear that the killing was an accident due in part to inexperience. Memorable, often moving first feature for Coogler. (2014)

**Funny People** 2009 Judd Apatow 2.0 Adam Sandler painfully dominating a film about stand-up comics and his search for romantic stability; Seth Rogan amusing as puppy-dog-like comic who signs on as Sandler's companion and amanuensis; Jason Schwartzman often amusing as one of three slacker roommates – starring in a sitcom, he is more successful than the other two; Jonah Hill as manic-depressive third chubby roommate, who can't decide whether he should mock or support his friends; Aubrey Plaza as reserved but sexy aspiring actress, who admits that she has sex with celebrities because they are celebrities; Leslie Mann (guess what, Apatow's wife) as serious romantic interest offered for Sandler's redemption – she is good at looking wholesome and smiling adoringly at her ex-boyfriend; Eric Bana (Australian) as highly neurotic husband of Leslie. Sometimes funny, mostly irritating film set in the world of celebrity stand-up comedians in Los Angeles. The funny part is due mostly to the antics of the slacker trio, who can't let a moment go by without cracking a joke or playing one. Rogan is a simple guy, unassuming and endearing, who as Sandler's alter ego sometimes earns point by objecting to his self-involved behavior, but there is a clueless passivity about the way he follows his boss around that prevents the viewer from taking him seriously. Sandler is superficial and egotistical, somewhat ironic about his material success and celebrity status, but mostly interested in making people laugh and screwing pretty young things he doesn't like and whom he will never see again. His Hollywood redemptive characteristic is his yearning for his ex-girlfriend, Mann, who dumped him years ago and then married and had two daughters (both played by Apatow's daughters). Second half of the interminable (2:26) movie is monopolized by Sandler's and Rogan's trip to Marin County, where Sandler makes a play for his ex-girlfriend; luckily husband Bana is off to the Far East for a business deal, although things get a bit tenser when he unexpectedly returns. Romantic comedy-style clichés abound as the film creeps toward its conclusion, marked by the triumph of marital fidelity (Sandler returns to Los Angeles with only having done oral sex with Mann). The ending seems to be a return to an immature slacker lifestyle – he and Rogan meet and the latter suggests more jokes to use in his routines. The film would be more than occasionally funny if there weren't so many penis jokes (30, 40?) and if Sandler's joke delivery wasn't so mumbly and low-key. (2009)

**Fury** 1936 Fritz Lang (MGM) 3.5 Spencer Tracy, Sylvia Sydney looking pretty glamorous as sweet, sensitive fiancée, Edward Ellis as a hokey upstanding sheriff who defends the jail against the attacking mob, Walter Brennan as very skinny deputy sheriff Bugs with that famous voice, William Abel

as the corny DA trying the 22 men for murder. Lang's first Hollywood film made paradoxically at squeaky clean MGM. Texture of the film is small-town America – characters have scrubbed, sanitized, respectable look even as they shout for violence against Tracy in jail – very different from dingy, veristic Warners look! Also all public servants are presented as upstanding and trying their best to do their duty – the Sheriff, the District Attorney, the Judge, and even Bugs, the comic relief deputy. Tracy does good job with a difficult role – an upstanding working class guy who just wants to get enough money together to marry his sweetheart, then turning into an unreasonable, crazed seeker of revenge after the attempt against his life, only finally to shave, dress properly, and appear before the judge in order to save the lives of the 22 men. Film has three McGuffins somewhat laboriously worked into the script – the tear on the raincoat sewed up with blue thread, the peanuts in Joe's pocket, and his use of the word 'momentum' when he means 'memento' all three tip Sydney off that he is alive toward the end of the film. The film has several surprise reversals – Tracy appears suddenly off camera (and then in shadows) when brothers are talking about him after his death; when jury is rendering its verdicts, camera follows one man running out of the courtroom, he stops, then reverses to show Tracy dressed in suit, then camera retreats as Tracy strides up to the judge. Heart of movie is the jail-burning sequence: the crowd descends on the jail, the Sheriff and deputies try to stop them, they break down the door, can't get at the keys, Tracy caught in a pattern of jail bars, the crowd sets fire to the jail building, desperate Sydney arrives on the scene and sees Tracy behind the flames through the cell window, the dog runs into Tracy's cell to "die" with him, rapid cutting between expressive, horrified close-ups – Tracy, Sydney, angry townsfolk, one woman kneeling in prayer, one fellow eating a hotdog -- and then all ended with use of dynamite. Film would be aimed at the South, but seems to take place in the western part of the Midwest. It begins with a condemnation of mob violence (endemic in the USA in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century) and the power of rumor (after Joe's arrest, many scenes of men spreading rumors in the bar and women gossiping about the same thing at home), but also condemns revenge – if Tracy hadn't been brought back to his senses by a good woman, he would have stood by while at least a dozen citizens would have been executed. Trial scene feels contrived and stagy. Has happy ending as Tracy in front of the judge forswears revenge and opts for justice; credits roll after embrace of reconciliation with Sydney. (2005)

**The Fury** 1978 Brian DePalma 3.0 Kirk Douglas, Amy Irving, Charles Durning, John Cassavetes, Carrie Snodgrass. Almost nonsensical thriller about father (Douglas) searching for his kidnapped psychic son, and enlisting heavily psychic Irving to help find him. Film begins with confused kidnap scene on Israeli beach, and then shifts to Toney locations in Chicago and outskirts. Some attempts at humor (interjecting Hitchcock style vignettes) are partially successful – scene where Douglas invades working class Chicago apartment and wins over fat old lady; extended chase sequence where federal agents try, but do not succeed, in catching Douglas, who kidnaps two local cops to help him. Kind of spy plot is almost irrelevant – what is so valuable about the psychic kids to motivate the feds to be so mean? What is relationship between scientific institute under Durning in Chicago and the other one in the country? Interesting that the bad guys are the feds, not the Russians or the Chinese – a sign of the 70s. Irving is very cute and fetching as vulnerable, smart, game teenage psychic; we do root for her. But why do we have to watch her ooh and ahh over her adorable bedroom and eat ice cream sundaes with fudge and marshmallow cream with Snodgrass? *Pièces de résistance* of movie are the violent schlock scenes à la DePalma. Irving has uncanny ability to make people bleed and to sense scenes and events; then she is shocked by the ill she has wrought. Ending is a true *tour de force* – a psychic confrontation between the evil Robin and his father, girlfriend, and Irving. He levitates and murders girlfriend, spinning her around until blood is splattered all over the wall and mirrors; he almost kills his father (he is levitated above Douglas when he enters the room), but falls to his death, where he communicates some blue-eyed power and will to revenge to Irving. She then is comforted by evil leering Cassavetes, and just as we think she is going to give in and become his lover, she turns on him, blinds him with cerebral hemorrhage and blood pouring out of his eyes, he staggers around the room, and then, apparently with the power given her by Robin, she blows him up in fantastic explosion with his head tumbling away. *Ne plus ultra* of gory shock and dismay! (2006)

**Fury** 2014 David Ayers 4.0 Brad Pitt as charismatic tank commander, Sergeant Wardaddy Collier, pushing through Germany against heavy opposition in April 1945; Shia LaBeouf as evangelical crew member, Bible Swan, who tells the guys that their survival is in the hands of the Lord; Michael Pena as Hispanic crew member Gordo Garcia ('End of Watch'); Jon Bernthal as brutal soldier Coonass Travis from North Georgia -- foul-mouthed and resentful of thoughtful, middle-class behavior; Logan Lerman as green, inexperienced individual replacement, Norman, who has to learn to operate the forward 30 caliber machine gun. Riveting war movie following a Sherman tank through a couple of German villages in April 1945 – it evokes excitement for the battle scenes, anxiety for the fate of the men, admiration for the leadership of Brad Pitt, pity for the death of the guys, except for Lerman, who manages inexplicably to escape under the bombed out tank when the rest of the crew is killed. Battle scenes are terrific – violent (turrets being blown off the Shermans), noisy (shouting, tank motors, explosions, bullets clanking against armor, etc.), exciting, snappily edited, expert filming to make the viewer understand what is happening. The battle scenes: 1) experienced commander Pitt barking out commands to knock out German anti-tank guns along the edge of the trees; 2) taking the town against weak opposition – tank gun shooting into buildings to get a sniper; 3) the best scene – the seemingly hopeless combat of the outclassed Sherman against the German Tiger; after losing three of four tanks, Wardaddy gets him by sneaking up behind (the Tiger's turret turns very slow) and bagging him through its vulnerable back (and then of course shooting the crew trying to escape the burning machine); 4) with his Sherman disabled in the middle of a crossroads, the five-man crew holds off an entire Waffen SS battalion, killing dozens with several well-executed tactics, until everyone dies (heroically) except for the lucky Lerman. In a bit of poetic justice, Lerman is spared by a German kid that spots him, in cosmic payback for the time in the beginning of the film that Lerman hesitated to fire at a German soldier because he saw that he was a teenager. Lerman is called a “hero” by American soldier later moving past his tank, thus indicating that the suicidal stand was worth it. Film is a fabulous buddy movie: all the characters are carefully drawn individually: Pitt as the hardened no-nonsense commander, who has however a decent streak shown by his love for horses (a central metaphor for the beauty of nature) and his ability to recall a citation from Isaiah in an exchange with Bible just before he is killed. Pitt is the father figure for the quarreling little family of four crew members. Pitt repeats several times “Best job I ever had” (his tank is his “home”), and says to his “children” at the end “I am sorry, son”, and “I did my best.” Coonass ridicules Norman’s romance with a local girl (they make love in the bedroom of her apartment), but he makes up with him, apologizing just before the final fight. The film is also eloquent on the utter and rank destruction of warfare – the viciousness and rage of the soldiers as they mow down the enemy, the enormous ravages inflicted on the human body, the huge numbers of Germans killed in the final firefight – what a waste. The final fight at the crossroads comes across as far-fetched – could five men really hold off an entire German battalion for a long time? Ranks at the top of great war films with ‘Saving private Ryan’, ‘The Big Red One’, and ‘All Quiet on the Western Front’. (2015)

**Gainsbourg (Vie héroïque)** 2010 Joann Sfar (France) 3.0 Eric Elmosnino in convincing, dedicated portrayal as legendary French singer-songwriter-provocateur from his childhood during World War II through the 1980s – he does not however have quite the presence and magnetism of the real Gainsbourg; Anna Mouglalis as sexy, dark-headed version of Juliette Greco; Lucy Gordon as his third wife Jane Birkin; Laetitia Casta as pretty convincing Brigitte Bardot. Entertaining, colorful biopic of the famous French songwriter: the film focuses on his songs and song styles (from his early romantic ballads, through the pop songs of the 60s (France Gall), jazz, and death rock, to his later reggae send-up of the “Marseillaise”); on his womanizing and need to be with women, resulting in his seduction of some of the foremost vedettes of the era; and on his hyper-Jewish appearance (big nose and protruding ears, which he refers to as “ma gueule”), which seems to lie at the source of his artistic inspiration, his extreme desire for attention, and his seeking consolation in the arms of women. The film covers most of the bases – his affairs with various women, many of his most famous (or infamous) songs; a nice version of “Dancing the Javanaise” with Mouglalis, a brief cabaret performance of ‘Le poinçonneur de Lilas’, and the send-up of the ‘Marseillaise’, but no soundtrack of ‘Sucette’ or the love-sex song with Bardot and Birkin. The first part of the film devotes a lot of attention to his interest in painting as well as sex – he regales his fellow students at school by drawing nudes pursued by dogs with erect penises. His father, who was a

piano player at a bar, tired hard to make him into a concert pianist, but was very proud of him when he made it as a singer and popular songwriter; Serge was very upset when his father died. The film suffers a bit from the omnipresence of fanciful cartoon-like figures that the director sticks in as reflections of the protagonist's insecurities: first a huge, balloon-like figure derived from German caricatures of Jews during the Occupation, and then a tall, thin figure with an enormous pointed nose and huge protruding ears who follows Gainsbourg around in the second part of the film. The film also suffers somewhat from formlessness – you know, one-thing-after-the-other, making sure you cram in most of the song styles, becoming sketchier in his later periods, and ending with Gainsbourg's physical and emotional degeneration into alcoholism and terminal scruffiness (the half-grown beard!). Nevertheless, an engrossing film for viewers interested in French popular culture and in the work of this quirky, unpredictable, but gifted artist. (2013)

**The Galapagos Affair: Satan Came to Eden** 2013 Daniel Geller; Dana Goldfine 4.0  
Fascinating documentary about the fate of the various Europeans (especially German), who came to Floreana (Galapagos) in the early 1930s to escape civilization and to find peace and meaning in solitude; they misnomer their destination as “paradise” or “Eden”, since it is apparent that for whatever reason, they do not leave their problems behind. The focus is on Friedrich Ritter and his consort Dore; an acolyte of Nietzsche, he wants to escape the artificialities of civilization and work on his expansion of Nietzschean philosophy. The couple's solitude is soon broken by the respectable- and bourgeois-seeming Wittners, who have two children and set up the most comfortable and complete living quarters, and the bizarre temptress, the so-called Baroness von Wagner, who arrives with two apparent male sex slaves in tow and who chagrins everyone else with her plans for building an hotel on the barren island. The events on the island soon become known throughout the world in scandalous detail due to leaks to the press. During a terrible drought in 1934 the Baroness and her first lover disappear, never to be seen again; one assumes they were murdered – probably by her husband Lorenz and with the help of someone else – but their bodies are never found. Lorenz then dies in a shipwreck as he attempts to leave the islands, and Ritter dies either because he ate tainted chicken or he was poisoned, perhaps by his wife, who may have hated him for his oppression of her. The authors canvas the opinions of various members of Galapagos society, but conclusions are left up to the viewer; there are many possible permutations; but one suspects that Lorenz murdered the Baroness and her lover, that Lorenz then died of an accident (divine punishment?), and Ritter of natural causes. The film also raises larger questions: Germans seek out solitude as a result of the anti-civilization movements in early 20th-century Germany (Volkish movements and Nudism). The film suggests that since humans are social creatures, they are not made to live in isolation without authority structures to channel their expectations and that in any case they bring their problems with them – rivalry, jealousy (among families and among women), competition, desire for riches, etc. The visual and aural texture of the film is very rich: the filmmakers gathered extraordinary film clips from the Galapagos locals, photographs taken by the American philanthropist, who visits the island periodically; professional actors including Kate Blanchett and Thomas Kretschmann read eloquently from the diaries and memoirs left by the principals to provide the narrative thread, characters, and interpretations of the events; thus there was no need for a narrator. Fascinating, thought-provoking, beautifully produced documentary on an interesting subject. (2014)

**The Game** 1997 David Fincher 3.0 Michael Douglas dominating every frame in the film as arrogant San Francisco finance executive about to get his comeuppance; Sean Penn as Conrad, his apparently troubled, drug-addled brother, who presents him with a (poisoned) birthday present; Deborah Kara Unger as attractive blond that Douglas runs into in the course of his “game” – they start antagonistic and of course evolve toward an understanding befitting a romantic comedy. Thriller with an enormous forward momentum about an arrogant executive bastard (he won't even look the people he is talking to in the eye) who out of curiosity consents to play a “game” that Penn organizes for him in a company called Consumer Recreation Services. The game starts off rather harmlessly with Daniel Schorr talking to him directly from his home TV set, but it soon escalates to far more dangerous levels – e.g., he finds himself trapped with Unger in an elevator that has no power and he is forced to climb up the cables to escape. Not much later, the game becomes dangerous as assassins charge his house with automatic weapons

blazing (seems improbable to the viewer that Unger and Douglas are able to escape these apparent professionals) and he is driven by a diabolical taxi driver into the bay; Douglas becomes progressively unsure of who is real – e.g., he can't figure out whether Unger works for CRS, he comes to believe that his lawyer is also in the plot, and when he calls his bank in Switzerland, he learns that all his accounts (totaling \$600,000,000!) have been drained by the conspirators. The viewer is carried along by the rapid succession of horrifying surprises and by the nagging unanswered question about who is behind all this. The climax builds to a paroxysm. Douglas is kidnapped, whereupon he finds himself in a dilapidated tomb in Mexico; after hitchhiking back to San Francisco (and humiliating himself in the process – he looks like a street person), he finds himself trapped on the rooftop of the CRS building; with Unger shouting that the people breaking through the steel door are coming to help him celebrate his birthday (who would believe this?), the door finally opens and Douglas shoots his brother through the chest before he can think; thereupon he throws himself over the edge of the roof, and falls 20 stories, through two glass ceilings, and into ... a vast beanbag with a bull's eye obviously prepared to cushion his fall. Thereupon the revelers, consisting of the friends, relatives, and passersby that appeared in the film, begin celebration of the real birthday party. Although this viewer found the resolution too pat and was looking suspiciously for another twist, this was it – the whole thing had been orchestrated by Conrad to teach his brother a lesson; and it appears to have worked – Douglas is emotional and thankful with everyone, and even asks Unger out on a date as she prepares to go off to Australia to do another gig for CRS. Film is neat and engrossing. It suffers all the way through however from improbability: the progression of the scam from one stage to another depends too much on coincidence and good luck, and in any case it scarcely seems psychologically probable that a man as cold and unfeeling as Douglas could be turned around by such a harrowing experience. Wouldn't he be bitter, humiliated, and vengeful? Best thing is to suspend belief and enjoy the ride.

**Le Gamin au vélo** 2011 Jean-Pierre et Luc Dardenne (Belgium) 3.5 The gifted Thomas Doret as Cyril, stubbornly furious ward of Belgian orphanage, who refuses to believe that his father has abandoned him; Cécile de France as patient, loving hairdresser in the town that – for reasons never revealed to viewer – takes Thomas into her home on the weekend; Jérémie Renier as dad that tells Cyril to his face that he no longer wants anything to do with him – he has moved on. Quietly moving, realistic drama about an abandoned child that eventually finds his way in life, it seems, under the wing of Samantha. Much of the film depicts Cyril constantly on the move – running away from the guardians of the group home or Samantha, riding all over town in his beloved bicycle, his legs pumping away, always seeming to be going in circles and looking for something. He is possessed by a furious, stubborn anger: at first he refuses to believe that his dad has disappeared, banging persistently on the door of his old apartment, roaming through the apartment opening all the doors to see if he is stuck in some closet, bicycling through the town interrogating people about his father's whereabouts, knocking on the window of the restaurant where his father works. In a memorably affecting scene, Cyril grips a woman in a doctor's office around her neck – it turns out to be Samantha, who tells him it is OK to hold her, but not so hard. She then becomes his protector, finding and returning his bicycle and welcoming him into her house on weekends. Cyril remains rebellious and angry, especially because visits to his dad yield only rejection. He slightly wounds Samantha with a kitchen knife, and gets recruited by a juvenile delinquent to help him rob a local merchant; he is arrested by the police and then reconciles with the victim. The film ends somewhat ambiguously, when Cyril is attacked by the victim's teenage son, but after a few suspenseful moments, Cyril gets himself up, gets back on his bicycle, and begins pedaling back to Samantha with the errand items he bought for her. Seems like a happy ending – Cyril has given up on his father, but he now has a substitute mother (although the film avoids any reference to his birth mother). Filming is simple and straightforward – all everyday activities like walking, running, eating, shopping, talking filmed in long takes that allow the viewer to focus on the actions and intentions of the principals, particularly Cyril. A lot of moving camera, but steady; no cinema vérité bobbing and jumping. Amazingly genuine treatment of the psychology and experience of a troubled child. The film seems to have Catholic overtones (Bresson). Cyril is surrounded by adults who support and try to save him; particularly Samantha, whose sacrificing, forgiving love for him is unexplained; she makes one think of

an angel bringing redemption for no particular reason (just as Jesus is supposed to have brought us all redemption just because his father willed it). (2015)

**The Gangs of New York** 2002 Martin Scorsese 3.5 Leonardo DiCaprio does credible job as Amsterdam, young son of Irish immigrant who works to extract revenge from rival gang for the death of his father, Daniel Day-Lewis in riveting performance as Bill the Butcher reveling in his role as leader of Nativist gang and for a while the real ruler of the New York Five Points district, Cameron Diaz fetching and effective as larcenous street moll who has antagonistic love affair with DiCaprio, Jim Broadbent as oily and terminally corrupt Boss Tweed of Tammany Hall and it appears the man who really runs New York. Amazingly energetic, violent, hard-hitting, tale of revenge in New York between 1846 and 1863. Scorsese's visual anthropology dissects his version of what New York (and America) was before the end of the Civil War – a checkerboard of tribal loyalties that include various Irish clans, the Nativist Protestants under Bill, the Tammany Hall machine under Boss Tweed, and the uptown rich who rarely go downtown. The Irish and the Nativists settle their differences in stylized combat – the two sides appearing in numbers and fighting it out bloodily and murderously with deadly weapons but not including firearms: reminds one of Early Medieval Germanic combat in great numbers. Shot in bright, even garish color; the decors are very gritty and realistic (hard to believe that lower Manhattan was so dirty and ramshackle) – movie often seems alike a long street fair with every human type known to man depicted in the streets; the culture is brutal and violent – bear-baiting in the streets, knife-throwing contests, public hangings to set an example (and the victims don't seem to mind that much!). All the performances are excellent, but Day-Lewis, speaking an early version of New Yorkese, absolutely revels in his evil and monopolizes the camera in all his scenes. Film has important historical theme. Instead of the mainstream idea that America's democracy and prosperity were made by the inevitable march of progress, modern New York here emerges out of tribal chaos and violence. Second part of film takes place during the Civil War, when the poor are drafted to be sent to their deaths (graphically depicted in photographs) the moment they set foot off their boats. Major event of the end of the movie are the 1863 draft riots, in which the poor mob ransacks authority and wealth in New York, denounces the draft, and kills every Black they can find. The riots are put down very brutally by the army, who fire into crowds with no compunction, beat mob members on the ground; even the final Armageddon between the Irish and the Nativists is spoiled by the firing of artillery shells from Union gunboats in the harbor. Amsterdam, who narrates: New York "is a cauldron in which a great city might be forged;" "our great city was born in blood and tribulation." It is through the application of catastrophic federal force/violence that modern American society is born out of the tribal loyalties and conflicts of the previous era. The non-stop weight of violence, the lack of credible female characters, the overwhelming weight of décor and history perhaps keep this movie from four stars. (2006)

**Garden State** 2004 Zach Braff 3.0 Zach Braff stars low key in his own film as kid living in LA trying to be an actor and returning to New Jersey to attend the funeral of his mother; Natalie Portman totally charming and fetching as sometimes ditzy girl who is an habitual liar and strikes up a relationship with Zach; Ian Holm as stern father who has insisted for years that Zach take anti-depressants to help him get over the death of his mother (the father thinks Zach was responsible); Peter Sarsgaard as Zach's grave-digging, pothead high school buddy. Kind of romantic comedy, coming of age movie about guy zonked out by psychotropic drugs; he stops taking them when he returns for his mother's funeral and gradually works out the first stages of some of his issues (he has to get off the drugs he has been on since childhood and realize that he was not responsible for the death of his mother), experiences some quirky adventures, and meets the love of his life. Especially the first part of the movie is engaging with attention-grabbing scenes, but the second part is characterized by long waits – perhaps the longest being the semi-surreal sequence in which Zach's buddy takes him on a voyage to a family living in a converted boat at the bottom of a quarry in order to recuperate his mother's favorite piece of jewelry that the friend had stolen from the corpse (!); the sequence is supposed to be the final part of Zach's voyage of discovery, but it is vague and endless. Piquant moments: most of Zach's old high school friends are doing odd jobs – the grave diggers who casually steal jewelry off the corpses they are burying and the cop who asks Zach how he is doing after he makes a hyper-macho traffic stop are amusing; Zach meets



guy who has retired on the royalties he received from silent Velcro invention – he now walks around in medieval armor and lives in a house without furniture decorated in medieval style; in first visit to Sam's (Portman) house Zach is assaulted by two Dobermans (called off by mother who tells them that they won't eat unless they leave Zach alone) and Sam has to bury the hamster that died because he couldn't handle the hamster wheel. Portman is the *pièce de résistance*: she is terminally cute smile, charming and zany but with a heart of gold and a head on her shoulders; she knows that Zach has been in trouble, but she knows that he is a good guy. In places, self-conscious inverted references to 1967's – 'The Graduate' with Zach playing the Dustin Hoffmann character; the difference is that Zach rediscovers the virtues of home and family, Ann Bancroft is muted into two endearing hippie-like moms who mean well, and the moral seems to be appreciate your roots rather than have contempt for them – Zach seems on the way to reconciliation with his dad. Entertaining small movie. It has a standard romantic comedy ending with Zach embracing Portman at the airport instead of returning to LA to face his demons alone; lots of tears as the lovers resolve to face life's challenges together. (2008)

**Gaslight** 1944 George Cukor (MGM) 3.5 Ingrid Bergman charming, beautiful and moving as young woman who marries on impulse and then is practically driven crazy by her husband; Charles Boyer as the charming foreign born pianist-composer who has a passionate fixation on jewels (reminiscent of E.T.A. Hoffmann?), 17-year-old Angela Lansbury in her first movie role as cheeky, impertinent, disquieting housemaid who makes things psychologically more difficult for her mistress (but who is not, it turns out, allied with Boyer in the plot); Joseph Cotten in rather flat role as the outside force of good who finally irrupts to save Bergman from her husband, and who gives signs in the end that he would like to marry her (do we have to wait for the execution of the arrested Boyer?); Dame May Whitty playing the amusing batty old maid that we are used to ('Lady Vanishes'!). Very effective melodrama taking place in foggy London; the art direction of the Victorian interiors of Bergman's Thornton Square apartment are detailed, sumptuous, and period accurate earning an Academic Award. Cinematography is also effective – detailed with a lot of shadows and expressive angles. The narrative engenders good tension (will Boyer succeed in driving his wife crazy by suggesting to her that she is gradually losing her mind? and will Cotton intervene in time to save her?), but the primary pleasure of the film is watching the strong performances of the principals, especially Bergman, bathing in the reflected glory of Hollywood's front-line stars at the height of their fame, and vicariously enjoying the splendid and lavish decors. Has there ever been a classic studio film that looks so good (admittedly the print is beautifully restored so we can enjoy the images to the fullest)? The script exploits well the subjection of wives to husbands in Victorian (1890s?) society; the viewer is a little frustrated that Bergman is so dependent – financially despite the fact she pays and psychologically – upon her husband. Film sometimes gives the impression that it is too polished with the rough edges filed off: What happened to the initial murder? What about the implication of adultery between Boyer and Lansbury? The traces of the Breen Office are apparent. The film received seven AA nominations with awards going to Bergman and Art Direction. (2007)

**The Gatekeepers** 2012 Dror Mareh (Israel) 3.5 Enlightening, almost always pessimistic documentary about the history of Israel from the 1967 war until the present. The director interviews six former heads of Shin Bet, a highly secret organization devoted to intelligence-gathering and prevention of terrorism from the annexed Palestinian population, first the PLO and then after the mid-90s Hamas, and he intercuts the interview footage with newsreels (Israeli right-wingers calling for the death of Rabin, Israeli soldiers rounding up suspects in the Occupied Territories, aerial shots of high-tech tracking and bombing of Palestinian terrorists) and with reenactings of key events, such as the 1984 Tel Aviv bus incident. The six men, who tend to merge into one another, are elderly, tanned, good-looking, well-spoken, and candid about their undercover activities. They recount the arrests of suspected terrorists, the aggressive interrogation techniques used to gather intelligence ("forget morality", their job is to do what it takes to prevent terrorism), the mistakes they made (the murder of two terrorists in the bus incident, their failure to protect Prime Minister Rabin from his right-wing assassin in 1995), the vicious internecine political struggle following the signing of the Oslo Accord in 1993 (the extreme right calling for the murder of Rabin), their campaign against the right-wing Israeli fanatics who plotted to blow up the Dome of the Rock in the 1990s, their inability to protect the Israeli population from the deadly Intifada attacks in the

1990s and the early 2000s. Interestingly all of the interviewees have sympathy with the Palestinian people and their aspirations: they regret ruefully that the short-sighted, broken Israeli political system was not able to find a solution that reconciled security for the Israelis with an autonomous state for the Palestinians (“tactics but no strategy”); some of them proclaim left-leaning opinions as they express their nostalgia for lost opportunities for agreement. They all are pessimistic about the future of Israeli and the Palestinians. The film ends with a breathless reenactment of an Israeli military patrol breaking into a Palestinian household, terrorizing the family waving their guns around, and arresting a young suspect. As one of the men says, hopes for peace are modest when Israel transforms itself into a domineering colonial state not so different in its behavior from Nazi Germany in, say, Belgium during World War II. Thought-provoking, emotionally wrenching for anyone who cares about Israel and the Israeli state. (2013)

**Gates of Heaven** 1978 Errol Morris 2.5 Famous first film by the ground-breaking documentarian. The subject is pet cemeteries in northern California; it begins with a series of interviews of people in the Bay Area – McClure, the guy who opened the cemetery, and several other folk associated with it ranging from a lady who talks to her dog to the owner of a local animal rendering factory. Because the owner of the plot decides to sell the land to a developer, the pet corpses are then exhumed and moved to Bubbling Well Pet Memorial Park outside Napa, owned and operated by a man and his two sons, named Harbert. The form of the film is wall-to-wall talking heads interspersed with a few scenes showing the terrain, the cemetery (in Napa), and at the end a montage of epigraphs and photographs of the departed pets (mostly dogs with a significant minority of cats). The author does not insist that his subjects talk about burying animals: one very amusing scene features a rendering businessman in the Bay Area who unintentionally reveals several amusing tidbits, such as his inability to talk about his business at dinner parties; Morris runs a long back-and-forth of two ladies feuding (for no apparent good reason) about the arrangements for moving the bodies; a long sequence has an Oakie-looking woman sitting in front of her shack complaining about her sons, but no reference to pet cemeteries. Most of the attention is devoted to the father and two sons who run the Napa cemetery. The younger son does not apparently have much to do; he talks about his hobbies including playing the guitar (cut to a long sequence of his doing so) or playing his stereo very loud facing the Napa Valley (cut to a scene doing so); on several occasions he proffers very detailed, hyper-elementary information about how he helps his dad run the business. The older son, who chafes a bit at ranking behind his brother in the company, talks like a motivational speaker drawing on his prior experience as an insurance salesman in Utah. The elder Mr. Harbert is the most eloquent in defining the ideology of the business: he thinks that pets were put on earth by God to provide love and comfort to people, and that they should be treated with dignity and respect and not thrown into the garbage can when they die; he and his wife believe that pets also go to heaven to rejoin their owners. The Napa segments afford numerous moving/bizarre/ humorous interviews with owners of deceased pets, who testify to the importance of the animals in their lives and to the emotional comfort they receive from visiting their graves. It is difficult to fathom what Morris is getting out; most often it seems subtle, unspoken humor at the expense of these yokel white people that are so attached to their pets. It is striking that the filmmaker was able to get his interview subjects to speak so freely and honestly. (2013)

**Gegen die Wand (Head On)** 2004 Fatih Akin (Germany) 3.0 Birol Ünel as a true suicidal bum who collects discarded bottles for a living, looks like a street person and has nothing to live for except his love Sibel; Sibel Kikelli – 20 years younger than Cahit, Sibel is yearning to break free from her straight-laced family and ‘fuck as many men as she can’; Stefan Gebelhoff gentle, loyal and loving as friend that poses as Cahit’s uncle when he makes courting visits to Sibel’s family. Disturbing love story between two impossibly matched Turkish Germans. Film takes place first in the lower reaches of Hamburg with a lot of time spent in dive bars, and then to the streets of Istanbul, where life is not much better. Sibel is looking for a Turkish husband who can conclude a *mariage de convenance* with her so that she can get away from her strict Muslim father and her thuggish brother, who tells her that she is dead meat if his father suffers from her misconduct; they live a wild and unconnected life with Sibel finding her lovers in bars and then leaving them contemptuously; Cahit goes to prison when he kills one of her lovers; Sibel then goes to Istanbul, where she thinks she might settle down and wait for her

husband, but she goes on a drunken spree and then settles down (apparently, since the process is not depicted in the film) with a middle-class husband and a daughter. Film has a reputation of being one of the first about the plight of Turks living in Germany, but in fact it deals little with cross-cultural observations and focuses on the impossible destiny of two completely mismatched lovers – the rebellious slut and the Bukowski-like drunk – and their inevitable disasters. Very dark, crummy, dilapidated surroundings, foul language, much substance abuse including alcohol and drugs, and a great deal of violence, including three suicide attempts (one of Sibel's with blood spurting all over a bar) and a brutal, bloody beating of Sibel in an Istanbul alley (she provokes it with her obscenity-laden insults of three macho guys she runs across). We always wonder what makes Cahit tick, since the author gives us a little background information about him, and we wonder what in the world attracts Sibel to him! Seemingly a lot of ellipses in film – we see the faces of the main characters, but we get little illuminating dialogue or action. The most enjoyable passage is the visit that the shaven Cahit makes to Sibel's parents toward the beginning to ask the skeptical father and brother for her hand. Film ends very ambiguously – Cahit comes to fetch Sibel from her middle class domesticity, and at first she seems willing to go with him; but then she – apparently – changes her mind and Cahit has to ride off in the bus alone. Different chapters of the narrative are interrupted by a Turkish band photographed on the straits and singing about love. Film has an engaging energy. (2010)

**The General** 1998 John Boorman (Ireland) 3.5 Brendan Gleeson absolutely riveting as Martin Cahill ('The General'), charismatic, humorous, fun-loving, affectionate yet often ruthless master criminal in 1980s Dublin; Adrian Dunbar as his faithful assistant, the last to abandon him when the going gets tough; Maria Doyle Kennedy as his beloved wife and mother of four children; Angeline Ball as very cute sister of Kennedy – she shares the affections of Martin with her sister; Jon Voigt with impregnable Irish accent as police inspector determined to bring down Martin even though he has a grudging admiration for him. Very entertaining and moving biopic of exuberant head of Dublin criminal gang. The film begins with a shocking depiction of Martin's assassination by IRA gunmen in a car outside his home, and then switches to flashback to recount the evolution of his career since he was a boy. The film focuses on his refusal to move out of his beloved working-class neighborhood, Hollyfield (he camps out in a tent while the bulldozers level the buildings around him); his daring robbing of Dublin's top jewelry store (but he is clueless about the 100 employees that love their jobs when the store goes bankrupt); his uncharacteristic crucifixion of a subordinate with nails to a pool table for supposedly stealing money from him (he takes him personally to a hospital when he realizes his error); his theft of valuable paintings from a local museum, his hiding them outdoors in a bush exposed to the elements (the most valuable one gets covered with mildew). Cahill, who is completely apolitical (he proudly refers to himself as a criminal), finally gets his comeuppance when he decides to fence the paintings to Ulster terrorists, leading a suspicious IRA to murder him after a few warnings that go unheeded. The evocation of Dublin neighborhoods is colorful and interesting – the row houses in Hollyfield, the middle class suburbs where Cahill moves his family when he has saved enough money from his loot, the law courts, the shabby police station (just like US movies), etc. The viewer's interest is heightened by Voigt's ongoing efforts to arrest Cahill and get a conviction; the wily criminal, who usually tries to hide his identity by covering his face with his hands or wearing a ski parka, always manages to escape conviction, much to the frustration of the judge and the police; Voigt however is able to wear down Cahill and his gang by putting dozens of hostile, mocking police officers on a visible tail toward the end of the film. The heart and soul of the film is the character of Cahill and the performance of Gleeson, an original mix of populist charisma (very popular with working-class Dubliners despite his meager contribution to their well-being), family affection toward his two women and all the children, and ruthless, self-seeking criminality. A memorable personality vividly presented. (2012)

**The General Died at Dawn** 1936 Paramount: Lewis Milestone 3.0 Gary Cooper long, lanky and terrifically handsome as O'Hara – he carries a little monkey on his shoulder and he is for oppressed people because he has been oppressed himself; Madeleine Carroll in first American movie as daughter of Hall – she is sent to seduce Cooper; Akin Tamiroff inscrutable and humorous as repressive war lord General Yang (nominated for Academy Award); Porter Hall as skittish, weak, whiny agent of

General Yang – all he wants it to earn enough money to get out of China; William Frawley hard-drinking arms merchant waiting for Cooper to show up with money; J.M. Kerrigan as rascally Irish blackmailer who provides a plot complication. In war-torn China hard-pressed war lord General Yang needs money to support his army against popular movements; adventure film with lots of twists and returns (baroque plot structure?) combined with humor (the supine Porter) and some hope for romance. The twin narrative issues are the fate of the suitcase of money that Cooper was supposed to have used to help the opposition to Yang, and whether (inevitably) the pending romance between Cooper and Carroll will pan out. “We could have made beautiful music together”, says Cooper to Carroll toward the end of the film. Indictment of war lords in China, who are just “merchants of war” with no concern for the well-being of the Chinese, whereas Cooper is an idealist fighting for the good of the masses. Beautifully restored print photographing sumptuous sets – on a train in the provinces; an elaborate set of a hotel in Shanghai with windows and glass doors everywhere; a large Chinese junk in the misty river where the climax of the film takes place. Cinematography is Milestonian moving camera and arty framing – always fun to watch, although perhaps not appropriate for the story. Script somewhat preachy in its disapproval of war lords and money-grubbing opportunists. Dialogue is often memorable (Clifford Odets), but many scenes give the impression of needing drastic cutting to avoid pointless silences, repetitions, and *longueurs*. Romance is a bit incredible, since at one point Cooper kills Hall; Carroll is predictably upset, but she gets over it to have her face photographed side by side with Cooper’s in the last shot of the film. Climax of film is violent and melodramatic: Yang is fatally wounded (by Frawley!); at first he wants to have the foreigners shot, but after Cooper persuades him that he needs to leave them alive to tell his story, he has his soldiers kill one another with their revolvers! (2007)

**Genius** 2016 Michael Grandage 2.5 Intermittently interesting drama about master editor Max Perkins’ shepherding of eccentric writer Thomas Wolfe in the late 1920s and 1930s. Colin Firth with his fedoras glued to his head in every scene as the patient Max; Jude Law as the restless, excitable writer with a constant rictus and wild gesticulations; Nicole Kidman as his girlfriend and later wife – also emotional and irascible but ultimately supportive; Laura Linney solid as Max’s patient wife (they have five daughters); Guy Pearce as the neurotic Fitzgerald, incapable of finishing anything; Vanessa Kirby as the catatonic Zelda (in a single scene); Dominic West suitably self-confident, swaggering as Hemingway. Film depicts the 1920s with faded sepia tones and selected period autos crawling the streets. Perkins is the editing magician who takes Wolfe’s gargantuan manuscripts (6000 pages for one), shortens them to publishable length, and focuses on giving the novel a discernible plot. The film is ambiguous as to who is the “genius” – the poet-prophet Wolfe or the persistent journeyman editor Perkins. Much of the film deals with the editing of the manuscripts – the daily meetings, often confrontational discussions with Wolfe about the wordiness and lack of focus in individual passages, the latter’s promises that he would shorten, focus the manuscript, only to return with another 100 typed pages, etc. An eternal struggle that appears to absorb both their lives. Scenes with Fitzgerald and Hemingway are thrown in mostly for color – Fitzgerald incarnating the has-been, failed writer, Hemingway dishing out devastating judgments about Wolfe’s prolixity. Perkins and Wolfe form a tight father–son friendship: Wolfe sorely misses his own father who died several years before, and Wolfe wants a son next to his gaggle of giggling daughters (no apparent editor there). The mistrustfulness of the two spouses is extensively developed – in a patient way with Linney who wants a father for her children and in an explosive fashion with Kidman who is wildly jealous of Tom’s relationship with Max. Eventually Wolfe breaks away from Perkins, blaming him for perceived deficiencies in his writing and career. When he dies in his late 30s, he sends a letter from his deathbed to Perkins, who reads it tearfully with his hat removed for the first time. The movie aspires to be a tribute to the bond of friendship between the two men that produced two of the presumably great works of early 20th century American literature. Law’s performance as Wolfe is usually distracting – too much waving of arms, pacing frenetically around the room, violent feeling sculpted on his face. Firth, who often has to watch Law’s antics patiently, often comes across as a passive character (and can’t he ever take that hat off?). (June 2017)

**Gentleman’s Agreement** 1947 Elia Kazan (20cFox) 3.0 Gregory Peck as intense crusading writer who takes his job of writing magazine series about anti-Semitism very seriously – he

poses as a Jew for two months to experience discrimination, Dorothy McGuire as his upper class, reserved girlfriend, John Garfield as Peck's Jewish friend who appears in second half of movie, Celeste Holm as one of magazine editors who is openly anti-anti-Semitic and falls for Peck too, Dean Stockwell as ten-year-old son of Peck, Anne Revere as stiff upper lip mother of Peck, Albert Dekker as enthusiastic and supportive editor who hires Peck for the series. Rather tedious and repetitive film à these against anti-Semitism among polite upper classes in USA – not the hate spewers, but the denizens of Darien, Connecticut who disapprove of overt anti-Semitism but who don't have the courage to stand up against their peers; discrimination consists of being excluded from swank hotels in the White Mountains (I am sorry there are no rooms available), of being turned down for a good job if your name is Greenberg instead of Green, of having your son called "a dirty kike" by kids down the street, of having queer looks from other employees when it is discovered that you are a Jew; the "gentleman's agreement" is the mostly tacit agreement among homeowners in an upper crust neighborhood not to sell to Jews. Several of the Jews have changed their names and recommend that they just ignore the issue in the conviction that it will go away. However, Peck is very passionate about his assignment, and he becomes a crusader as he gets more deeply into it – with some fire in his eyes. Romance is between him and the aristocratic McGuire, who had suggested the assignment in the first place: although they intend to marry, sparks fly from the friction between Peck's insistence that deploring anti-Semitism privately is not enough, but you must act and stand up for your beliefs to end the scourge, and McGuire's tendency to let things ride so as not to embarrass herself with her Darien peers. A bit of tension is built up by the possibility that Peck might hook up with the earnest Holm instead, but thanks to McGuire's quick study under Garfield's tutelage in a swank restaurant, the two are reunited in an ending shot kissing in the doorway. Best thing is the star quality of Peck, etc. The film is preachy and often tedious; Peck is particularly adept at delivering sermons. Peck has usual effective moral seriousness (see 'Twelve O'clock High') but McGuire comes across as obtuse, weak and indecisive; as a result, we are disappointed when Peck chooses her over the plucky Holm. It would seem the film won Academy Awards because of the topicality of the issue right after World War II. (2006)

**Get Carter** 1971 Mike Hodges (Britain) 3.5 Michael Caine charismatic, determined, and extremely vicious as a London gangster who travels to Newcastle to find out who killed his brother Frank and to exact plentiful revenge; Ian Hendry, John Osborne, Tony Beckley, Britt Ekland et al. as a host of more or less interchangeable Newcastle hoods and their molls that may have been involved in the murder. Film resembles a detective story as Caine, not knowing what happened to his brother but gut-sure that he was murdered, arrives in overcast, working-class, bleak, and depressing Newcastle and then follows his leads from one character to another. After an initial effort, the viewer has no hope of keeping all of his interlocutors straight – they all look like low-life British hoods, but you basically don't care, since the environment is seedily fascinating and Caine's steely determination and ruthlessness rivets our attention (not to mention that frank sex and nudity scenes). What adds to his rage is the discovery that Frank's daughter, Doreen, whom the viewer met in the initial stages of the film, was forced to make a pornographic film (one wonders about Caine's actual relationship with her – perhaps biological daughter?). We expect him to be harsh with the guilty persons, but we are not prepared for the punishment he deals out to characters only peripherally involved: the businessman who is thrown over the side of the multi-story parking deck; the girl who introduces him to the fateful porno movie is locked in the trunk of his car (why?) and then apparently drowned when the London hoods push the car into the river; one of Frank's girlfriends is stripped, murdered by injection, and then dumped in the river next to the mob's mansion house apparently to frame them for the murder. He finally catches up with the guilty man; he chases him breathlessly across a bleak Newcastle beach, and when he catches him, he forces him to down a bottle of whisky, as Frank had done, and then he is murdered and dumped in the ocean. To add to the sense of nihilism, Caine is then executed by a hit man sharpshooter as he strolls down the beach thinking that his mission was accomplished. There are several scenes with sex and nudity that places the film squarely in the early 1970s. Caine's rough, amoral character, the frank sex scenes, and the dilapidated moral and physical environment is reminiscent of 'The French Connection' produced about the same time. (2011)

**Get Out** 2017 Jordan Peele 3.0 Effective thriller focusing on racist tropes with a little bit of comedy and a Grand Guignol ending. Daniel Kaluuya (British actor) as laid back middle-class Black photographer, Chris, hooked up with white girlfriend; Allison Williams, Keira Knightly look-alike and act-alike as Rose Armitage, his apparently loyal girlfriend; Catherine Keener (suddenly broad-faced) as Armitage family matron with impressive and scary hypnotic powers; Bradley Whitford as ostensibly avuncular paterfamilias; Lil Rel Howery as Rod, close buddy of Chris – he is the comic relief in a not particularly funny film. Film focuses on race: Rose and Chris are an item, and Rose early (and rather reticently) invites Chris to visit her upper middle class family in a manse isolated in the country; manse looks like a modern-day plantation (evoking slavery of course); Chris finds the inhabitants disquieting; with Rose he decides to return home; the family bares its claws and attempts to turn him surgically into a robotic slave; Chris somehow fights back managing to kill all members of this criminal, white (plantation) family; he rides off into the night with Rod (in the TSA cruiser...not sure what that means). The most effective part of the film is the build-up of tension and suspense that begins with the collision with a deer on the way to the home. The parents are earnest wealthy white liberals who say they would have voted for Obama a third time and are trying too hard to bridge the racial gap with Chris. The couple meets three Black characters with robotic, ‘Stepford Wives’ modus operandi: the gardener, who scares the viewer by running full blast right by Chris his first night; Lakeith Stanfield with an empty stare, wearing a straw hat, and performing a “Step’n Fetchit” routine for the benefit of white guests; memorably Betty Gabriel with a disquieting, rictus-like wide smile and unpredictable emotional responses. Movie is effective at keeping the viewer speculating, even wondering if the ever-smiley Rose is part of some nefarious plot. Keener turns out to have extraordinary hypnotic powers that fill Chris with tearful anxiety and dispatch him down into distant blackness; every time Keener turns the spoon in her tea cup (taking tea is quintessentially white), Chris goes into a trance. By step-by-step revelation, it emerges that the family is using surgical procedures to turn black men into robotic, submissive simulacra of themselves doing the will of the master family. On the verge of his own surgical transformation, Chris manages to break loose from his leather bonds (simulating an electric chair) and go on his own violent rampage, killing the whole family with the possible exception of Rose, who is lying mortally wounded on the driveway as Chris drives away. One wonders how – bound that he is – he managed to insert earplugs in order to escape hypnosis; his most grotesque killing is running Whitford through with the deer antlers displayed over the fireplace – shades of Branagh’s ‘Dead Again’. Fun to notice the debt also to ‘Stepford Wives’ and Franju’s ‘Les yeux sans visage’. The cookie-cutter Grand Guignol sequences at the end fail to live up to the promise of the rest of the film. Some viewers might be offended by the assertion that white racism is present in even in the most benign of circles (white liberals) and that the guilty parties merit bloody elimination. (July 2017)

**Get Shorty** 1995 Barry Sonnenfeld 3.5 John Travolta as cool, laid back, sympathetic mafia debt collector, Chili Palmer, who would rather go into producing movies than break some legs; Dennis Farina as sometimes excitable, sometimes deadpan, always comic mafia boss back in Miami who is also interested in movies; Gene Hackman with facial hair making hilarious comic impression as self-delusional maker of low-budget horror films in Hollywood; Rene Russo as Hackman's girlfriend, a sardonic disillusioned actress that takes up with Chili; Danny DeVito as diminutive and egotistical Hollywood star who gets laughs talking movie critic lingo; Delroy Lindo tall, flashing a lot of teeth, also interested in financing movies but not above murdering confederates in cold blood; James Gandolfini as (rather svelte) movie stunt man serving as Lindo's incompetent body guard. Wonderfully funny crime film and satire of Hollywood based on Elmore Leonard novel. The narrative is convoluted, but it essentially involves Chili going from Miami to LA to collect a debt from Hackman and then deciding he would rather produce films; if there is a central thread, it is the interest of all the main characters in producing a script that Hackman thinks is a potential Oscar winner (good luck). Like all the main characters in the film, Chili adores movies, spending time in a movie theater watching his favorite scenes from 'Touch of Evil' (and reciting the lines with the on-screen actors) and after beating up Gandolfini two times (not a good bodyguard!), he suddenly stops and starts talking to him about the movies he played in. Travolta ably carries the movie through on his confident, genial, subtly humorous personality. The film is an amusing satire of Hollywood: the self-important director struggling to produce his bad horror films;

Lindo's conviction that writing films is easy – you write the story, make sure you say “cut”, and then hire someone to correct the spelling and put in the commas; the contrast between DeVito's diminutive stature and outsized ego on the one hand and his big star celebrity status on the other. The film has an ingeniously amusing ending: the ever stupid Farina decides to open an airport locker that contains \$500,000 in drug money and is closely watched by DEA agents; as the agents move in, the shot of Farina from the rear cuts to the back of the head of another actor – Harvey Keitel! He turns around, the camera cranes up, and we see that all the film's characters (except Farina!) are on the set of a film being directed by Hackman; he is finally producing a film from a script based on the events of the film we have just seen; i.e., Hackman is filming Elmore Leonard's book. Very entertaining film that expertly catches the interplay of crime and humor in Leonard's books. (2013)

**The Ghost and Mrs. Muir** 1947 Joseph Mankiewicz (20c Fox) 3.5 Rex Harrison, Gene Tierney, George Sanders, Edna Best, Natalie Wood (8 yrs old). Touching and compelling romantic fantasy about English widow, who breaks away from her tyrannical in-laws, takes a house by the sea (beautiful and atmospheric shots of the Devon or Cornish coast), and meets and falls in love with the ghost of a sea captain. Harrison good with his gravelly seaman's voice and gruff but sincere manner. He settles down with her to write an account of his life, which she later sells to support her and her daughter in the real world. Tierney really makes movie work – beauty, sensitivity, sensibleness: the viewer roots for her and feels for her; her beauty deepens the tragedy because we are convinced that she deserves the best. Scenes between Tierney and Harrison could be corny and embarrassing, but impeccable taste of director and actors carries it through. Tierney meets George Sanders, who seems like a cad, but presents self as her romantic destiny; turns out he is married and Tierney has to accept her destiny, which she does with courage and aplomb; instinct of the viewer turns out correct. The passage of 40 years is shown touchingly by the action of the sea and the wearing away of the stele on the beach that has daughter Anna's name on it. An aged Tierney dies of heart trouble in the same chair where she first slept when she had entered the house 50 years before; the ghost captain enters, and Tierney rises into the screen rejuvenated and beautiful, and with a wistful look back at the dead woman, the two phantoms walk off into the light for an eternity together! Sounds corny, but it works wonderfully. It is possible to interpret the story as a pre-feminist account of a woman moving toward independence in a world where she need not lean on the arm of a man; perhaps the ghost is not “real” but Tierney's alter ego leading her to an independent life free even of the George Sanders of the world; living alone for all those years is not so bad; the final scene indicates that that life has its own rewards. Very poetic. (2005)

**Ghost Ship** 1943 Mark Robson; Val Lewton: RKO 3.0 Richard Dix as very normal seeming psycho killer who is captain of a freighter; Russell Wade as young third officer just out of the academy. Another high quality low budget feature by Lewton group. RKO ordered him to make a cheap movie using the same set used in a former 1938 movie. (The film disappeared for a long time due to legal problems.) The ship set is wonderful – very detailed, rich textures, camera following characters up and down stairs (moving from the subconscious to the conscious?); and of course it is shot with atmospheric contrasts of light and dark, with a lot of shadows. All outdoor shots have back screen projection. Dix's captain is an intriguing character: he is cool and collected on the surface and is quite popular with the crew and has the loyalty of the first officer; a possible tip-off is his remarks on his absolute authority over his crew (the film's disapproving attitude perhaps reflects the democratic critique of totalitarian powers during World War II). Tension is quietly ratcheted up when he murders two of his crew whom he considers disloyal and trouble-makers. Wade is the only one who notices the captain's wrong-doing. Last twenty minutes has him finally able to turn the tide when Captain makes a false step; he is finally stabbed to death in a fight with one of his crew. Mysterious atmosphere enhanced by having Wade meet a musical blind man before he gets on the ship, and then the viewer encountering the voice-over thoughts of a weird-looking dumb crewman on board (the one that finally kills the Captain). Dix's excessive insistence on presenting the Captain's avuncular side makes it a little difficult to see him as a threat. Although only 69 minutes, the pace of the movie is slow. But it is solid. (2007)

**A Ghost Story** 2017 David Lowery 3.0 Low-budget philosophic tale about the meaning of death for the dead. Casey Affleck as the low-key deceased husband enshrouded in a “Casper the Ghost” bedsheet; Rooney Mara in the first half of the film as his bereaved wife then widow. After an introduction to Affleck’s and Mara’s affectionate relationship in a stark Texas two-bedroom, Affleck dies quietly in an auto accident in front of his house. The heart of the film is the half hour succeeding Mara’s viewing of his body in the hospital. Affleck arises from his gurney in his bedsheet, and stands immobile and dispassionate in various rooms in his house watching Mara deal with the unexpected shock of being alone. The filmmaker shoots in haze-shrouded light, in an antique-looking 3::2 aspect ratio, doing long takes that sometimes seem like they will never end, allowing only slow movement in the frame. The shrouded ghost is stately, dignified (not childish at all), and mainly melancholy, evincing a profound sadness about what it must be like to be a dead person who has retained consciousness. Mara is initially distraught, lying immobile in her bed, in a two-minute take jabbing with a fork and slowly consuming an entire berry pie before she runs to the bathroom to vomit. But the living still have their family, children (although Mara does not), and fellow humans around her, and soon she is dating and kissing her friend goodbye at the door (Ghostie watches disconsolately), whereas the dead as imagined in the film are entirely alone trapped in a kind of purgatory waiting for some kind of transition; Affleck is lonely, clawing at a spot in the woodwork where a note penned by Mara is hidden. Another family moves in that he scares away by his antics. The last third of the film is less moving and more puzzling. A grizzled counter-culture type (Will Oldham) breaks the film’s poetic silence to deliver a long and loud monologue on the meaninglessness of any individual human life in the heartless immensity of time; the house is torn down by jawed machines and a high-rise office building goes up in its place (tied to a geographical place, Ghostie still wanders its corridors), he jumps off the building in an apparent suicide attempt (?), the film cuts to a 19th-century pioneer family staking out the footprint of the house (when a little girl is murdered by Indians, we watch her body rapidly decompose), and finally Ghostie appears again in the abandoned house (thought it had been torn down...), and when he is finally able to read Mara’s note, the robe suddenly collapses. He moves on to another place, another existence –where if anywhere is not apparent. The film raises the ultimate existential questions, but does not seem to answer them. The first part of the film is touching and compelling, but the spell is broken by the brash monologue and the confusing time loop. Nevertheless, intensely poignant moments in this independent film. (October 2017)

**Ghost Town** 2008 David Koepp 2.5 Ricky Gervais as nervous, misanthropic British dentist living in trendy Manhattan; Greg Kinnear as ghost of dead businessman that latches on to Gervais (virtually the only sign that he is dead is that living people can’t see him); Tea Leoni as (real) widow of Kinnear; Billy Campbell as the awkward, sanctimonious new suitor of Leoni – he is actually a decent person; Kristen Wiig in cameo role as surgeon obsessed with her fake tan; Aasif Mandvi as soulful Indian dentist, who dispenses wisdom to the recalcitrant Gervais. Fairly dull, by-the-book, kind-of Hollywood romantic comedy enlivened primarily by the periodic antics of Gervais. During a colonoscopy Gervais acquires the ability to see ghosts of recently deceased Manhattans that have unfinished business before they can move on. Kinnear contacts Gervais and persuades him to prevent widow Leoni from marrying Campbell, who at first seems like a jerk. The plot moves inexorably toward redemption, which is achieved on multiple fronts by the end: We learn that Campbell is a good enough guy, and in any case Kinnear learns his lesson regretting that he cheated on his wife; all of the ghosts that we encounter finish their business and move on to...well, the hereafter, very much like Indians going to their happy hunting grounds; Gervais doesn’t get the girl, but he has the satisfaction of watching her marry a good person, and there is no doubt at the end that Gervais is now a kinder and gentler (and more boring) person. One wonders what must have possessed Gervais to play in this film, which one can imagine being mercilessly mocked in one of his TV mockumentaries. Gervais is often very amusing – as the intolerant misanthropist in the early part of the film; and in his racist statements, e.g., assuming that Mandvi is a terrorist since he has dark skin; trying to impress Leoni with his politically correct humanitarianism except that he makes an exception for the Chinese, whom he finds very peculiar. The bantering interaction between Gervais and Kinnear is often clever and entertaining. If you want to laugh with Gervais, watch his TV programs. (2014)



**Ghost World** 2001 Jerry Zwigoff (the maker of the documentary 'Crumb' – he told Crumb that if he didn't cooperate in finishing the film, he would commit suicide) 3.5 Thora Birch chunky, semi-punk with straight black hair and heavy dark-rimmed glasses as Enid, the girl with no goals, no dreams, who doesn't know what to do now that she has graduated from high school (or has she?); Charlotte Johansson plain and big-chested as her more level-headed friend who shares her disdain for the straight world but who seems willing to give it a try – e.g., get a job; Steve Buscemi as the loser Seymour, a loner isolated in his apartment full of collectible 78 rpm records – he can't relate to people and he hasn't had a girlfriend in years; Illeana Douglas as priceless politically correct art teacher ("summer art class for losers") who thinks Enid's gifted drawings are not art because they don't suffer and scream enough – her favorite student art project was a found-art sculpture of a tampon in a teacup. Based on Daniel Clowes' graphic novel of the same name, the film is set in Los Angeles, and follows the fortunes of Enid, who has contempt for the whole world around her and resolutely refuses to grow up. Characters are true and picturesque, and have you constantly laughing. Several memorable scenes such as the high school graduation scene where the two girls are annoyed with the keynote speaker in a wheelchair – she thinks she is so cool since she had a little car accident and got paralyzed!; and the "party" attended by old fogie record collectors. Film follows Enid's and Buscemi's developing relationship: at first Enid just attaches him as another of her little projects that she makes fun of, but she gradually gets closer to him. Buscemi is eccentrically isolated in his fanatical collecting of old records, quirky, very bizarre looking with his bad teeth, self-aware and penetrating (he tells Enid all the things that are wrong with him); he has no confidence in himself and is insecure in all his relationships. Enid helps him get a date with a charming woman that likes him, but Buscemi is not cut out for normal people and he drifts back toward a romantic attachment with Enid. The end is quite negative: after his breakup, Buscemi sees a vapid analyst and goes back to live with his mother (no progress there); and Enid takes the mystery bus (that an older man has been waiting for most of the film) and takes off down a dark mysteriously lighted street – destination unknown. Might the bus take her somewhere where she will grow up? (2007)

**The Ghost Writer** 2010 Roman Polanski (Britain) 3.5 Ewan MacGregor as persistent ghost writer called to Martha's Vineyard to rewrite memoirs of a former British prime minister; Pierce Brosnan as the charming, although ill-tempered former prime minister, Adam Lang; Olivia Williams as Brosnan's anguished although highly intelligent, politically savvy wife, Ruth; Kim Cattrall eternally young as Brosnan's assistant and, as soon becomes evident, his mistress; Eli Wallach very old and grizzled as Hitchcockian colorful personality -- an old fart who gives MacGregor valuable information in the midst of a violent seashore squall; Tom Wilkinson as normal-looking, elegant Harvard professor, who turns out to be a CIA agent. Wonderfully directed, although essentially lightweight thriller about ghost writer who detects something is rotten in the house of Lang and then pursues his private personal investigation to its logical conclusion -- his own death when he is run down by a big black car in the streets of London. Film is wonderfully directed. Gray skies, high winds, and rain squalls dominate the mise-en-scene; MacGregor is often alone, isolated inside the big, beautiful East Coast beach house, sitting or standing next to big plate glass windows and looking at the sand dunes and stormy weather outside, riding a bicycle through a downpour. Editing is kept to a minimum (quite un-Hollywood), and Polanski tells his story with minimal cutting and maximizing action inside the frame. The viewer is fully identified with the everyman ghost writer who has is driven to find out what his boss is really like and what really happened to his predecessor -- he was supposed to have committed suicide, but a lot of people seem to believe he was murdered. The narrative gives us alternative possibilities -- Was it jealousy since the murdered man was having an affair with Ruth? Was it the deranged father of a soldier killed in Iraq? Or was it the Americans trying to hide their torture of prisoners in the war of terror? The film has important an political dimension: Lang is obviously modeled after Tony Blair, and it is apparent that Polanski is hostile to Blair's and Bush's War on Terror: hence the indictment of Lang for crimes against humanity and his association with a defense contractor recalling Halliburton. After visiting Tom Wilkinson, MacGregor believes that Lang himself murdered his former ghost writer to keep him from revealing that throughout his career he worked for the CIA! After Lang's assassination by the deranged dad, a final last-minute twist has MacGregor realize that the wife Ruth is behind the naïve pm, but before he can follow it up, he is run down by the black car: end of film. Marvelous Hitchcock-like moments: in the beginning of the

film, one car remains immobile in the ferry as cars drive around it to exit, and the driver then turns up dead on the beach; MacGregor's informative conversation with the grizzled geezer Wallach, who still has a twinkle in his eye; MacGregor rifles through secret files of his predecessor, and the notes, phone numbers, and photos he discovers give him valuable clues about what is happening; at one point MacGregor gets into the same BMW SUV that we saw on the ferry in the beginning of the film, and the navigation system destination that the murdered man had last used takes him to Wilkinson's house instead of the quaint old inn where MacGregor had been staying; MacGregor's note with key information gleaned from the memoirs is passed from hand-to-hand (close-up photographed) to a hypocritically mourning Ruth in a memorial service for Lang. Virtually the only fault of the film is the seams in the complicated, twisty plot: Was Lang really that passive and thick-headed so that he did not know that the CIA was commanding him through his wife? Who was supposed to read the secret message embedded in the text of the memoirs? Was the film clear enough in letting us know enough about the political intelligence and ruthless ambition of Ruth? And why did this calculating woman seduce MacGregor? Nevertheless, we should heed Hitchcock and not be so small-minded as to demand absolute credibility in the plot. A fine achievement; stands head and shoulders over the average thriller! (2009)

**The Ghoul** 1933 Hayes Hunter (Britain) 2.5 Boris Karloff as Professor Morlant, Egyptologist with a nasty skin disease who is obsessed with gaining immortality; Cedric Hardwicke as Broughton, Karloff's solicitor; Ernest Thesiger attention-getting as his club-footed, amusing, loyal Scottish servant Laing; Kathleen Harrison as scatter-brained Kaney; Dorothy Hyson ("the most beautiful person I have ever seen" – her husband Anthony Quayle) as pretty chatterbox Betty Morlant provides pleasant comic relief; Ralph Richardson as rather fatuous Anglican vicar, who reminds us that Karloff was not a good Christian, but a pagan or heathen; Anthony Bushell as the callow, awkwardly aggressive cousin of Betty. Film opens with an arresting scene of Karloff dying in his bed. The film is about an Egyptologist obsessed with attaining immortality through a stone he has discovered, and when it is stolen from his tomb, he comes back from the dead – ugly as hell – to recover it, in the meantime wreaking havoc on those he suspects of taking the jewel. Comic relief is provided by the nice, respectable lovers, Betty and the cousin, and particularly by the foolish and ignorant Kaney. In the end virtually every character is after the jewel (for its monetary value or for its magical powers?), including the fake vicar, who cons the jewel out of Karloff's hand by posing as a statue (!); Karloff then dies for good, and the cute couple emerges from the burning tomb to salvation together. The film is slow-moving; it takes a long time to get to the last stalking section. Karloff's performance is monstrous, but he expresses well his desperate hunger for immortality. Most of film is quite dark, making the viewer wonder about its state of preservation; much creeping about dark, foggy streets; all the film takes place at night; the main interiors are usually lit by candles or torches; well-rendered Egyptian tombs and carvings; intense use of shadows, e.g., Thesiger's hands casting a shadow over Karloff's corpse, Hyson standing at the big gothic windows illuminated by the full moon. The soundtrack makes use of Siegfried's funeral music; sound quality is good. Moderately enjoyable film; moderately creepy, especially when viewing Karloff's disfigured face. (2008)

**Giant** 1956 George Stevens 3.0 Elizabeth Taylor as strong-willed, independent, sharp-tongued, socially conscious bride from genteel background who marries the Texas rancher and who teaches us in the end that you can only raise your children, you can't make them do what you want; Rock Hudson strong and steady as the rancher with 100,000s of acres – he has difficulty adapting to new conditions, especially with his children whom he wants to be typical bigshot Texas ranchers; Mercedes McCambridge as crusty sister of Hudson – she is jealous of Taylor when she arrives; James Dean rather annoying looking at the ground, mumbling, unhappy, depressed, slumped in a chair, sucking on a cigarette, drinking too much (his drunk scene toward the end is pretty embarrassing) – first as a non-conformist ranch hand and then rich guy with a mustache; Chill Wills as avuncular older relative always preaching reason and sensibleness; Dennis Hopper in good performance as the retiring, naïve son of Hudson (cast against type!) who wants to be a doctor, but who gets fiery when racial prejudice affects his wife; Carole Baker as preppy, the apple of Daddy's eye, showing a little breast and putting the moves on rich guys; Sal Mineo in cameo as Mexican American kid proud of his Marine uniform and then killed in

the war; Earl Holliman as rather thick-headed, unambitious husband of a relative of the family. Well-made 50s epic ultimately about family: the enduring affection between Hudson and Taylor, their troubles with typical 50s children who have their own ideas about their lives, Hudson coming to accept his Mexican daughter-in-law and his dark-skinned grandson, and Taylor saying at the end that the family is finally a success! Two generation film with Hudson and Taylor looking pretty good in the second part but with silvered hair. Epic scope of the film evokes social and political environment: huge, arid Texas cattle ranch; all the guys wearing cowboy hats, shouting rebel yells, the band playing “The Eyes of Texas Are Upon You” and “The Yellow Rose of Texas”; discovery of oil, the tax exemptions and depletion allowances; the beginning of World War II and the departure of the young men for service; successive women’s fashions from 30s through 50s; kids going off and marrying mates below their station without telling their parents; the nouveau riche Dean who makes obscene amounts of money through oil and then seeks respectability by marrying a member of the established family. Lovely epic style photography of the big sky and open spaces especially in the first half of the film. Nice depiction of the death of McCambridge – the viewer sees only the lone horse returning to the house. Wide angle long shot takes in all the empty tables in the hotel when Dean is sitting drunk with his head lying on the head table. A good 50s liberal film: Taylor shakes up the strictly segregated society with her concern for the sanitary and living conditions of Hudson’s Mexican servants, all of whom are of course noble, patient and long-suffering. Some race mixing, when Hopper marries a Mexican girl and they have a dark-skinned child. The family stands up for the Mexican daughter-in-law when they are confronted with discrimination in restaurants and beauty parlors; Hudson even has a big fistfight with Sarge, the racist owner of a restaurant – so long as you have the money, you should be served anywhere and treated politely. Good film with great star power; it does not probe very deeply, ending up with an affirmation of the family and love of children and a denunciation of racism, while implying Texans are really good at heart. (2008)

**The Gift** 2000 Sam Raimi 3.5 Cate Blanchett as Annie, a good-hearted mother of three reading cards in small-town Georgia to support her family – she is more of a therapist than a fortune teller to her clients; Giovanni Ribisi as violent and unpredictable auto mechanic befriended by Annie; Keanu Reeves as truly scary, wife-beating “insecure redneck” that thinks Annie is a witch; Katie Holmes as rich-bitch town slut engaged to Kinnear and then murdered halfway through the film out of jealousy; Greg Kinnear, thoroughly respectable-seeming grade school official with not much of a Southern accent; Hilary Swank in small role as wife and victim of Reeves; J.K. Simmons as local aw-shucks sheriff. Extremely entertaining Southern gothic film that doubles as a supernatural thriller and a whodunit murder mystery. Blanchett has vivid, scary visions throughout the film about a murder that is going to happen: the director makes frequent use of full moons shining over a dark landscape, the camera tracking while looking up at thick intertwined tree branches, balloon-based trees emerging from the swamp, sudden, noise-cued visions of violence, spooky apparitions such as seeing the nude body of a murder victim floating in the air tangled in the limbs of a tree (not the water where it really is). Real scenes can be almost as scary: Ribisi tying his father to a chair, dousing him with gasoline, and lighting him on fire in retaliation for sexually abusing him when he was a child, Blanchett returning to her house, noticing a mysterious blue light shining through her bedroom window, then after slowly creeping through her house, finding a message written with tarot (?) cards on her bed accusing her of being a witch, the shocking appearance of Holmes’ body (especially her eyes) when it is pulled out of the pond, the finale when Kinnear, the man who committed the murder, hits Annie hard and then is about to throw her into the pond when he is bashed on the head by Ribisi (or the spirit of same)? Raimi uses his considerable repertoire of shock tactics – deep, bright colors, sudden editing switches, percussive sounds to underline a jolt, etc. The murder mystery of the film is fairly routine: the most despicable of the suspects – Reeves – is convicted by a jury with the help of Blanchett, but when she becomes convinced that he is not the guilty one, the viewer has to wait – a la ‘The Thin Man’ – for the final revelation to find out that the murder was committed by the least likely of the suspects, Kinnear. The plot however remains tense and suspenseful because of the director’s ability to overlay the narrative with outrageous, imaginative shocks and thrills. Perhaps the strongest aspect of the film is the tender, thoughtful, emotional performance of Blanchett, whose expressive kindness and courage draw the viewer into even the most improbable of proceedings. A supremely cinematic pleasure that doesn’t depend primarily on plot or theme. (2011)

**The Gift** 2015 Joel Edgerton 4.0 Jason Bateman as dominating, deceptively sensitive guy moved with his wife from Chicago to Southern California (?) to take a high octane job in the electronics industry; Rebecca Hall as his quiet, seemingly submissive wife, who has suffered a miscarriage and is intent on having another baby; Joel Edgerton (writer, producer, director, actor) as edgy, lugubrious ex-schoolmate of Bateman mysteriously pursuing Bateman and paying a lot of attention to his wife. Domestic-style psychological thriller in the tradition of ‘The Hand that Rocks the Cradle’ that about halfway turns into a three-way drama of relationships, revenge, and self-liberation. Edgerton is Gordo the Weirdo, a former schoolmate of Bateman – through the first half of the film he is disturbing in his attention to the couple: showing up at their house unsolicited, leaving presents on their doorstep, filling their pond with goldfish. Although Hall is somewhat sympathetic (the obverse of her unspoken distance from her husband?), the suspicious Bateman soon puts down his foot, causing Gordo’s attentions to turn nasty – poisoning the goldfish, apparently kidnapping the couple’s beloved dog Jangles (who is returned unharmed in a humorous reversal of ‘Fatal Attraction’’s boiled rabbit), and sending disturbing notes regretting that Bateman will not “let bygones be bygones”. Thereupon Bateman, who hitherto has feigned ignorance of Gordo’s identity, has to come clean with the distressed Hall and admit his bullying behavior toward Gordo as a teenager. The film then escalates toward disaster: although often absent from the screenplay for long periods, Gordo keeps up the pressure; Bateman is revealed as bullying and mendacious, even spreading false information about a business rival that is discovered; and Hall, who is now pregnant, becomes increasingly alienated from her husband. The final sequences are a tour de force. While his wife rests in the hospital with the baby, Bateman opens “gift” messages from Edgerton, the last of which is a CD suggesting that Gordo has raped Hall (after drugging her in her own home) and may be the real father of Hall’s baby. The film ends with Edgerton savoring his revenge, Hall hugging the baby in the maternity viewing room, and Bateman slumped defeated and demoralized on the floor. Quite different from the standard subgenre, in which the evil menace is defeated and the protagonist is redeemed. Hard to say which of the male characters is hero or villain – Gordo has terrorized two people and destroyed a marriage (that was ripe for destruction); Bateman’s masks have been ripped off and his life is shattered. The film generates a lot of creepy suspense and tension; the midcentury modern house (in the Hollywood Hills?) has glass walls and a long corridor that is used to good effect in a night scene, when Hall creeps along from boundary to boundary until in a shock moment she discovers her lost dog pawing at a glass door. Also imaginative aggressive editing that ramps up the tension in the finale. M Joel also wrote the excellent ‘The Square’; marvelous first film as director! (2015)

**Gilda** 1946 Charles Vidor 3.0 Rita Hayworth in her quintessential role as ruthless temptress, who likes guys and knows how to use them to get what she wants; Glenn Ford as tough guy who falls for Rita despite her marriage to his boss – she had married Macready on the rebound from a breakup with Ford; George Macready smooth and slippery as the owner of a casino who is really carrying on a business with a couple of Germans (a bit evil since the war was just over) to corner the world tungsten market; Joseph Calleia as policeman on the trail of the criminals. Excellent shot-in-the-studio film noir vehicle with one of the most percussive *femmes fatales* of all time: many shots of the long-bodied languor of Hayworth, throwing back her long hair in her boudoir to make suggestive remarks to the unflappable Ford; she seems always to be stepping in and out of expensive cars with men she has picked up (although in bow to the Hayes Code it is revealed at the end of the film that she wasn’t having sex with them – it was all play to rekindle the romance with Ford). Takes place exclusively on believable studio sets representing a wealthy Buenos Aires, where everybody dances the tango in fancy night clubs into the early hours and pursues international finance in expensive homes. The problem is in the relationship of Ford and Hayworth: they always express the most extreme loathing for one another, and yet we are supposed to believe them in love. The attempt to depict a masochistic-sadistic love relationship comes across more as a botched script and confusion about what to do with the main characters. The film ends with impossible reconciliation: the two lovers forgive one another, the evil Macready is killed when he tries to use his walking stick spear to kill Ford, and the two embrace and agree to try it together one more time. Meanwhile Calleia agrees to turn a blind eye to their exit from Argentina. Strong elements of *noir* in the shadowed cinematography and the domination of the *femme fatale*; the viewer is disappointed in his

expectation that that the male lover will be doomed. Fun mainly to watch the famous Hayworth: fabulous gowns, sultry sexiness, long, wavy hair, quick on the repartee, not much on the singing (her voice is dubbed) and the awkward dancing (when she spins in the famous final number her arms flap like wings). (2007)

**Girl Model** 2011 David Redmon; Ashley Sabin 2.0 Rather curious, often puzzling documentary about the “supply chain” of very young, pre-adolescent models recruited in Siberia for possible work in Japan. The film mainly follows 13-year-old Nadya from Novosibirsk, who wants to help raise her family out of poverty by earning a lot of money abroad working as a model. The first part of the film features the skinny pre-adolescent candidates shivering in their bikinis as they are judged for the competition; the second observes a lonely and uprooted Nadya as she waits for work to come her way in Tokyo; and the film concludes with her temporary return to Novosibirsk, where she is genuinely happy to be reunited with her mother, father, and beloved grandmother; a postscript indicates that she returned to Japan shortly thereafter, and that she was still performing international modeling when the film was completed. The film has no narration and only a few interviews, which makes for dead moments and vagueness in the narrative; how much time do we want to spend looking at Nadya’s modest dorm room in Tokyo or the large, barren house in Connecticut that Ashley, the recruiter has bought? The business relationships among the main actors is never clarified. The film however makes it clear that life is hard for the girls and they are exploited. Although they and their families are promised work minimums when they are recruited, the girls have little work in Japan and return home to Russia owing the recruiting agency large sums of money (\$2000-\$3000). The rather strange head of the recruiting business in Russia, Tigran, claims that he has an almost religious devotion to furthering the well-being of the girls and their families, but his exchanges with Ashley make it clear that he is “pure business”; Messiah, the Japanese marketer of the models in Japan, looks like a crook and never gives the camera a straight answer. Ashley asserts in an interview toward the end of the film that many of the girls turn to prostitution when their modeling careers falter: for most of them selling their bodies for sex is more lucrative than selling their bodies to the camera. Ashley Arbaugh, the recruiter who decides which girls are sent to Japan (we never figure out who she works for) is quirky and hard to understand. She has a puzzling indirect way of talking to the camera. She shows us films of herself as a model in the late 90s, in which even then she expresses her dislike for her profession. For some reason, the directors include footage of her abdomen distended by a large cyst and a fibroid tumor and her comments about her plans to have a baby (although there is no husband or boyfriend around); the camera even dwells a bit on the naked baby dolls that she has seated on the sofa in her living room. The most sympathetic characters in the film are Nadya and her simple, honest parents. The film provides interesting insights despite its slow pace and barren stretches. (2012)

**Girl Shy** 1924 Newmeyer, Taylor 3.5 Harold Lloyd, Jobyna Ralston as Mary, his sweet love interest with the slightly protruding teeth. This time a romantic comedy about a very girl shy apprentice tailor who has written a book about how to succeed with women; he falls in love with a rich girl who is more or less affianced to an obnoxious rich guy; we have to have a finale big chase (22 minutes) for Lloyd to thwart the wedding with the rich man and to get his girl. Film plays almost as a romantic comedy. Lloyd, dressed in his usual middle class clothes, stutters and flutters around women (silent film disadvantage of depicting a stutter without sound!), but as soon as he becomes attached to his woman, he becomes a tiger; nothing will stop him! Some classic scenes and sequences. Meeting Mary on the train, he has adventures with her dog who is not allowed on the train and with the suspicious conductor; meeting Mary next to a creek, he first sees her reflection in the water and thinks that he is just imagining her there (kind of a satire on silent film double exposure to show dreaming), and then he is successively embarrassed when he comes across a mother dog suckling her pups and some naked boys swimming in their swimming hole; the bust gag when he imagines a bust of himself (with trademark glasses) next to a famous author in the publishing house; he is mocked by the employers in the publishing house for his silly book on how to be successful with women, but then the publisher decides to publish his supposedly serious book as a humorous one. The pièce de résistance however is the last 22 minutes of the film, when Harold must race across town to stop the marriage of Mary with the rich man: he misses a

train, fails to hitchhike, tries to hitch a ride with an incompetent woman driver, transitions acrobatically from car to tree to horse, tries to catch a fire engine but can't stay on since he is holding a hose that is playing out, finds himself driving a streetcar and when he has to get on the roof to put the trolley pole back on the wire the streetcar careens driverless down the street as startled passers-by jump to the side to avoid being crushed, steals a cop's motorcycle, drives through a trench with workers bailing out right and left, jumps on to a wagon drawn by two horses, ends up riding the horses without the wagon into the formal Italian garden of the mansion where Mary is being reluctantly wed; and he arrives in the nick of time, literally kidnaps Mary and takes her outside; when he can't get out his marriage proposal because of his stutter, she borrows a whistle from a milkman and startles him into blurting it out! Final chase a kind of parent of 'It Happened One Night' and 'The Graduate.' The romantic part of movie sometimes drags a bit and Harold seems to be trying to be too sweet and innocent; but it is heart-warming, and the final chase is one of Lloyd's best, even if it isn't as hair-raising and palm-sweating as the skyscraper climbing sequence in 'Safety Last.' (2006)

**The Girl on the Train** 2016 Tate Taylor (writer Erin Cressida Wilson) 2.5 Fairly engaging but confusing thriller about alcoholic woman who becomes obsessed about a couple she observes from her New York commuter train. Emily Blunt as alcoholic divorcee, Rachel, given to fantasies; Haley Bennett as pretty young blond woman, Megan, that Blunt observes many times as her train passes; Rebecca Ferguson as another pretty young blond, Anna, who resembles Haley; Justin Theroux as Anna's current unpleasant husband, Tom, who is the father of her baby; Edgar Ramirez as psychiatrist visited by both Emily and Haley; Allison Janney as police detective, who gives friendly maternal advice to Emily (wonder if that was part of her training in the police academy?). The film has the advantage of being centered on trains that whoosh several times a day past the upscale suburban homes where the story occurs. The film's narrative focus is Emily, who is suffering because she could not conceive a baby with her former husband (Tom, who is now married to Anna) and who becomes fixated on Megan when her train passes her house. The thriller plot focuses on the murder of Megan, whose body is discovered in the woods in town; several suspects are trotted before the camera, before the viewer finally sees that the guilty one is Tom, who turns out to be a serial womanizer and bigamist, and who murdered Megan to hide from his wife the affair he was having with her; the film ends shockingly with Tom being stabbed in the neck by Rachel assisted by a disgusted Anna. The plot's progress is difficult to follow because of the time leaps in flashback scenes and the difficulty of distinguishing between Rachel's many fantasies and the objective account of the omniscient narrator. Many of the dialogue passages in the film are awkward and do nothing to deepen the viewer's appreciation of the characters or the advancement of the plot. The mise-en-scène focuses excessively on the anguished, trembling, often drunken visage of Rachel. The film is essentially a woman's potboiler: lots of sex and anguish; all three of the main female characters dream obsessively of domestic happiness with a sensitive husband and a baby, and what they get is an angry, abusive, traitorous, and ultimately homicidal husband, whom they murder to punish him for his offenses against womankind. The film aspires to repeat the success of 'Gone Girl', but it fails to reprise Fincher's clarity of character and plot, and the shock of his narrative twists. This film tries hard and is generally entertaining. (2017)

**The Girl Who Kicked the Hornet's Nest** 2009 Daniel Alfredson (Sweden) 2.5 Noomi Rapace continuing as the emotionally damaged, punk, electronically savvy Lisbeth Salander; Michael Nykvist as the head of the leftwing muckraking magazine 'Millennium' and Lisbeth's devoted defender. A wrap-up film to the three part Swedish film. Lisbeth is in jail after almost hacking her father to death with a large axe; the plot is essentially whether the heavies, who seem to have control of a large number of the top offices in Sweden, will succeed in railroading her back into a mental institution, whether the (mostly elderly or dying) bad guys will succeed in intimidating Nykvist from pressing ahead with a publication that will help her get off, and whether the police, who seem to be honest, will get the bad guys in custody in time; and what will happen to that mutant half brother residing in an abandoned factory that belongs to dad?. A problem with the film is that Lisbeth spends most of her times in the hospital or in custody, so that the little action we enjoy is conducted by less entertaining hands. The film is filled with television-like long conversations, about half of them should have been eliminated to cut down the

interminable 2:30 hours of the film; also quite a few action sequences with speeding cars recalling Hollywood action movies (but the crashes are much less spectacular). One jarring surprise has an elderly member of the Secret Service gang who is dying from cancer shoot Lisbeth's father in the head while he is recuperating in the hospital; the trial sequence is satisfying and entertaining as the defense adduces fresh evidence Perry-Mason-style to shoot down the corrupt prosecution and undermine the testimony of the psychiatrist who is trying to get Lisbeth committed again to psychiatric care. After lengthy meandering, the film does provide closure – Lisbeth is sprung from Jail, she returns to her (fancy, though empty) apartment to smoke a cigarette after long abstinence, she arranges for her half-brother to be murdered by a motorcycle gang that hates him (in her showdown with him she staples his feet to the floor with a high-powered staple gun!). As for her future mental health, one wonders – she does manage to proffer a wan thank you to Nykvist before she shuts the door of her apartment...the credits roll. The three novels seem to have two stories: the first one that was handled well in 'Dragon Tattoo'; the five hours or so written into the second and third episode should probably have coalesced around Lisbeth's problems with her father into one two-hour film. Entertaining, but one hopes that the American remake will be stronger and more focused. (2012)

**The Girl Who Played With Fire** 2009 Daniel Alfredson (Sweden) 2.5 Noomi Rapace again as Lisbeth Salander, counter-culture computer hacker girl with a dark psychological background and a penchant for violence; Michael Nyqvist again as the serious, intense, pock-marked Michael, the journalist working for the muckraking magazine 'Millennium'. The second installment in the Salander trilogy, this one with a lot less narrative unity and plot interest than the first one; it seems more like a television program, continuing the saga of Lisbeth after her return from exile abroad and then ending in the middle of the action with her arrest by the Swedish police; we are openly urged to tune into the third installment which will hopefully bring the story to a satisfactory conclusion. The narrative focuses first on a scandal dealing with the import of East European sex slave prostitutes into Sweden, and some of the higher ups in the public establishment might be involved; when three murders occur, the focus switches to Lisbeth's pursuit of a defected Russian spy, who after much mayhem turns out to be Lisbeth's father! After a lengthy epic confrontation between Lisbeth and her dad (assisted by his scary, goony natural son) which includes Lisbeth being buried alive and then driving an axe into various parts of her father's body, the dad and Lisbeth are severely wounded and carted off to the hospital .... tune in to episode three to see if they recover and if Lisbeth and her friend Michael uncover the scandal behind the sex slave story. The most entertaining aspect of the film is the personality and behavior of the 88-pound Lisbeth – small, slight, punky with a big tattoo on her back, a lesbian with a contempt for men, admirable computer expertise, a dark secret in her past (finally revealed to setting her father on fire in retaliation for his maltreatment of her mother), and consequently a major penchant for violence (e.g., the axe in her father's head, her spirited, maiming, kick-in-the-groin self-defense against the two goons in front of the rural house outside of Stockholm); not your typical movie heroine. It is also fun to take the tour through the streets of Stockholm and through the countryside around Stockholm and Göteborg. Often entertaining, but it fails to add much to the first installment. (2012)

**The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo** 2009 Niels Arden Oplev (Sweden) 4.0 Michael Nyqvist as Mikael Blomqvist, a low-key, but persistent newspaper reporter hired to investigate a murder; Sven-Bertil Taube as noble-seeming older man who hires Mikael to find his beloved niece Harriet, who disappeared back in the 60s; Noomi Rapace – the star of the show as Lisbeth Salander – as dark clothed, punk expert computer hacker with lots of piercings; she has a dark past eventually teaming up with Mikael to help find the girl. A dark psychological thriller set among the farms and small towns of Sweden. The viewer follows Blomqvist in his search for the disappeared Harriet; the girl hunt picks up when Lisbeth, who has been hired to profile Mikael, likes him, contacts him, and then brings her advanced computer skills to help Mikael find out what happened to the woman. The thriller aspect of the film is laid out ably if sometimes deliberately: we follow the investigation into the Nazi past of members of the Vanger family only to find that one of the Vanger brothers was a serial killer (who picked on Jewish woman) who taught his son the skill. In a double postscript, Mikael and Lisbeth discover that Harriet is still alive and living in Australia (long flight!) and arrange for a touching reunion between her

and her uncle; and then Lisbeth gives Mikael the information he needs to nail down his journalistic case against the cheating tycoon that he had pursued in the beginning of the film; and then the tycoon dies a mysterious suicide (did Lisbeth do him in?) and a mysterious woman gets her hands on much of the tycoon's wealth (and we see Lisbeth walking down something like the Promenade des Anglais dressed now in high Eurostyle). The originality of the film lies in the character of the dark and ruthless Lisbeth: the viewer discovers in the course of the film that she had been abused as a child and that she had burned her tormenter to death in his car; hence her being on probation in the beginning of the film and her single-minded drive to discover the author of the rapes and murders she and Mikael are investigating. Much explicit sexual violence that does not come across as lurid: Lisbeth's unmerciful revenge against her probation office tormenter with a large dildo (anal rape) and a freely wielded tattoo gun; very explicit photographs of the murdered girls with severed heads and mutilated bodies; a horrifying, sexually motivated attempted hanging of Mikael when captured by the sicko Martin (Mikael is rescued at the last minute by the arrival of the implacable Lisbeth with a golf club). The relationship between Mikael and Lisbeth is friendly and trusting, but the retiring Mikael never thinks to push it further; when Lisbeth finally initiates sex, it is somewhat impersonal, but they have an attraction for one another, and the editing makes a bigger deal of their holding hands than of the actual sex; the end of the film is open-ended inviting for a sequel that followed shortly; it is obvious that the two are on the same side, but the viewer will have to stay tuned to see what happens. An unusually good thriller because of the careful plotting, the interesting character of Lisbeth, the absorbing social and geographical background, the twists and turns and little shocks in the editing. (2012)

**The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo** 2011 David Fincher 3.0 Daniel Craig as the strong, silent, persistent, fundamentally decent investigative journalist, Mikael, condemned at beginning of film for slander; Rooney Mara rather low-key, although obsessive as the revengeful, punk, computer savvy investigator, Lisbeth Salander (and much less memorable than the unforgettable Noomi Rapace in the Swedish version of the novel); Christopher Plummer avuncular as the head of the weird, violent Vanger family – he hires Mikael to investigate the disappearance of his grand-niece Harriet; Stellan Skarsgard as the nephew Martin, who first seems respectable as the man who runs the Vanger company but who turns out to be a sociopathic torturer and murderer of young Jewish women. Often entertaining, although over-long big studio version of the terrifically popular Steep Larsson novel. Like the Swedish version, this film covers the territory only of the first novel, leaving the other two to perhaps sequels. The best part is the first part, when we are just getting to know the principals, Mikael travels to northern (?) Sweden to meet the Vangers (beautiful shots of the train cutting through the snowy landscape), Lisbeth is sexually abused by her guardian and she wreaks her infamous revenge on him (using a stun gun and then tattooing 'rapist' on his huge belly; while satisfying, the scene is not as gut-wrenching as in the Swedish tv version), Mikael, soon joined by Lisbeth, begin their investigation of the disappearance of Harriet, etc. The second part of the film is filled to excess with montages of the two principals conducting their investigation into the murders and mutilation (following passages from Leviticus) of a number of girls beginning in the 1950s: many shots of the black clad Lisbeth zipping through city streets on her sleek motorcycle (the film never explains where her extensive funds come from), and parallel edited shots of their computer screens over both of their shoulders. Once the evil Martin is disposed of in an exciting sequence (Mikael being tortured in the basement of his house, rescued by Lisbeth with a golf club (not clear), who then gives chase to Martin after asking permission to kill him, and then Martin's death in a fiery auto crash outside the local grocery store), the film loses momentum as Lisbeth dons a blonde wig, pursues the enemy, hated businessman Wasserström, to several exotic locations and then somehow has him executed by mafia-style hitmen. Some emotional redemption when Plummer is reunited with one of his daughters (not clear to this viewer if it is Harriet). An original wrinkle in this version is the focus on Lisbeth's love life: she is of course lonely and perhaps warped by her experience with her guardian, but she falls in love with Mikael; she approaches him aggressively and innocently, virtually forcing sex on him several times; the last scene of the film has her preparing special gifts for him, but then having to hang back crushed outside his house when she sees that he is still attached to his girlfriend. The film ends on a note of empathy for her, making the viewer wonder whether a sequel is in store. (2012)



**The Girl With a Pearl Earring** 2003 Peter Webber (Britain) 3.0 Scarlett Johansson as Griet, the simple, unlettered, but sensuous, full-lipped teenager hired to serve as a maid in the household of Dutch painter Jan Vermeer; Colin Firth mostly impassive as Vermeer – he works very slowly painting one canvas at a time; Tom Wilkinson as wealthy, lecherous patron that takes a liking for Griet (but any movement toward seduction is blocked by family and social strictures in this film); Judy Parfitt active and dominating as Vermeer’s mother-in-law – she dominates family life; Essie Davis as Vermeer’s repressed, jealous, and eventually hysterical wife, the mother of five or six. Slow-moving treatment of the relationship dynamics of Vermeer’s family that factor in the origin of the famous painting; the film stands out for its recreation of the light, color, and decorative characteristics of Vermeer’s world rather than interest in plot, theme, or character. Griet and Vermeer have a potentially erotic connection from the beginning: she shares his interest in art and a sensitivity to the components of a painting; since he gets her to prepare colors for him, they are able to spend a lot of time together; a couple of times they almost touch or kiss; their mutual attraction finally finds fulfillment only in Vermeer’s commission from Wilkinson to paint her portrait. The shot of her posing with the blue scarf and the pearl earring borrowed from Vermeer’s wife is a dead ringer for the famous painting. Vermeer remains frustrated (?) and imprisoned in the tight web of his family, but Griet advances toward adulthood. Her relationship with Vermeer activates her sensuality, and her passage to womanhood is signaled by her sexual encounter with her butcher boyfriend in a stable and by the gift of the pearl earrings (by Vermeer?) to her at the end of the film. The viewer’s interest in the development of the plot and characters is mitigated by repetitious shots of Griet’s shy, halting demeanor, making little curtsies and casting her eyes downward; one is relieved when she finally grows up (one supposes she will marry the butcher boy and adapt to life in her won social class). The strength of the film is the *mise-en-scène* – bright, yellowish light, realistic textures, sumptuous costumes and jewelry worn by the middle classes, the exact recreation of a middle class household, the canals of Delft used for transportation (the film was made largely on a pre-existing set in Luxemburg); the sensitive score by Alexandre Desplats is excellent. (2015)

**Girl’s Dormitory** 1936 Irving Cummings (20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox) 3.0 Herbert Marshall his usual avuncular, sincere self as headmaster of an adolescent girls’ school; Ruth Chatterton sincere and long-suffering as a teacher at his school who is secretly in love with Marshall; Simone Simon glowing in her first Hollywood appearance as a 19-year-old graduating student who is in love with Marshall; Constance Collier plain, ugly, and comic as priggish teacher bent on enforcing the standard moral code; J. Edward Bromberg as stocky, bespectacled, and equally priggish instructor; Tyrone Power with a small part in his first Fox movie as Simone’s cousin. Little romantic drama that takes place in an exclusive girls’ boarding school somewhere in Austria in the 1930s; Simone, who is in love with the much older Marshall, is caught with a love letter that she wrote to him (with no intention of delivering it); at the insistence of Collier and Bromberg she is almost expelled from the school just a few weeks before graduation, but Chatterton and Marshall save her; she then reveals her feelings to Marshall, who realizes that he reciprocates them (student and staff person – good thing the film takes place in the 30s!); having changed her mind about pursuing her connection to Marshall, Simone leaves the school after graduation on the arm of Power, whom she presents as her fiancé, but later in a Paris night club a bereft Simone is approached by Marshall; they embrace, and despite their age differences, one supposes they live happily ever after. The film is in good condition, and is well directed with atmospheric sets depicting the location in the Alps and appropriate close-ups on the principals in key moments (the close-ups of Simone’s face are as particularly pretty and affecting). Characters are clearly drawn, pitting the sensitive, well-meaning good guys (Marshall and Chatterton) against the sourpusses who don’t want to give the girl a chance (Collier and Bromberg). One has to wonder about the appropriateness of a budding relationship between the director of the school and a student (however mature she is proclaimed to be), but the screenplay draws several lines – Marshall hesitates and seeks advice and Simone breaks off the relationship until after she leaves the school – to prepare a respectable consummation. No mention that such a good student might want to delay marriage and go to college! Enjoyable, well-done little ‘A’ film providing tidbits of titillation presenting pretty girls in thick cotton nightgowns. (2009)

**Glengarry Glen Ross** 1992 James Foley (written by David Mamet) 4.0 Alec Baldwin in one of his earlier roles as brutal, vicious, insulting real estate boss, who appears at the beginning of the film to harangue the salesmen and then disappears; Al Pacino spell-binding in role as the real estate company's smooth-talking, sometimes almost Satanic-seeming top salesman; Jack Lemmon slack and elderly in excellent swan-song performance as somewhat over-the-hill salesman who can sell something only to customers who are conning him; Ed Harris as very angry and foul-mouthed (well, ok, they all are) salesman, who plots revenge against the company and then disappears in the last act; Alan Arkin as nice-guy (only one?)mild-mannered echo of Harris; Kevin Spacey as frustrated and unhappy sales coordinator – he is supposed to be the local boss, but he gets nothing but insults from his men; Jonathan Pryce as the only customer – rather wimpy, he backs out with darting eyes and guilty look when his wife refuses to go along with the sale maneuvered by Pacino. Brilliant adaptation of famous David Mamet play for the screen; remains as a talkfest delivered by a perfect cast of consummate Hollywood professionals, but environment is opened up some by varied interiors in a sleazy part of Chicago (the office is terminally drab and shabby, the Chinese restaurant gleams with garish reds), driving in cars, and an almost continuous driving rain. Concerns a bunch of more-or-less shady real estate salesman who are told by Baldwin in the beginning of the film that if they don't deliver on the next set of "leads" (supposedly people who have already been contacted), they will be fired. After 24 hours of hostile conversation and mostly pathetic attempts to sell (one assumes worthless) land in Arizona and Florida, the film ends with the lives of most everyone in shambles. The sales made during the film both fall about: Pacino's mark appears in the last act and reneges; Lemmon's sale, about which he is very proud, turns out to be a con on him by a lonely couple that likes to play with salesmen. Almost all the dialogue is classic Mametese matching the characters and relationships of the hapless cast. Characters spit insults at one another, thrust and parry in their insults, use a lot of profanity (Lemmon outdoes his fellows in a surprise outburst at the end), interrupt, repeat, double back, spin hostile and insulting patterns in their conversation. The dialogue expresses the desperateness of the salesmen: they are in dead-end jobs and would probably be better off working at Starbucks; they are in competition and secretly hate one another; they see themselves as expert predators, and yet they are classic victims – of the company and their bosses, and sometimes even of their customers; hence their misery and their desperation. Film ties in with Mamet's 'House of Games', since selling property is really a con game perpetrated on the customer and often on the salesman. Pacino provides the classic demonstration in his long conversations with Pryce in the Chinese restaurant, but even the king of the salesmen is humiliated in the last act. Outstanding play, outstanding adaptation, outstanding performances, although not something you would show your children. (2009)

**Gloomy Sunday** 1999 Rolf Schubel (Britain) 3.0 Joachim Krol as pudgy, good-hearted, and loving owner of Budapest restaurant in the 1930s; Erika Marozsan as the stunningly beautiful Ilona, a server in the restaurant and lover of Krol; Stefano Dionisi as pianist hired to play in the restaurant – Ilona and he also fall in love; Ben Becker as German customer who also falls in love with Ilona but is rejected by her. Romantic melodrama that turns into a Holocaust story in the last third. Most of the time the film is about the love triangle between Krol, Ilona and Dionisi: they all work in the restaurant, both of the men make love with Ilona in deliciously moderate detail, and the three seem to get along pretty well. From the beginning the film has a tragic undertone, since the famous "Hungarian suicide song", 'Gloomy Sunday' that is composed by Dionisi appears to drive people to suicide (could it be because they are tired of listening to it?). Meanwhile, Ilona rejects Becker, and when he attempts suicide by jumping into the Danube, he is saved by Krol. The narrative has a flashback frame: it begins with the sudden death of an older man visiting the restaurant many decades after the war, and then with a shot of a photo of the divine Ilona the flashback takes us to the amours of the 1930s. The film takes on a tragic tone toward the end when the Germans arrive in Budapest to implement the Final Solution for the Hungarian Jews. Becker, who is a higher SS officer, turns out to be venal: he sells exit visas for Jew who can afford to pay, and he and his associates ship the jewels and money off to Germany to start an import-export business after the Germans lose the war (were there many SS officers so realistic?). But when he is persuaded by Ilona to save Krol from the Auschwitz train leaving from the station, he neglects to follow through on the bargain and he saves another Jew who could be more useful to him later. The epilogue then takes the viewer back to the 1990s, where we are informed that the man who had dropped dead in the beginning of the film is

Becker, who is a prosperous, rich and respectable German businessman, and – much to our surprise – that the owner of the restaurant is Ilona, who has exacted her revenge with the same vial of poison that Krol had not been able to use back in 1944. The mixture of languid three-way (almost four-way) romance with revenge melodrama is perhaps a bit forced, but the film holds your attention and resonates afterwards. With her perfect facial features, medium brown hair, and slight but shapely body, Marozsan is a paragon of beauty; she contributes immeasurably to the romantic spell cast by the film. (2008)

**Go** 1999 Doug Limon 4.0 Sarah Polley as plain Jane but bold grocery store clerk who decides on a one-time drug deal; Desmond Askew as heedless Brit who also works in the grocery store; Katie Holmes in early role as more cautious and reserved friend of Polley; Timothy Olyphant as initially disquieting drug dealer; Scott Wolf and Jay Mohr as nervous, good-humored soap opera stars who get dragooned into a drug sting involving Pulley; William Fichtner eventually amusing as alarming police detective setting the sting with Wolf and Mohr; Jane Krakowski in early role as Fichtner's lecherous wife. Extremely amusing directorial tour de force set among various LA slackers just looking for a few thrills. Film is quite different from Limon's 'Swingers' in that it has scarcely a sensitive, romantic moment but concentrates instead on narrative momentum and surprises, good humor, and engaging performances from all the young actors despite the often absurd situations they get into. The film is divided into three parts: the first one following Polley as she gets tangled in a bad drug deal and is left in a ditch after being hit by a car; the second following Askew as he heads to Las Vegas (again!) for a crazy day of sex (he has group sex with two bridesmaids) and violence (the boys steal a car and then shoot the bouncer in a lap dance parlor); and the third following Wolf and Mohr as they set up the failed sting with Polley and end up at Fichtner's house for "dinner". The film rewinds the action each time to the same beginning scene in the grocery store. The third episode often depicts the same scenes seen from a different point of view in the first (the middle one is separate since it takes place in Vegas): for example, the third episode shows that the drug deal was a police sting and that Polley gets wind of it just in time because Mohr whispers to her to flush the ecstasy pills she is trying to sell; it also repeats the hitting of Polley with the car from the point of view of Wolf and Mohr inside the car (surprised to find her alive, they later rescue her and take her to the hospital). The film ends farcically with the bouncer coming to LA and finally deciding to shoot Askew in the arm just as Askew had shot him during the tussle in Las Vegas. The film has many amusing bits, perhaps the most extreme one being the dinner that Wolf and Mohr attend at Fichtner's house; every indication is that he is inviting them for a homosexual orgy, but conversation at the dinner table reveals to the viewer – absurdly – that Fichtner and his wife are Amway salespeople and want the two guys to work for them. Throughout the narrative the characters get involved in disturbing underworld situations, but somehow the script gets them out of trouble and leaves them all no worse for wear at the end. The film has obvious debts to 'Pulp Fiction', but has a sunnier, less disturbing temperament. Inspired, ingenious fun. (2012)

**Go West** 1925 Buster Keaton 3.0 A sweet brown cow plays his close friend. At times slow-moving Keaton film (70 minutes) with low-key action and fewer well-planned gags, but the film has a sweetness lacking in most of his films since the Keaton character is lonely (his names his Friendless) and the only human relationship he establishes is with a brown car. Keaton can't cope with life in the big city, so he heeds Horace Greely's "Go West, young man!", which he does by hitching a freight train to a western ranch. He gets a job, but he is of course completely incompetent at cowboy activities – he twists himself in the rope when he tries to lasso, he rides a mule instead of a horse, he is incompetent to court the pretty (?) girl that lives in the ranch house, every time he sits down to eat at the mess table, everyone else gets up and leaves (?), etc. His only achievement is to befriend the brown cow, whom he protects from branding and from coyotes/wolves, on whose head he ties reindeer antlers to help her protect herself against the bulls; he becomes very upset when the ranch owner announces that he has to send his entire herd to market (in railroad stock cars) to keep himself from going bankrupt. Once he arrives in the market city (actually the streets of Los Angeles), Keaton continues his campaign to save his cow. The herd of cattle wanders through the streets, crossing the street under the direction of the traffic cop and wandering into several shops and hotels disturbing the customers who usually run for high land to escape the cattle; Keaton has to intervene to shoo them out of the shop. Keaton does a lot of pratfalls and

generally maintains his Stoneface; even when a gunman tells him to smile when he talks, he tries by using his fingers to raise the corners of his mouth, but he just can't. His last gag is the best: because he saved the boss' cattle herd, he tells Keaton that he can have whatever he wants; Keaton then points to his left where the daughter is standing and says he wants her; when his beloved brown cow walks into the frame, father and daughter realize that Keaton means the cow and not the girl. Not Keaton at his most ingenious and inventive, but he makes up for it partially by pulling harder at our heart strings. (2006)

**The Godfather** 1972 Francis Ford Coppola 4.0 Al Pacino in moving performance ranging from callow youth to steely ruthless mafioso; Marlon Brando irritating with all the cotton stuffed in his mouth but surprisingly gentle in his attachment to his family and his old-fashioned ways; James Caan percussive and convincing as the hot-headed eldest son; Diane Keaton; Robert Duvall as the non-Italian, cool-headed consigliere; Sterling Hayden bigger than life and a little foolish as a police captain in the pay of Barzini; Abe Vigoda; Talia Shire; John Cazale as the not-so-bright Fredo Corleone; Richard Conte as Don Emilio Barzini; Al Lettieri as Sollozzo. Outstanding drama about the transition of a New York mafia family from the old days – under Brando with gambling, rackets, perhaps prostitution – to the new world: either drugs, which are considered very profitable, or legitimate business, which seems to be Michael's decision when he moves the family to Las Vegas at the end of the film. Dramatically the story is about the transformation of Michael from a respectable war hero (engaged to a very WASP Diane Keaton) to a completely ruthless, cold-blooded mafia don at the end of the film. An outstanding passage stretches from the family's meetings about what to do after the attempt on Don Corleone's life to Michael's murder of the "Turk" (Sollozzo) and his client, Captain McCluskey (Sterling Hayden). Sonny (James Caan), the hot-headed oldest brother, argues with Tom, the temporizer. In a series of dramatic scenes, Michael, the younger brother, is transformed from a callow war hero and college guy in a button-down collar to "maturity" and willingness to kill his family's enemies in the interest of "business." Michael performs the murders in a bravura scene in Louis' restaurant, where he cold-bloodedly shoots both of his enemies twice in the head at close range. Coppola shows himself as a master of characterization (the four brothers are all very different). He makes Michael into a sort of tragic hero, a nice fellow who would like to have been normal, but who is drawn by circumstances and rock-solid clan loyalty into the underworld at the head of the family. In a dazzling display of ironic parallel editing toward the end of the film, Coppola shows the ruthless murder of Barzini and his henchmen in several different locations intercut with scenes of the baptism of Michael's second child. The film ends with a psychologically shocking scene between Keaton and Michael: when Keaton asks her husband point blank whether he is responsible for the killings, he looks her square in the eye and replies "No"; Keaton completely accepts the lie and dissolves in utter relief in his embrace. Coppola is a master storyteller, who by a good script that establishes well delineated characters and by meticulous direction keeps the film exciting and the viewer on the edge of his seat. He plays constantly on the film's main theme: although the Corleone brothers are affectionate family men (note how they hug each other goodbye when Michael leaves for the killing) and devoted to the trappings of their Catholic religion, they do not hesitate to kill in cold blood; family togetherness (eating, long wedding ceremonies) and religious ceremonies (marriages, baptisms, and funerals) coexist uncomfortably in this film with illegal activity and extreme violence. The film is implicitly critical of American culture, often suggesting a comparison between normal American families and businesses and the mafia families and their business. Nino Rota's music appearing in key spots is unforgettable. Other memorable scenes: reluctant Hollywood mogul finds a bloody severed horse's head in his bed; Sonny's ambush at the toll station; Brando's affecting death scene in the presence of his grandson; numerous scenes in which Brando and Michael say, "We will make him an offer he can't refuse". (2006)

**The Godfather Part II** 1974 Francis Ford Coppola 3.5 Al Pacino, Diane Keaton, who has a major meltdown scene when she kisses off Michael, Robert Duvall, John Cazale as Fredo, Robert De Niro as Vito Corleone as a young man in New York, Lee Strasberg as Hyman Roth, Michael's seemingly mild-mannered *bête noire* in Miami. Sprawling continuation of Part I, focusing mainly on Michael Corleone as he gains control over most Nevada gambling, and with big flashbacks to events in Sicily (assassination of Vito Corleone's father by Don Ciccio) and New York (Vito [of course played 'later' in Part I by Marlon Brando] as a young man in New York becoming a mobster style protector in the Italian

community). Film has less violence than the first movie; and it has less dramatic rigor and consistency. Perhaps film should have focused exclusively on the riveting story of Michael's increasing moral corruption and personal isolation and have left out the Vito background material: the flashback sequences, which take up over an hour of the film change the tone of the film from dark and brooding to light-filled and even nostalgic – it seems that Vito and his family could have turned out better given DeNiro's positive traits. Wonderfully told individual sequences that keep one's attention: the cross-cut triple murder at the end (including Fredo on Lake Tahoe); Michael's near death in his bedroom at the beginning and our attentiveness as we follow Michael through his search for the killer, etc. Film would have had more inner consistency if Coppola had focused exclusively on the tragedy of Michael. Pacino and the family are holed up in the dark mansion next to Lake Tahoe. Pacino is terrific in subtly portraying the tension between Michael's quiet, rather easy-going, family loving exterior and his fierce, roiling inner demons. He never forgives or forgets an insult or a betrayal; he must always take revenge against his enemies – he has his own brother Fredo murdered as he watches from the window of his Tahoe mansion despite his sister's pleas for forgiveness (what would his father have done?); he becomes increasingly bitter and lonely until he is left almost alone at the end – all his brothers are dead, his wife is estranged, he has no human warmth with anyone. He has broken his promise to Kay (Keaton) at the end of Part I to move the family into legitimate business. Was it unyielding pride that turned the sweet kid of the beginning of Part I into the murderous near-monster of the end of Part II? Surely we can't ascribe it all to the requirements of the job! Some narrative questions remain: what was the point of the extravagant and long section on moving into Cuba? And who did actually order the murder of Frankie in New York (almost everybody blames Roth, but the killer gave Frankie a greeting "from Michael Corleone" as he started to garret him). Fascinating film with marvelous components that could have been a true masterpiece in its own right if perhaps the nostalgic flashbacks had been eliminated or minimized. (2006)

**The Godfather, Part III** Francis Ford Coppola 3.0 Al Pacino looking gaunt, a lot older, and more frail; Talia Shire turned into a rather ruthless sometimes shrew ordering deaths of family enemies; Diane Keaton boring as Michael's estranged wife, who will never forgive him for what he did in Part II; Andy Garcia as Sonny's hot-headed son, who increasingly takes control of the organization; Sofia Coppola as Maria, the striking but awkwardly performing daughter of Michael; Eli Wallach as old, seemingly doddering family Mafioso, who turns out to be a scheming traitor to Michael. Final, overly long, under-edited part of the Godfather series. Takes part largely in Italy with shots of the Vatican and a lot of locations in Sicily, including the exterior and interior of the Teatro Massimo, where Michael's son Anthony is performing (well) the lead role in 'Cavalleria rusticana' toward the end of the film. Film has dual thrust. One is the drama of Michael, forever caught between on the one hand his love for his family and his desire (frustrated once before in Part II) to take his family legit and on the other the dynamics of a mafioso – almost impossible to get out; film ends tragically with the shooting death of his daughter on the steps of the Teatro Massimo in Palermo, and then in the last scene he, a very old man, (in a long shot) falls dead off his chair, recalling the death of Vito in 'The Godfather'. The other is a swipe at the Catholic Church, or at least at certain corrupt circles in the Vatican, who have connections with top crime families in Italy, and who resist Michael's attempts to take over a traditional European real estate company with close ties to the Vatican, to the point of murdering members of Michael's organization. Michael in the end wins the contest with his adversaries, but this doesn't mean much since he and his daughter die. The climactic action includes the 'murder' of Michael's decent ally John Paul I (the film implies that JP's predecessor, Paul VI, was either a fool or complicit in the crooked dealings of the Vatican bad guys). Film moves slowly with too many scenes developing Michael's remorse (including one where he kind of confesses to the Cardinal future Pope John Paul I) and preparing entry into the Vatican intrigue. Ends with a long (15 minutes?) cross-edited sequence between the murder of the Vatican bad guys and the performance of Anthony in 'Cavalleria Rusticana', where assassins are trying to get to Michael; assassin with gun couching in a box and taking aim at the proposed victim while the music crashes of course reminds one of the assassination scene in 'The Man Who Knew Too Much', but without Doris Day's timely scream. The sequence successfully evokes the lurid, emotionally over-the-top character of Italian opera. Since story and filming were good, the film could have been a lot better with tighter editing and some performance tweaks. (2006)

**Gods and Monsters** 1998 Bill Condon 3.5 Ian McKellan in show-stopping role as older, flagrantly gay James Whale, who is slowly dying from a stroke; Lynn Redgrave unrecognizable as grouchy housekeeper who as a Catholic disapproves of the old man but really loves him (kissing his corpse on the lips when he is fished out of the swimming pool at the end); Brendan Fraser as a young lawn cutter whose life is so far a failure, who can't maintain a permanent relationship with his girlfriend (Lolita Davidovich calls him a "kid"), and who then befriends Whale. Sleeper film about preparing for death and accepting it; it won an AA for best adapted screenplay in 1998. Quietly directed in colorful, posh Los Angeles setting – medium-sized house with swimming pool in Santa Monica. Whale, whose mind is slowly disintegrating, is very vulnerable, thinking constantly about death, and flashing back to previous experiences – his erotic attachment to a beautiful British soldier in the trenches of World War I, the skinny dipping parties attended only by men in his swimming pool, the making of 'The Bride of Frankenstein' with Elsa Lanchester in her impossible hairdo standing between the gay Colin Clive and Professor Pretorius, dream sequence in which Whale is the monster having his brain extracted from the top of his skull and carefully replaced. He appears to be looking for a romantic glow in his attachment to Fraser – he even shows him off at a hilarious garden party given by George Cukor (also a flaming gay) for Princess Margaret – but in a lurid surprise he reveals that he wants Fraser to kill him; being killed by a beautiful strong man in a sado-masochistic situation would be his way of making death acceptable. Fraser's attraction is partly his hunky sexual appeal, partly a superficial resemblance to the Frankenstein Monster that Whale had created. Film is good at keeping us suspended about what its theme is, and then honing in on the experience of dying after a life filled with fun, love, and professional fulfillment. Ending has bits of Hollywood sentimentality, as Fraser becomes strongly attached to Whale, grieves when he dies, and then passes on his legacy to his son, whom he is showing Whale's film in the last scene. Several clips from "Frankenstein" and "Bride" shown to different characters throughout the film. The real strength of the film is the acting: Fraser does a creditable job, but the fussy Redgrave and the elegant McKellan (especially when he recounts his experience growing up in a working-class family in the North of England) turn the film into a memorable experience. (2006; 2014)

**Godzilla, King of the Monsters** 1954/1956 American Version (Japan) 2.0 Japanese actors; Raymond Burr added for US version. Godzilla, a 400-foot dinosaur/lizard, appears out of the deep, completely lays waste Tokyo, and after military achieves little, he is finally destroyed by secret weapon, Oxygen Destroyer. Focus of film is special effects 1950s style – miniatures of urban landscape (railroads, buildings, electric power towers, etc.) approached and crushed by (stop action?) lumbering monster, who breathes smoke from mouth catching whole city on fire; generally then cut to reaction shots of the public panicking and running. American version has many scenes with Burr watching and reporting back to the USA about happenings in solemn, purple prosy Edward R. Murrow type reportage; intercut with Japanese footage, often to awkward effect; Burr scenes much sharper and more contrast compared to washed out, scratchy Japanese footage; some dubbing, but always terrible; most remarks of Japanese are translated or summarized by Burr. Science and the military team up to defeat the threat coming from the outside, after several failures. The monster is spawned by Hydrogen Bomb tests that have altered some creature in the depths of the ocean; scenes of Tokyo reminiscent of firebombing of World War II (only ten years before) or of what the city would look like after a nuclear attack. Attempt to keep our interest with cheesy romantic triangle; and the inventor of the OD finally sacrifices himself to make sure the creature is turned to a skeleton -- much solemn elegiac music toward the end. The latter was afraid to use the weapon "for fear it would fall into the wrong hands." Film has no humor. One of the early prototypical monster movies; civilization is threatened from the outside, but we manage to save ourselves by trusting in science and the military. (2007)

**The Goebbels Experiment** 2005 Lutz Hachmeister (Germany) 4.0 Outstanding different style of documentary about infamous Nazi propaganda minister, Joseph Goebbels. Film has virtually no narration – only a few printed subtitles now and then; it consists of excerpts from Goebbels' diary narrated in deadpan, non-committal tone by Kenneth Branagh and illustrated with fabulous film footage from German television and film archives: scenes of German streets especially in the 1920s; and once he

became well-known, of Goebbels doing most everything in his brief 12-year period of glory: paling around with Hitler and Goering, riding in fancy automobiles with them, walking into a performance of 'Tristan and Isolde', which he criticizes rather bitterly, giving speeches about many subjects, including the wonders of modern radio technology and the beauty and effectiveness of Soviet and Czech films (he found the former's approach to propaganda too obvious, and he found the latter charming, mainly because it contained a ravishing Czech actress caressing her own breasts – she later became Goebbels' mistress). Since it concentrates almost exclusively on the entries in Goebbels' diaries, the film skips many of the key events and attitudes of the Nazi regime: if Goebbels writes about it, it's in the film. He is presented as an ambitious fellow frustrated by petty jobs in the 1920s economy and by his disability – he had to wear a brace on one of his feet; and he found compensatory fulfillment in his adoration of Hitler and a fanatical commitment to the cause and ideology of National Socialism. He remained insecure and was convinced that party rivals such as Goering, Strasser, and Himmler, all of whom he characterized on occasion as schemers and fools, were out to get him. Although he remained completely attached to Hitler, he at one point criticized him as weak. The film shows him as rabidly anti-Semitic, although there is no indication that he played any direct role in the persecution of them. During the war, he rarely mentions the Americans, and devotes more vitriol against the English (although he comes to a reluctant admiration of the rhetoric of Winston Churchill) and, to a lesser extent, the Russians. There is a lot of footage of him and his beloved Magda (they had six children) at home or of the children wishing their father happy birthday on film. His opinions are very strong and often very self-serving, e.g., English propaganda is infinitely inferior to the German variety, several of the German films made during the war are among the masterpieces of the world. He comes across as a strong orator, who could speak without notes almost poetically about technological progress, or heatedly and rabidly about the Jewish menace or the dire need to defeat the Russians so as to protect German women against the Reds. It is apparent that he is a master of propaganda and that much of the success of the Nazi regime in snuffing out dissent and disagreement in Germany is due to his propaganda campaigns, but there is no analysis of what made it so effective. Not many entries in the last weeks of the war. His fate is shown by Russian film of his and Magda's charred bodies lying on a sheet next to the intact bodies of their children (poisoned!) – his foot brace is apparent. Fascinating work that remains rather puzzling: in some ways his life and character seems ordinary, way out of proportion with the extent of Nazi evil; and he seems somewhat on the periphery of events, commenting on them in his diary and justifying them to the world and the German people. (2011)

**Goin' To Town** 1935 (Paramount) Alexander Hall ; dialogue by Mae West 2.5 Mae West sporting her best strut singing two blues songs and wearing fabulous hats cocked to the side; Paul Cavanaugh as handsome, distinguished Englishman Carrington has energetic delivery; Ivan Lebedeff as crooked suave Russian with slicked back hair and spats living in Argentina. Starts out in typical old western town (20<sup>th</sup> century) where everybody is neatly dressed. Her one-liners are tame. "Marriage. That would be a new kind of racket for me." West agrees to marry a rich outlaw (?); when he dies in a cattle rustling, she inherits all his property making her a millionairess. To her manager, "Just look after the cattle. I'll take care of the men." Decides to seduce suave, snobby Englishman Cavanaugh, who is prospecting for oil on her property; long seduction scene with him where she uses mild double entendres – "You like girls who like pink tea and stick out their little fingers when they drink it." He: "You're a dangerous woman." She, "You look good to me too." West decides to follow him to Buenos Aires, where she will get him by entering her horse in the races and pretending she is a "lady". She hobnobs with the rich upper set in BA – night clubs and horse racing – and enjoys attracting the attention of all the elegant, stylish men and women. Rich people are snobby, stiff, concerned only with money and social standing. Nice racetrack scene – close race, suspense, dirty tricks, and lots of West's money riding on the result. About prospective elderly suitor – "He collects antiques." West "Do you think he'll last 'til I get him home." West marries a rich man strictly to improve her social standing, but the rich ladies plot to run out of town. Hilarious scene with Mae West singing Delilah's love song in French in duet with Samson in Saint-Saens' opera. In silly ending West is accused of her new husband's murder, but she is of course cleared. She then marries Cavanaugh who has recently acceded to a lordship and returned to court her; they are last seen in a ship heading for England. (2007)

**Going Clear: Scientology and the Prison of Belief** 2015 Alex Gibney (based on the book by Lawrence Wright) 3.0 Documentary film that takes a skeptical, nay hostile, attitude toward the “Church” of Scientology. It is based almost entirely on well-produced interviews with ex-Scientologists that left the Church in the last 15 years. The viewer’s reaction to the film depends on your evaluation of the credibility of the interviewees – they have been roundly and violently denounced by the Church as a bunch of liars (why? Financial gain? Personal disappointment?). They seem completely credible – well-spoken, sincere, concerned to get the truth about the abuses of the organization out to the public. The sometimes repetitive film covers a number of subjects: revelations about Ron Hubbard’s background, particularly his lies about his experience; the bestselling pseudo-psychology ‘Dianetics’, followed by Hubbard’s decision to found a religion (the only way to make money, he says, since it will be tax-exempt); his absurd, unbelievable mythology that is revealed to organization members only when they are firmly imbedded in the movement (the galactic Overlord, the souls dropped into volcanos where they are spread about by hydrogen bombs into the unfortunate bodies of contemporary Americans that go to Scientology offices to undergo repetitive auditing to get rid of their problems); the absurd Sea Org, wherein everyone dresses in naval uniforms and sails around the Mediterranean to escape taxation from the IRS; the epic experience of John Travolta in the movement, and his failure to take measures to influence the organization in a positive direction; even more attention to Tom Cruise, the campaign by the organization to undermine his marriage with Nicole Kidman, his supine relationship with Scientology head David Miscavige, and his utter failure to speak out; the depredations of the power-hungry dictator Miscavige, who took over the organization immediately after Hubbard’s death in 1986, and who has ruled the organization with a Hitler-like iron hand ever since, even to the point of torturing and intimidating Scientology executives in prison camps; the decision by the IRS in 1993 to grant religious tax exemption to the organization in return for dropping the myriad law suits they had filed against the federal organization. Extensive videos of the Scientology rah-rah conventions with monumental backdrops, flashing lights, all recalling the Nazi Party rallies in Nuremberg. The film believes that the organization is losing members – only 50,000 active ones in 2014, but that it is unbelievably wealthy – worth over 3 billion dollars. The film’s explanation for the loyalty of so many to a criminal organization is human nature: members are imbued with the idealistic belief that they will save the world from destruction; the parameters of Scientology’s beliefs are so strong that people who have been in the organization for a long time cannot imagine life outside the walls. Low-key approach that helps convince us that the film is telling the truth. Often repetitive and cinematically dull, the film is nevertheless eloquent in its indictment of this exploitative group. Disillusioning about the religious tax exemption maintained by the IRS. (2017)

**Going My Way** 1944 Leo McCarey (Paramount) 2.5 Heart-warming drama about the relationship of an older priest and his replacement in a Catholic New York parish – 7 Academy Awards! Bing Crosby avuncular, natural, reassuring (and essentially dull) as younger priest sent by the bishop to replace...; Barry Fitzgerald, the crusty pastor of Saint Dominic’s parish for 45 years and apparently reluctant to retire; Risë Stevens smiley, upbeat Met Opera singer – she is very supportive of the good fathers; Gene Lockhart as the not-so-bad mean guy, who holds the overdue mortgage for the parish; Frank McHugh as smiley, good-humored, benign priest that is a friend of Crosby; Jean Heather and Porter Hall in small supporting roles. Harmless, feel-good film whose huge harvest of awards must have had much to do with war weariness in May 1944. Nary a nasty character in the whole cast – Lockhart is not really that bad, Heather is not a slut after all, and the gossipy widow is harmless since the wise, knowing priests don’t take her seriously. Part of the narrative hinges on the parish’s mortgage debt, which is taken care of when Crosby and Stevens team up at the end of the film to produce a benefit concert to raise the needed funds. Although the film is not really a musical, songs and musical themes crop up at every opportunity, the most memorable of which is the popular “Swing on a Star”; quite a few drippy religious songs, such as “Silent Night” and of course Schubert’s “Ave Maria”. Crosby is a modern, cool, with-it priest, who came to the priesthood later in life after a first phase of secular music and romance (with Stevens). He solves a number of parish problems, the most improbable of which is to convert the neighborhood juvenile delinquents into an expert, disciplined boys choir singing in mellifluous four-part harmony. Fitzgerald (AA best supporting actor) is the best thing in the film, very sentimental but genuine as he



invokes the love of his 90-year-old mother back in the old country and his plans to visit her once he is retired; his relationship with Crosby is at first thorny, but of course softens dramatically as time passes. Crosby solidly anchors the film, but remains one of the least deserving of AA winners in Best Actor category. The portrait of Catholic priests is so positive it is treacly (even the bishop would never harm a flea). Similar in tone to 'The Song of Bernadette' 1943, which is a much better film; the contrast to 2016's 'Spotlight' is telling. War-weary patrons must have exited smiling from this good-natured, entertaining film. (2016)

**Golddiggers of 1933** 1933 Mervyn LeRoy, Busby Berkeley 3.5 Ruby Keeler, Joan Blondell, Ginger Rogers (smaller role), Dick Powell, Guy Kibbee. Pleasant, entertaining story about chorines living together and struggling to find work; which they do, more or less; they "trap" two upper crust Bostonians to marry them – financially very advantageous. Focus is music/dance number of the incomparable Busby Berkeley. Best is immortal "Pettin' in the Park" that shows women undressing, explicit silhouetted nudity; a sexually active baby who leers at the girls, looks up girls' dresses, and tries to catch the dancing girls naked before they finish changing behind the translucent curtain; mocking of Victorian/Puritan sex rules; and ends with Dick Powell using a can opener to take off the tin armor of his girlfriend, obviously a metaphor for those pesky old behavior rules. Also the opening number 'We're in the Money,' which has a section in which Ginger Rogers, clad in a coin vest, sings the number in Pig Latin; the number also suggests that girls may have to resort to more extreme means (trapping wealthy men?) if they can't keep their jobs in show business. The "Forgotten Man" number at the end is supposed to celebrate the unfortunate Depression unemployed, but is pretty flat compared to the other three. Dick Powell is song writer/performer; has very good high tenor voice, and lots of liveliness. Other theme is the scheming women, who use their sprightly beauty to trap wealthy men so they won't have to struggle any longer to make a living. Joan Blondell is the cutest, peppiest of the women, but all of them are pretty lively and pretty including Ginger Rogers and Ruby Keeler. Movie is fairly risqué (references to nudity; dancers obviously bare chested behind translucent screen; references to being in bed with a man, etc.); also makes reference to marijuana ("What have you been smoking?"). This movie could not have appeared without major changes after 1934. (2005)

**Golddiggers of 1935** 1935 Busby Berkeley (Warners) 4.0 Dick Powell as hotel clerk and medical student – on hand to croon two or three times; Adolphe Menjou mugging terminally as eccentric Russian dance impresario; Gloria Stuart as rich girl that falls in love with lowly Powell, and then smiles all the way through the film; Alice Brady perhaps the funniest thing in the film as hyper rich dowager with a keen Screwball comic technique; Hugh Herbert as stupidly balmy comic; Frank McHugh as another corny comic; Winifred Shaw as the gifted, dynamic star vocalist of "Lullaby of Broadway". Busby Berkeley's second 'Golddiggers', with its throw-away plot and comedy (with perhaps the exception of Alice Brady) perhaps not up to the standards of the first, but nevertheless containing three first-rate BB numbers. Most of the film is a romantic comedy set in a ritzy resort hotel (New England?), but then becomes a stage musical toward the end as Brady decides to put on a charity show – directed by Menjou, one thinks – at the hotel. Dick Powell croons twice – a cute ditty "Shopping" when he first takes Stuart out to find some suitable clothes for partying; and then an extremely corny crooning in a motorboat to the love waltz, "Words Are in my Heart" The pièces de résistance are three. 1) The introductory number that has various workmen and women (polishing the brass, arranging the furniture, stacking the laundry, trimming the hedge) doing their thing to the accompaniment of a snappy tune. \*\*\*\* 2) The reprise of "Words Are in my Heart" that seems to be set in the antebellum South with female dancers in white organdy gowns, and the famous 56 white pianos twirling and moving to create inventive shapes – waving lines, from random pattern to a perfect square, etc. \*\*\* 3) The immortal "Lullaby of Broadway", framed by the ghostly picture of Winnie Shaw's head (excellent pop voice) starting tiny and then tracking into the screen, whereupon she turns upside down and lights a cigarette; afterward the evocative story of a girl (Shaw) that parties all night on Broadway with Powell, and then (like a good girl; this is not 1933) returns to sleep alone in her bed all day (a clock tells us what time it is); she gets out of bed and goes to a huge expansive nightclub where she and Powell – the only spectators – watch the famous choreographed routine on the multi-tiered stage, several dancers performing mostly tap in hard-to-believe unison,

switching the initiative between the men and the women. Although again there isn't much that is risqué, the number has a certain undercurrent of abandon and danger – the lovers' kisses are passionate, the company has a threatening quality (the men giving the fascist salute?), the crowd sometimes seems to be attacking Winnie (not well-behaved?), and then she plunges apparently to her death at the end, although since the sequence returns to the picture of Shaw's singing head, we wonder if it was a dream. Dramatic and imaginative choreography set to a colorful and evocative song.\*\*\*\* Forgettable film; BB doesn't seem to know how to control his actors; but saved by two wonderful production numbers. (2015)

**Golddiggers of 1937** 1936 Lloyd Bacon (Warner Brothers) 3.0 Not bad final sequel in the Gold Diggers franchise. Dick Powell with silly pencil-thin mustache but singing well and serviceably funny as an insurance salesman; cute Joan Blondell as unemployed (naturally) chorus girl, who falls in love with Powell; Glenda Farrell pretty and man-eating chorine that turns soft at the end; Lee Dixon tall and lanky energetic tap in the two main numbers; Victor Moore as unbearable whiney hypochondriac, who turns energetic in time to produce the final show. Entertaining Warners Berkeley musical with some good satire, a few pretty good songs, and two entertaining Busby Berkeley numbers. Lots of beautiful babes, whose skimpy outfits rival the pre-Code films. The narrative has two insider crooks buying a life insurance policy on Moore so that when he dies (he is in bad health), they can cash in the policy and hide their financial skullduggery. A great deal of macabre humor connected to their attempts to murder Moore: e.g., a good laugh when they push Moore into a swimming pool and then cry for help – very weakly – so that no one will notice; they also hire Farrell to excite him to death, but seeing what a sweetheart he is, she confesses her sin, marries him, and helps him produce the final big number. Some fairly daring social satire for a post-PCA movie: “It's hard to be a debutante.” “It's hard to be good in the capitalistic system.” Good, if not particularly memorable, songs by Harry Warren and Harold Arlen, the best of which is ‘Let's Put Our Heads Together’ (Warren), an energetic Berkeley number that features Powell crooning, almost frenetic tap-dancing by Dixon, and a lot of bathing-suit clad blonde beauties in and out of the water around the swimming pool \*\*\*1/2. The final, save-the-girls number is a curious mix, whose message is that the power pretty girls wield is similar to an army: girls and guys lined up in trenches firing at one another, but ending up kissing (war of the sexes); girls making intricate designs on a mass of white rocking chairs, girls marching forward in a wedge with white pennants flying, drums flying, and cannons firing; Dixon appears for a short tap routine.\*\*\*\* The number has no narrative. The viewer can hardly escape the impression that Berkeley spent a lot of time watching military parades and college bands perform on football fields. Keeps your attention but isn't up to the standards of the previous Gold Diggers installments. (2016)

**Gomorra** 2008 Matteo Garrone (book Roberto Saviano) (Italy) 3.0 Toni Servillo as waste disposal entrepreneur, Salvatore Cantalupo as master tailor, Salvatore Abruzzese as Totò, Gianfelice Imparato as Camorra bagman. Shockingly and depressingly realistic film about the Comorra's stranglehold over the northern part of Naples. Set in massive decaying public housing projects and semi-industrial wastelands on the outskirts of the city; few of the characters appear to be professional actors, they are so ugly, vicious, overweight, sweating, unshaved, inchoate, mostly stupid, and poorly dressed. The Comorra controls everything in the neighborhood – if you displease the leadership, you might be murdered or just kicked out of your (extremely ugly and tattered) apartment. The film has hardly any plot and it does not waste time with character development: in the first scene in a tanning salon we are thrown into a gang war within the Camorra organization; we are given certain characters, who are barely introduced and explained, and you just move forward with the ever-escalating violence. There is no resolution of issues; the film ends with the usual scenes of confusion, violence, and death, and one assumes that it all will continue. The narrative follows several plot lines: 1) Servillo is a respectable-looking mob-related entrepreneur, who disposes of toxic waste in illegal fashion, bribing local farmers to allow him to dump poison on their land; 2) Imparato is a bag man paying the employees of the organization; when things begin to look grim for him, he rats on his own men to another organization, and four of his friends are murdered in a hold-up; 3) Two extremely stupid kids who run around spouting lines from ‘Scarface’ decide to operate on their own, steal weapons from one of the sub-gangs, and they are then murdered in retribution in an ambush; 4) Cantalupo, a master seamster working for a Camorra-

controlled clothing factory, sells his services to a rival Chinese factory with violent consequences; 5) Little Totò delivers groceries for his mother, but he is then drawn into working for one of the gangs. The violence is rather matter-of-fact – sudden, bloody, not terribly noisy (no huge explosions, but just pop sounds from the guns), and always quickly over with; very little of the surreal, obscene wallowing in violence that one sees in American movies by Tarantino, DePalma, etc. The viewer goes away with the impression that the civilization that tolerates such random, vicious criminality is lost. Unpleasant, muck-raking exposé at its most elemental and violent; Europe is challenged to do something about it. (2009)

**Gone Baby Gone** 2007 Ben Affleck 3.0 Casey Affleck a little over his head as mumbling private investigator, who is a cross between down-home boy and neighborhood tough guy in Boston working class neighborhood; Michelle Monaghan as essentially decorative live-in girlfriend; Amy Ryan pulls out all the stops as cynical, tough-talking, cocaine snorting mother of the little girl kidnapped (one thinks) in the beginning of the film; Ed Harris as emotionally intense veteran policeman horrified by crimes committed against children; Morgan Freeman as apparently benign police captain specializing in crimes against children. Confusing, imperfectly paced, often violent, yet compelling crime drama about Affleck's efforts to help mom to find her child. The environment is hyper tough, shabby working class neighborhood filled with foul language, violent criminals, drug dealers, dark streets, and dive bars. Although Affleck doesn't have the bona fides for a tough guy role, he bulls his way through the screen of evil doers in his search for the little girl. Every non-criminal character is outraged at the ills – especially sexual – visited upon little children – the “hundreds” of children that disappear every year. Affleck has such contempt for a child molester that he executes him spontaneously with a shot in the back of the head (and the police instead of investigating make their approval apparent). A scene in a quarry close to the city is handled badly: the little girl is supposed to be exchanged for the \$130,000 previously recovered by the police, but a series of treacherous events leads everyone to think that she has fallen and drowned in the quarry lake. When a funeral is held shortly thereafter with an empty coffin, everyone unaccountably believes that the child is dead (very confusing for the viewer, who protests how they can be sure). Affleck's energetic persistence eventually pays off: he initially thinks that Harris and a fellow police officer kidnapped the child in order to get their hands on the money that the mom had stolen from a drug dealer (a particularly vicious Cheese played by Edi Gathegi), but he discovers that they took the child to remove her from the care of her mother and give her to the kindly Freeman for keeping. In a scene typical of the moral quandaries posed in several parts of the film, Affleck ignores the pleas of Monaghan and calls the police to have the child returned to her mother – professional responsibility and his interpretation of his moral responsibility – Freeman, the good man, goes to prison, Affleck loses his partner, and the bitch mother ends up with her child, as the TV newscasters exclaim at the supposedly happy ending of the story. The film would have been better with a more limpid script and some strategic editing. Nevertheless, with its analysis of competing moral imperatives, it makes you stop and think. (2014)

**Gone Girl** 2014 David Fincher 3.5 Ben Affleck living in Missouri suburbia as laid back guy with financial problems and a problem wife; Rosamund Pike as glamorous, sexy, demanding wife, Amy, who turns into a femme fatale; Carrie Coon as Affleck's sensible, entertaining twin sister – she is blunt, honest, and profane; Kim Dickens as low-key, persistent, competent police inspector; Tyler Perry as wry, well-informed, rock star defense lawyer that takes charge of Affleck's defense. Extremely twisty thriller with a cutting edge femme fatale and a wry satire of media culture and modern US marriage. The narrative takes front and center for most of the film. When Pike disappears from her home, the police automatically suspect Affleck mainly because of the numerous clues lying around that point to him. The narrative follows a parallel track: the investigation of Affleck by the persistent Dickens, and simultaneously the voiceover of Amy, who quotes extensively from her diary (found later in a heating furnace) containing incriminating remarks about her husband. The first big surprise is the sudden revelation that the whole disappearance affair had been cooked up by Amy; she had faked her own kidnapping, leaving behind clever clues that her husband had murdered her and disposed of the body. The narrative now follows Amy (the viewer wonders where in the world is she going?), who is robbed by some deadbeats of the large amount of cash she is carrying; she then is taken in by an old, obsessed

boyfriend (Neil Patrick Harris), whom however she murders in the grisliest possible fashion while having sex in bed. Amy then returns home covered in blood, saying that she killed Harris in self-defense; she then impregnates herself with sperm that Affleck had previously given to a sperm bank, and maneuvers her husband into remaining married to her (what??) in order to raise their baby (protect him against her mother?). The ending twist is entertaining, although psychologically untenable – Why would Affleck stay married to the slipperiest, most manipulative, and most dangerous woman on the planet after she had tried to send him to the lethal injection gurney and then murdered another boyfriend? The film commands the viewer’s attention from beginning to end. Pike is very effective as the most outrageous femme fatale in recent memory. The film also presents a jaundiced view of a modern American marriage that begins amid glamor and ecstatic sex, but then somehow disintegrates into mutual hatred and contempt; and then they get back together again? Equally jaundiced is the film’s depiction of US media culture good mad: cable “news” anchors declaim alternately about Affleck’s monstrosity and his self-sacrifice to care for his wife and baby; crowds of people congregate outside his home either to shriek denunciations or to cheer him good-humoredly; to let the public know about their final decision, Affleck and Pike schedule an interview with a cable personality that had previously characterized Affleck as a moral monster. Nary a moment in the film that is not shocking or entertaining. (2015)

**The Good, the Bad and the Ugly**      1966   Sergio Leone (Italy)   4.0   Features the famous three – Clint Eastwood, Lee Van Cleef, and Eli Wallach – and a host of convincing and amusing villains; there are no female characters except for unhappy widows and a prostitute with a heart of gold. Very entertaining Leone western about the involvement of the three in a search for a gold treasure buried in Sad Hill cemetery; takes place in the desert, magnificent mountains and endless vistas of West Texas and New Mexico (actually filmed in the Almería desert of southern Spain) in the era of the American Civil War (has to be one of the few westerns that take place in the early 1860s). Plot has Eastwood and Wallach as swindling partners, who have a falling out and then engage in semi-comic tit-for-tat revenge acts that continue to the final scene; they come together with real bad guy Van Cleef in the final scene looking for the treasure in the cemetery. Three main characters are well-defined, distinct and amusing. The especially vicious Van Cleef is perhaps most impressive and memorable with his prominent nose, “angel eyes”, well-chiseled face with horizontal moustache and broad black hat filmed in iconic Leone close-up that in wide screen includes the (huge) expanse of his hat. Although the apparent star, Eastwood is not quite so pungent: more easy-going and retiring, fair haired and fair skinned, less intrusive in the screen, laconic. Wallach seems to have the most screen time: hilarious; a complete hypocrite, who is able to play the affectionate brother, the man humbling himself in prayer before God, a good and loyal friend (but always the viewer is reminded – perhaps by a smirk, an eye peering between two fingers – that he is playing a role); and he is essentially a self-interested materialist who sweats greedily over the prospect of finding the treasure and he digs with trembling hands when he finally finds what he thinks is the grave. Despite the title, there is little moral difference among the three: Van Cleef is probably the most ruthless, but Eastwood has almost as little compunction in shooting down opponents, often in cold blood; Wallach kills plenty of people as well and has little regrets, but he endears himself to the viewer by his overt foolishness and sense of humor. Leone’s world has little of the high-falutin’ themes and moralism of the 50s American westerns: scores of men die for often no good reason; all three main characters are greedy and ruthless who often don’t bother to draw their guns fair and square from their holsters (although they do in the final scene); there is no significant female character; the West is definitely not civilized after the action is over. Morricone’s score plays major role throughout film; unlike “Once Upon a Time in the West”, however, it is used for punctuation rather than an operatic score that dominates throughout. One symphonic theme toward the end, but of course the memorable one is the quaver theme played in endless variations. Leone’s visual style adds a mythic quality to the film: slow moving, not much dialogue with long moments of silence, widescreen pictures of heroic vistas with a tiny lone rider making his way across the barren wilderness. There is a big anti-war subtext: the main characters keep weaving through the Union and Confederate armies fighting in the Southwest; scenes of countless wounded and dead on the ground, of hospitals, and of prisoner-of-war camps; and the men happen upon a huge battle scene (where did all the money come from?) overlooking a bridge that has to be protected at the cost of thousands of men if necessary. The commander of the Union forces can die happy only when he knows that the bridge

has been destroyed. An over-long movie could be made better by tightening back to the 161 minutes of the original release. Great ending: when the three finally find the gold in the “Unknown” grave, Eastwood proposes a three-way shootout to settle who will get the money; after a long wait with a lot of music, he kills Van Cleef, but spares Wallach by taking the bullets out of his gun; he then has Wallach stand on a rickety cross with a rope around the neck, and Eastwood leaves with half of the loot lying on the ground in full view of the greedy but helpless Wallach; when Wallach is about to teeter over and thus hang himself, Eastwood from afar shoots the rope allowing Wallach to fall to the ground (thus repeating the confidence trick they had pulled several times in the beginning of the movie). Wallach curses him and Eastwood rides off accompanied by Morricone. (2008)

**The Good, the Bad, the Weird** 2008 Jee-woon Kim (Korea) 2.5 Kang-ho Song humorous, scruffy, and tough always clad in an aviator’s cap and riding his motorcycle across the desert sands (the Weird); Woo-sung Jung impossibly cute in cowboy hat and duster as more or less honorable bounty hunter (the Good); Byung-hun Lee mean as a snake and looking like a pop star with his black hair covering one eye (the Bad). Extremely colorful and dramatically empty action picture based on Sergio Leone’s two masterpieces – ‘The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly’ and ‘Once Upon a Time in the West’. The film is set in Manchuria around 1930 that has been turned into a kind of Wild West of the East. It mixes Korean, Chinese, and Japanese characters, the latter provided by the humorless and methodical Japanese army. The plot is inconsequential: all parties – the three main characters, the Japanese, and at least a couple of rival gangs – are after a map that purports to show the location of a huge treasure; what there is of a plot involves their rivalry and collisions as they compete to get to the treasure first. The climax is a three-way shootout, as in Leone’s film, in which all three main characters seem to perish; a postscript however suggests that at least Kang is still alive, and maybe Jung; the treasure appears to be the oil that spouts out of the ground as the three are lying unconscious. Song’s characters is entertaining and rather endearing – he remains laughing and good-humored through the worst of crises; the other two remain colorless; not even the villains in the film are interesting. The viewer doesn’t care how the film turns out, but it is amusing and entertaining to watch the mise-en-scene and the extended action sequences. The initial sequence is memorable with the train cutting through the desert landscape, the cgi eagle making a pass at a carcass on the tracks just before the locomotive passes, and then the extreme, bloody violence as several bandit groups attack the occupants of the train. Probably 20 minutes of the action sequences could have been cut for repetition, but who is going to cut them out after all that money? The connection to Leone’s great films is strictly plot, mise-en-scene, and a Morricone-imitative musical score: Kim does not try to build suspense dramatically with the long operatic close-ups of Leone, nor does he place the action in its historical context as carefully as did his predecessor in ‘Once Upon a Time in the West’. Perhaps better seen as ‘spaghetti western meets Hong-Kong kung-fu’? (2012)

**Good Bye Lenin** 2003 Wolfgang Becker (Britain) 3.0 Daniel Brühl as Alexander, Katrin Sass as mother, Maria Simon as sister. Rather long but affecting movie about a East German young man who protects his sick mother (a great fan of socialism) against potentially fatal disappointment by creating false environment to convince her that the DDR is still existence after its collapse. Film is very good at depicting the impact of the breakup of the DDR on its citizens, many of the older generation regretting the reunion with the West. Humorous confrontation of the two societies that seems to emphasize the absurd consumerism and hyper-activity of the capitalist West in contrast to the calm and restfulness (and at least the good ideals of brotherhood and mutual help) of the Communist regime. Film rather nostalgic about the ‘good old DDR:’ its crimes, oppression and demoralization of its citizens are swept under the rug. Sometimes very amusing, especially the faked TV programs devised by Alex and his friend to give mom the impression that the DDR is still thriving; just before she dies, they admit that the two Germanies are reunited, but with the West essentially joining the East in a renewed socialist Fatherland (thus explaining how the streets of East Berlin could be filled with western cars). Acting is excellent, especially Brühl and his mother. Second main focus is the devotion of Alex to his mother, which is profound, but as the lie grows and takes on its own independent life, Alex begins to come off as obsessive and manipulative – Why can’t he trust that his mother will adapt to reality, especially since all the women in the family are insisting that he tell the truth? A third image is the realm of space and space

travel that seems to represent an alternative ideal realm of eternity and peace: mother's ashes are finally spread in the atmosphere by a toy rocket that busts into a fireworks display. Film sometimes annoying but touching. (2005)

**The Good Girl** 2002 Miguel Arteta (writer Mike White) 3.5 Jennifer Anniston in her second film as sad-eyed clerk working at Retail Rodeo (kind of a mini-Walmart) in small Texas town; Jake Gyllenhaal also droopy-eyed as depressive, cute kid that worships 'Catcher in the Rye' to the point that he calls himself Holden; Zooey Deschanel hilarious as pixie-faced fellow Retail Rodeo employee who constantly mocks her customers and her boss ("Fuck you very much" instead of "Thank you very much to a shocked customer"); John Carroll Lynch as the big-bellied store manager trying to cope with his hapless employees; John C. Reilly effective as Anniston's dim-witted, pothead, although sweet-tempered husband; Tim Blake Nelson as his inseparable buddy that finds "salvation" by having sex with Anniston one time; Mike White very funny as Bible-thumping security guard at the store constantly inviting Anniston to Bible study. Insightful, entertaining, truthful little film about personal desperation in a small Texas town. Anniston is excellent as dissatisfied, rather self-centered young woman married to a pothead and looking for something better, someone who really "gets" her. She hooks up with lost-child Gyllenhaal, who is even more lost than her (he writes short stories that always end with the protagonist's suicide); they have a few exciting weeks together, making love in the local motel (dangerous!) and in the storeroom (more dangerous), but reality soon intrudes; people in the town discover their affair, and Anniston has to have sex with Nelson to keep him from squealing to his friend, Reilly. Anniston soon recognizes that the hyper-romantic Gyllenhaal is unstable and offers her no future, and in a key moment at a traffic light, she decides not to meet him in the motel, but to report his whereabouts to the police (they are looking for him for robbery of the store). He then commits suicide in the motel room. The story ends with a lying Anniston passing off the baby she conceived with Gyllenhaal as her clueless husband's; flash forward a few months and Reilly is playing proudly with "his" new baby while Anniston looks on, content for the moment. Anniston is convincing in her semi-depressive, non perky-'Friends' performance; she even narrates most of the story in a resigned, deadpan style that seems to imitate the writing style of young J.D.Salinger-type writers; she projects well the plight of a pretty, somewhat cruel woman caught in a dull marriage (Reilly would rather be with his buddy Bubba than with her) and in a deadend job in a discount store. The ending makes the viewer wonder how long her acceptance of domesticity and motherhood will continue. The film is very funny, from Anniston's plight with her husband and his friend to the hilarious, if somewhat snide satire of American small-town consumerism in Retail Rodeo. Sweet tempered, satirical, rather sad and existential. Excellent small movie. (2013)

**Good News** 1947 Charles Walters 3.5 June Allyson, Peter Lawford, Joan McCracken\*, Patricia Marshall. Peppy and infectious musical about college life; adapted from 1927 Broadway hit and from 1930 Hollywood version; new songs by Freed and Comden. Allyson is demure and a little dull, and Lawford, who obviously is fluent in French, is no song and dance man; but the two show pep and flair in the final number, 'Varsity Drag.' Plot is throwaway – boys and girls trying to get together (the ultimate aim is to pair off, and everybody is at the end of the show); light-hearted look at college life, where sororities are queen, football is important, the professors are a bit hostile, but they come around at the end to support the team in its big game. The heart of the show is the song and dance numbers. 'The Best Things in Life are Free' is sung by Allyson (a simple girl) and then by a very young Mel Tormé. 'Good News' starts the show with the incomparable McCracken leading the way. The French song between Allyson and Lawford is clever and endearing (this is where they fall in love), and the big dance number 'Varsity Drag,' sends us off at the end with a lot of energy. The highlight of the show is "Pass the Peace Pipe," which takes place in a college soda fountain with way too many kids crowding the premises; Joan McCracken is outstanding with enormous energy and precise dance movements at the head of the pack incorporating the American Indian motifs. She is completely charming in this what appears to be her only movie (she dies in 1961 of complications from diabetes). Light-hearted and inconsequential, but very entertaining and (perhaps because of McCracken) strangely and unpredictably poignant. (2005)

**Good Night and Good Luck** 2005 George Clooney 3.0 David Strathairn does an excellent imitation of Edward R. Murrow (a very serious word smith with an inflexible code of ethics and with a cigarette always in his hand and the smoke curling upwards), although he doesn't look much like him, George Clooney in fairly anodyne, smiley role as CBS producer Fred Friendly, Frank Langella as very commanding in role of CBS CEO William Paley, Robert Downey Jr. as another newsman who is secretly married to Patricia Clarkson (which is against CBS policy), jowly Jeff Daniels as a smooth assistant CEO. Perhaps overrated historical recreation of Edward R. Murrow's decision to stand up to Joseph McCarthy, and the role it played in McCarthy's fall and the consequences for Murrow. In black and white the film focuses almost entirely on the CBS newsroom, the esprit de corps of the guys united in their crusade against the demagogue bully; there is a little relief from the guy energy in the three or four jazzy songs by a female vocalist and in the subplot of Downey's and Clarkson's marriage and how they will probably lose their jobs because of it (she had to remind him to take his ring off before he goes to work). Much of the story is taken from real transcripts, especially of Murrow's broadcasts, and from newsreel footage of McCarthy (no actor plays him in the film). The theme of the movie is primarily our responsibility to speak out and to act in order to preserve public decency and freedom in the face of people like McCarthy (with the obvious parallel to Bush and his campaign to reduce our civil liberties so as to "fight terrorism"). Also the culture of American television. Paley is a friend of Murrow, supports him and refuses to censor him, but he remembers that in American broadcasting the bottom line is financial; thus when at the end of the film sponsor Alcoa drops Murrow's news program, Paley reacts by taking Murrow off the evening news and putting him on Sunday afternoon documentaries (the affiliates are all screaming for entertainment programming). Movie is framed by beginning and end of 1958 Murrow speech in which he speaks of the great educational potential of American television and decries its descent into entertainment and pandering to someone's cynical low assessment of public taste (he would be more upset if he were to experience American television in 2006). In the end, McCarthy is discredited and censured by the Senate (the Army Hearings); Murrow and his crew played a role in softening up and alerting public opinion with their anti-McCarthy broadcasts in 1953. Movie is informative, perhaps too didactic for my taste. (2006)

**The Good Shepherd** 2006 Robert De Niro 3.0 Long film on the origin and development of the CIA dressed up with an all-star Hollywood cast and true romance. Matt Damon as an extremely guarded, reticent, and unreactive Edward Wilson from a blue blood background; Angelina Jolie beautiful as his wife, whom he doesn't see for long periods of time; Alec Baldwin in small role as FBI honcho; Billy Crudup as British espionage associate; Michael Gambon as British master spy who is murdered by his own people for his leaks to his homosexual boyfriends; William Hurt as Wilson's boss; John Turturro as Wilson's ruthless subordinate; John Sessions as Russian KGB agent who defects (turns out he is a mole); Eddie Redmayne overacting a bit as Wilson's idealistic son who falls in love with a Russian agent. The film is centered on the CIA's involvement in the Bay of Pigs debacle in 1961: Who revealed to the Russians (and thus the Cubans) the location of the projected invasion? The film focuses on the career of CIA officer Edward Wilson: the suicide of his father in 1925; his graduation from Yale in the elite Skull and Bones club; his joining the OSS in the year of its founding in 1939; his specialization in counter-espionage (disinformation), his different experiences executing treasonous colleagues, and his service in opposing the Soviets in Germany and overthrowing Soviet-friendly regimes in Latin America. A great deal of the film is devoted to his marriage to Angelina Jolie – he marries her when she becomes pregnant after a brief fling, and after the birth of a son their relationship languishes because of his relentless devotion to his job. The film's primary theme is that the delusion and untrustworthiness of the spy's life takes its toll on your private life – no friends, you have no one you can trust, your romantic relationships are stillborn, etc. It turns out that Wilson's son is responsible for the Bay of Pigs leak when he reveals the information to his Russian-employed girlfriend. The film has interesting passages: Wilson's relationship with British spy Gambon and having to witness his execution by British-hired thugs; his discovery that his German mistress is a Russian spy and his execution of her by point-blank gunshot; primarily the ending gambit in which – ironically – the Russians try to turn Wilson into a mole inside the CIA by threatening his son, and when he refuses (to the accompaniment of much mystifying dialogue between him and his Russian counterpart), their murder of his son's girlfriend by throwing her out of an airplane.

The film needs some disciplined editing: it has a pretty good thriller story, but the screenplay goes back way too far to untangle Wilson's motivations and it lingers too much on the romantic aspects of his life. It is also lazily directed – the camera lingering too long on conversations with nondescript music playing in the background. Entertaining but needs sharpening. (June 2017)

**Goodbye Christopher Robin** 2017 Simon Curtis (Britain) 2.5 Very sentimental, hyper-PG treatment of the origins of the “Winnie the Pooh” books, stressing the relationship between S.A. Milne and his son, “Billy Moon”. Will Tilston (9 years old) very cutesy, although effective, as the prototype of Christopher Robin; Domnhall Gleeson reserved, very British upper class as his father and author of the Winnie the Pooh stories; Margot Robbie pretty and blond as his wife, distracted from motherhood by her addiction to London and its socialite activities; Kelly Macdonald humble and heartfelt as Billie Moon's Nanny, a surrogate for his absent mother. The film is ravishingly photographed in the verdant and scenic Sussex forest, where Gleeson and his wife have their home. The film focuses on the strong bond between Tilston and his father – taking leisurely walks through the forest, playing at cricket, and when Gleeson's playwright career stalls, making up stories about Christopher Robin, Winnie the Pooh, Eeyore, Roo, and Tigger, which Gleeson later publishes to worldwide renown. The viewer is prompted to believe that Billie Moon suffers from lack of loving attention from his parents, and is exploited as a publicity vehicle for selling his dad's books. Inexplicably, Gleeson sends Billie Moon to boarding school, where he is bullied pitilessly (and rather incredibly) for being famous; when he finishes school, he rebelliously volunteers for military service in World War II, much to the horror of his father, who had only gradually recovered from trauma after serving in the trenches in World War I. The viewer's heart strings are manipulated shamelessly by a false telegram (not delivered personally!) that the boy is presumed dead; joy however reigns when he walks up to the house completely intact (but without explanation of what had happened; the British Army is just incompetent). He and father are reconciled on the bench where they had sat together when Robin was a child, and everyone lives happily ever after, preferably out of the public eye that only causes tension and unhappiness. In its commitment to PG status, the film treats subjects superficially: Gleeson's and Robbie's difficult relationship, which seems to just survive with little comment; why the parents sent Billie Moon to boarding school (obviously a bad idea); the importance of the war trauma on British society between the wars. The film, while pleasant, is superficial, facile, and obviously designed to please children curious about the real background to their favorite stories. (February 2018)

**Goodbye Mr. Chips** (AA nomination in that banner year) 1939 Sam Wood (MGM) 4.0 Genuinely moving sentimental film about a master in an English public school, told in flashback from his arrival at the school as a young man to his blissful death at 83. Robert Donat (AA) sensitive, shy, soft-spoken, a bit doddering as an elderly man, as the master Mr. Chips eternally dressed in his torn gown and his mortarboard hat (Did they really wear those to class?); Greer Garson (AA nomination) done up in Edwardian garb as his beautiful, charming, good-humored wife; Paul Henreid as the German master, Chips' cheerful and loyal friend in the school killed in the war. The film is told in flashback by Chips (real name Chipping) in retired old age; beginning with his low-key beginnings as a master (stiff and couldn't tell or take a joke); his affecting encounter with Greer on a misty mountain ledge in the Alps; his hesitant courtship with her including a pretty good waltz in Vienna; his marriage that didn't last long because of her death in childbirth (what a cheat!); his transformation under her influence into a joke-appreciative and sensitive master, eventually being made acting headmaster during the Great War; then his famous cheerful death, when lying on his deathbed he hears a colleague say that it was a pity that he didn't have children, he opens his eyes to say he has had plenty – all the boys that he has tended and loved over the 63 years at the school, after which the camera moves away to the accompaniment of school music. The film, typical of the Anglophilism of Hollywood in the late 1930s, is a feast for lovers of things British – the traditional buildings of the school, the stiff-upper-lip, but kind and friendly character of the principals, the traditional academic robes, the affected accents of the upper-class boys (one boy identifies himself as ‘Dorset’, for Duke of Dorset), the lovely choral music sung by the white-surpliced boys on ceremonial occasions in the chapel. Nary a hint of any sexual exploitation of the boys by the masters, just benevolent friendship and encouragement: Chips makes much of teaching several



generations of boys from the same family, especially the Colleys, the last of whom is sadly killed in the last month of World War I – another of the fresh-faced boys wiped out by the hecatomb. The film was one of the last projects of Irving Thalberg before he died in 1936: the fleshing out of the character of Katherine as an inspiration for Chips was his idea. The film was made in MGM's new studio in England. (2016)

**Goodbye Pork Pie** 1981 Geoff Murphy (New Zealand) 3.0 Kelly Johnson as hare-brained Auckland goon who rents a car with the stolen identity of an arrogant Auckland woman; Tony Barry as somewhat older guy who joins him in search of his wife who has just left him to return to Invercargill, on the far south side of the South Island; Claire Oberman and Shirley Gruar as pretty young women they pick up and then lose on the way to the south. Entertaining anti-conformist road movie about two guys driving a rented yellow mini from Auckland to Invercargill; Johnson is just a bit crazy and looking for excitement, while Barry is a bit more settled as he seeks to get back together with his wife. The film is essentially a thumb-in-the-face to what is presented as dull, conformist New Zealand; we can be just as crazy and unpredictable as Jack Kerouac. The guys are constantly pursued by the amateurish Kiwi cops, who don't carry guns and whose incompetence and cluelessness recall the antics of Sennett's Keystone Kops. They steal gasoline from service stations, pick up girls and bet money on whether they will have sex with them, evade the police (incredibly) racing down roads surrounded by magnificent New Zealand scenery, smoke a lot of marijuana while driving, drive their car into an empty freight car (?) that is on a train crossing the Tasman Straits on a ferry, sell off pieces of their car (including the doors) until there is nothing left but a shell with motor and seats, all of it done in a hurry and at very high speeds. The piece de resistance is the sequence just before the middle when they drive their car wildly through a railroad station, the wrong way down one-way streets, and then up a ramp into a vacant freight car. The film ends with an affirmation of anarchy: Johnson is killed (or seriously injured) in an auto accident caused by the police, Barry drives what remains of the car up to his wife's sister's house, whereupon it bursts into glorious flames and he rushes into the house, rips off his clothes, makes love to his wife, and then emerges naked from the house to be taken into custody by the police: an ending worthy of Wagner. The tone of the film is consistently humorous -- two guys on an extended lark until they finally reach their destination; they have no intention of hurting anyone; New Zealanders are often seen applauding the men's cheekiness. The film, which is professionally photographed and edited, provides a colorful travelogue of parts of the North and South Island of New Zealand. (2013)

**Goodfellas** 1990 Martin Scorsese 4.0 Ray Liotta, Robert DeNiro, Joe Pesci, Paul Sorvino, Lorraine Bracco. Perhaps Scorsese's best film combining art and entertainment; has to be one of the most entertaining movies ever made. Follows career of Henry from early teenage years until his crash and entry into the Federal Witness Protection Program. Early years when non-Italian guy envies big shot lifestyle of the local mafia and joins up (although being non-Italian, he can never be a made man); best years when he marries Bracco, prospers, makes a lot of money, and then goes to jail; decline when he starts to deal in drugs without boss' knowledge, takes the stuff, makes mistakes, and then is arrested; he cops a plea in order to avoid being murdered by Jimmy, which he knows is coming. A kind of mafia guy in the trenches look at the subject; what was life as a common mafia guy like, as opposed to the guys at the top ('Godfather?'). Almost incredibly vivid movie that knocks your eyeballs out: garish colors, outlandish personalities that are clearly delineated and about whom you care even if they are bastards; extreme violence (Henry crosses the street and brutally beats up the guy who molested Bracco with repeated blows to the face (meant to be disfiguring) without any edits; the black guy's brains blown onto the bed when Tommy suddenly shoots him in the back of the head; the guy who bought a pink Cadillac for his girlfriend found in the Cadillac with both their brains blown out; crazy Tommy shot suddenly in the back of the head when he arrives at the house to be "made;" and of course opening sequence when "dead" body in trunk makes noise, then stabbing, shooting, etc.); great memorable profane dialogue. Unforgettable: the opening sequence and its prequel later in the movie (Tommy borrows the kitchen knife from his sweet mom); steady cam follows Henry and Lorraine through the corridors of nightclub in their first visit – point being that Henry is now a big shot; steady cam introduces us to all the characters as it winds through the busy nightclub; Tommy (Pesci)'s tirade in the nightclub when he has everyone convinced that he is going to blow away Henry for laughing at his jokes ("Do I aMUSE you?"); Bracco holding gun in close-up to the face of sleeping Liotta and threatens him for a

full minute. Wonderful sequence of Henry's final day – nervous, jump cuts, doing too many things at same time, constantly looking up at helicopter, Jimmy pissed because the guns he brought don't fit his silencers, preparing drug shipment on airplane, and all the time preparing the ziti for his little brother; then police sweep down on him at his house. Pesci's hyper excitable personality has audience on toes throughout; Jimmy turns paranoid at end, and murders almost everyone who participated in the Lufthansa heist (\$6m). Bracco wonderful as wife; turned on by the alpha male, rich and famous lifestyle of Henry; always remains passionate and becomes wiser and more knowing as time passes; strung out, hysterical, and loyal at end. Liotta carries movie with his reserved, sensible personality, a little on the outside compared to Tommy and Jimmy, and yet he goes over the edge, and is saved from death only by the Feds looking for their witness. Wonderful script co-written by Scorsese and Pileggi that sucks audience into characters and suspense, and keeps us on our toes at all times. The voice-over throughout film adds greatly to atmosphere (Henry most of the time, Lorraine on a couple of occasions); essentially the commentary and description of the two principals after their dreams have been punctured and they have been relegated to suburbia like two ordinary schmucks. Great loud, age-matched soundtrack of rock music that keeps us excited. You never want to stop and think; you just experience the film and love every minute of it! Has any movie ever radiated such enthusiasm for film? (2004)

**Gosford Park** 2001 Robert Altman (Britain) 3.0 Michael Gambon as old fart aristocrat Sir William – “a hard-hearted, randy old sod” – who owns the magnificent mansion where the weekend party takes place and who is murdered about halfway through the film; Maggie Smith as crusty old Countess who complains throughout the film and condescends to everyone; Kristin Scott Thomas as cold wife of Gambon – she has great contempt for him and his lapdog; Ryan Phillippe is Thomas' lover who (for some reason) poses as a servant through most of the film; Emily Watson as the likable Scottish servant girl, one of the few honest, innocent persons – she unravels the mystery for the viewer; Jeremy Northam in underwritten role as English movie star that sings; Bob Balaban as a Hollywood producer often on the phone arranging for a 'Charlie Chan' movie; Helen Mirren as the house's major domo – she becomes extremely important only at the end of the film; Clive Owen and jowly Alan Bates as servants. Longish film set in magnificent country house. By genre it is a murder mystery, but it focuses mostly on social and cultural observations on English and Hollywood society in the 1930s: the memory of World War I, the relations between an extremely snobbish set of idle upper class characters and the small army of servants who support them (much discussion downstairs about which valet is going to dress which gentleman) and whose lives are intertwined with them; the varying fortunes of the upper class characters, some of whom are bankrupt and desperate for money, etc. The film recalls TV program 'Upstairs, Downstairs' but without the good will that reigned between the floors in the TV show; there is much hard feeling, vicious gossip, contempt on the part of the servants toward their employers. The film is extremely entertaining for its punctilious attention to baronial detail (what elegant dresses, costumes, furniture, bric-a-brac, family portraits on the wall, silver and china on the table, etc.) and for its often intriguing characters and piquant dialogue. The plot lines are however extremely difficult to follow: Altman's classic overlapping dialogue and weaving together of a dozen subplots in dizzying profusion (we are rarely given more than a snippet of a conversation at one time before the director moves on to another subplot) make following the narrative line very frustrating; one suspects that the film would make a lot more sense when viewed the second time. The murder mystery adds some unity to the proceedings in the second part of the film: the viewer is given a few clues, and then little detective Mary uncovers the motive behind the murder: Gambon had been a rank seducer of girls working his factory; he had fathered a child with Mirren, and he had him then dumped in an orphanage; this turns out to be butler Clive Owen; mother and son then collaborate unknowingly in their revenge murder of Sir William. Entertaining film that unveils a lot of characters with strong needs and passions; if only the screenplay could have been pared down for the sake of cogency and simplicity. (2009)

**Le goût des autres** 2001 Agnes Jaoui (France) 3.5 Agnes Jaoui as free-spirited barmaid who is also a hashish dealer; Anne Alvaro as a not beautiful actress who exercises irresistible attraction on Bacri; Jean-Pierre Bacri as essentially gentle and sensitive industrialist who is unconsciously looking for something better; Alain Chabat and Gerard Lavin as two bodyguards for Bacri and his wife while they are negotiating a business deal with "the Iranians". Delightfully insightful, sophisticated romantic set in

Rouen among the intellectual bourgeoisie who eat in lovely restaurants and at least feel obligated to say they like the theater and support spoiled and indecipherable modernist artists. Narrative focus is Bacri who is hilarious in the beginning with his disdain for the theater (his wife makes him go) and his cynical colloquialisms. He however changes rapidly when he falls for Alvaro while she is performing Racine's 'Berenice' on stage -- one assumes that part of her attraction is her physical attractiveness (one could not say she is beautiful) and another is that finally 'art' is making an impression on the philistine industrialist. He attaches himself to the artists' society and pursues Alvaro inexorably, but makes a fool of himself by telling potty jokes in the bar they frequent and by uttering homophobic slurs to a man who is obviously gay. Alvaro thinks he is an idiot for much of the film, but then -- inexplicably of course -- thaws toward the end. Bacri however is "redeemed" when he decides to leave his impossibly superficial interior decorator wife (she is also neurotically attached to her yappy, ill-tempered lapdog), and the last scene has him again watching Alvaro perform and he mouths "Je t'aime" to her from the audience. Watching the supporting actors -- Jauoi as the surprisingly lovestruck barmaid and the two bodyguards -- and listening to their dialogue is interesting and amusing. Screenwriters Bacri and Jauoi are observant, tolerant, humorous and insightful. At the end Bacri and Alvaro seem destined to get together, but the other characters are lost, sometimes disappointed, and sometimes bitter. It seems that one is better off appreciating art and the theater, but the authors bring out the pretensions also of the world of art. Fine, discriminating entertainment! (2008)

**Gran Torino** 2008 Clint Eastwood 3.0 Clint Eastwood rather a parody of his 'Dirty Harry' character, slim, haggard, grey teeth, growling, sneering, racially prejudiced, armed to the teeth, and generally disapproving of everyone and everything around him; Bee Vang usually wooden and hangdog as Thao; Ahney Her charming and lively as Sue, Thao's sister; Christopher Carley impossibly callow as the local parish priest; Dreama Walker as spoiled punkish teenager who goes to the funeral of Eastwood's wife with her belly button exposed. Entertaining, although a bit long and repetitive, Clint Eastwood swan song about the unlikely redemption of an extreme curmudgeon and the need to reach out to people and help them despite their ethnic appurtenance. Film is in part a comedy with most of the laughs emerging from the mutual incomprehension of the white bread Eastwood and the huge Hmong family living next door -- since most do not speak English, most of the interaction is with the wise, light-hearted Her. The family itself is respectable, and well-meaning, if not sociable, but Hmong gangs and their opponents (mostly Black and Mexican) provide a continual temptation to the undecided Thao. A fair amount of melodrama, as Eastwood is outraged at the mistreatment of the decent Hmong by the gangs, and he breaks out his old M-1 (he was allowed to keep that?) and his automatic pistol to defend his property against the 'gooks' and to protect and avenge his newfound neighbors. Although the viewer has no idea of it in the beginning, the seemingly incorrigible Eastwood is redeemable. It seems that his hard feelings come from having had to kill 13 enemy soldiers in Korea, something that has scarred his soul and kept him from reaching out to anyone since (this includes his two sons and their families, with whom he does not exchange a kind word). His crusty exterior is cracked by his increasingly paternal feelings toward Thao and Sue and by his anger at the extreme persecution to which they are subjected by the gang. Eastwood's moral outrage leads to a surprise redemptive ending, when he induces the Hmong gang members to kill him in the street; since he is unarmed, they will serve long sentences in prison. Film ends with the radiant Thao driving the Gran Torino next to the lake -- Eastwood has left it to him in his will. Film is feel good: the Hmong are basically good people and at least the girls will go to college; the gang is broken up; and Eastwood's death is noble. (2009)

**Grand Budapest Hotel** 2014 Wes Anderson 3.0 Ralph Fiennes as highly verbal, lecherous, scheming head concierge, M. Gustave, in an extremely picturesque luxury hotel somewhere in Austro-Hungarian Empire in the 1930s; F. Murray Abraham tells the story to neutral Jude Law; Adrien Brody as highly nervous, resentful heir to the fortune of...; Tilda Swinton unrecognizable in brief role as elderly resident of the hotel and lover of Fiennes -- the plot revolves primarily around the inheritance she leaves when she is murdered; Jeff Goldblum in hilarious role as elegant, mustachioed lawyer with a flat American accent (funniest when he states to Brody that he is a lawyer and must therefore follow the law); Willem Dafoe very funny as Brody's enforcer, who stops at nothing to recover the (McGuffin) priceless

painting, “Boy With an Apple”; Harvey Keitel almost unrecognizable as officious bare-chested prisoner, who helps Fiennes escape from prison; Tom Wilkinson, Bill Murray, Owen Wilson, Jason Schwartzman, Léa Seydoux, Edward Norton in brief cameos; Tony Revolori as Zero, awkward, dark-skinned boy that M. Gustave takes under his wing; Saoirse Ronan as Zero’s girlfriend and wife. Wes Anderson-style, burlesque fable set in the mountains and cities (Lutz) of Eastern Europe following the demise of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (the title says that the film is inspired by the writing of Stefan Zweig). The film is a sort-of thriller adventure recounted as a flashback from the vantage point of the gloomy, Communist-dominated era of the 1960s. Expressive, decorative art direction especially in the main sequence recalling a cartoonish, dollhouse-like image of the Austrian Empire: the rococo-classical façade of the hotel against the mountain backdrop; interiors dominated by beiges, pinks, peaches, and baby blues; sweet, precious pastry creations that rise to a point; picturesque foggy cobblestone streets with graceful neo-classical buildings (cf. Cluj and Vienna); funiculars and streetcars that seem to be made of colorful paper cutouts. The narrative recounts a non-stop adventure involving the competition for the supposedly priceless painting “Boy With an Apple”, which is a token of the Swinton inheritance that her family (Brody) and Gustave are vying for: the film takes us to the lawyer’s office, to the prison where Gustave is thrown when he is accused of Swinton’s murder, onto trains where the principals seem to be constantly challenged by the police, to a high-speed ski pursuit down the mountainside. Despite the light-hearted atmosphere, the story does not end well for most of the characters; Zero seems to be the only one that survives – in the person of Abraham, who tells the story. The film is entertaining, charming, and amusing – there is always something beautiful and interesting to look at, and Fiennes delivers his lines with a clever bite. The film does not however engage as drama; since the characters are paper cutouts (like much of the scenery), the viewer doesn’t care much what happens to them. This flight of fantasy is likable enough, but less engaging than some of Anderson’s other films. (2014)

**The Grapes of Wrath** 1940 John Ford 4.0 Henry Fonda, Jane Darwell, John Carridine. Very political presentation of plight of the poor Okies in the Dust Bowl days. Clearly sides with the Joads as they trek across the country in their ramshackle truck in search of work and survival in California. The banks in Oklahoma heartlessly drive the sharecroppers off the land with big bulldozers; the growers in California exploit the poor and hire thugs to keep the upper hand – they are in cahoots with the police. The only good guy is the federal government that through the Department of Agriculture has set up pleasant settlement camps for the agricultural migrants. Famous ending with Ma Joad saying “we are the people,” and they can’t get the people; we will always be there. Stunning black and white photography (Gregg Toland) that brings out the big horizon and the big sky, the dust of the road, the details of the physical objects in the frame. Many location shots on the road, but also a lot of studio scenes, e.g., in the camps. Fonda brings understated strength and nobility to the role of Tom Joad; at first he just wants to stay out of trouble, but then he develops a desire to face injustice and help the oppressed. Great scenes: Ma going through her things to decide what to keep and what to throw away; the men in the New Mexico diner quietly pay the owner for the candy she has virtually given the obviously deprived Joads. Tone is sentimental, full of feeling, visually beautiful, elegiac and noble. Aided by the Christian humanism of the message -- promoted by the preacher, who makes sure God is remembered in the purplish script (Nunnally Johnson): love your neighbor and help him – so simple. (2005)

**The Grave of the Fireflies** 1988 Isao Takahata (Japan) 3.5 Very emotional film about two children, one a teenager and the other with her 5-year-old sister, who try to survive the American fire bombing in Kobe at the end of World War II. Very beautiful and poetic, often bordering on the sentimental. Simple in its straightforward style that seems realistic, but it does dwell on heart-tugging scenes and symbols, e.g., Setsuko buries the fireflies like her mother, who was killed in the bombing, dwelling on the death of Seita in the subway, the big eyes of Setsuko. Story of survival where both end up dying. Animation is very beautiful and betrays its origin in Miyazaki’s studio. Very effective as statement about their sufferings brought on common folk by war; viewer ends up being very sad at end. No particular animus against Americans, but against war in general. Perhaps most obvious is the cruelty of people to one another; they won’t share their food even with children who are obviously starving – the aunt who hounds them out of the house, even the farmer who claims that he has no more food, especially

the doctor who says the only thing wrong with Setsuko is lack of food, and then refuses to give her any!  
Very moving reflection on the reality of war. (2006)

**Gravity** 2013 Alfonso Cuarón 4.0 George Clooney; Sandra Bullock; Ed Harris as the humorous voice of the NASA space center in Houston. (2013)

**The Great Caruso** 1951 Richard Thorpe (MGM) 2.5 Mario Lanza looking boyish, callow, and good-hearted as Enrico Caruso, Ann Blyth as the New York socialite he marries – very artificial, mannered and staged (teeth blazing white all in a row), Dorothy Kirsten as the standout Met Opera singer who sings with Caruso. An example of the lower level of the MGM musical in the early 1950s. A kind of biopic of the great Italian/American Caruso that takes great liberties with the facts of his life – e.g., the film has him dying on stage in a performance of Martha (but we scarcely understand why except that he has a cough and has been using ether to lubricate his throat). Impossibly sentimental/corny – much about how dedicated Caruso is to the social utility of music (it makes people so happy); all of his Italian hangers-on are good-hearted, even-tempered, fun-loving, and superficial with nary a worry in the world; Blyth falls in love with him at first sight, and persists in her determination to marry her true love despite the opposition of her upper crust New York dad; Kirsten advises Blyth not to marry Caruso because in effect his first wife will always be his music (she speaks from experience since apparently she has sacrificed her own personal life for her career on the stage). Caruso is not at first popular in New York, which apparently likes its tenors to be more upper crust and aristocratic (the critics say he sings with too much emotion and in too plebeian a style), but the city comes around when another tenor praises him and it turns out that Caruso, who at first thought that Americans were cold and impersonal, is going to like them after all, etc., etc. Caruso is presented as a man of the people, who sings more to the working class Joes in the gallery than the upper crust set in the loges. Lanza sings selections from the opera repertory – ‘Rigoletto’, ‘Tosca’, ‘Martha’, ‘La Boheme’, ‘Pagliacci’, etc. – and a smattering of his popular songs, “Loveliest Night of the Year”, ‘Because’, etc. He is not much of an actor (and he looks like he aged and gained weight from the beginning to the end of the film [make-up?]), but his voice is smashing – clear, precise, great volume and tone, and full of feeling. Perhaps it would be more worthwhile to listen to the remastered recordings of his songs than watch his movies. (2006)

**Great Expectations** 1946 David Lean (Britain) 4.0 John Mills as the older Pip, absolutely unbelievable when he is still a blacksmith’s apprentice, but convincingly snobby and dressed in dapper silk as a gentleman about town in London – the most passive and uninteresting character in the film; a very young Jean Simmons playing the teenaged Estella, slim, astonishingly beautiful, elegant, and sprightly; Valerie Hobson a distracting come down compared to Simmons as the grown up Estella; Bernard Miles endearing as Pip’s good-hearted brother-in-law of – he would do anything for his ward; Francis L. Sullivan corpulent, jolly, stentorian, and decisive as the lawyer Jaggers at the center of the narrative; Finley Currie as the disturbing-looking convict Magwitch who turns out to have a heart of gold despite his rough hewn exterior; Martita Hunt as a rather kind and benevolent, although mad and vengeful, Miss Havisham determined to punish all men for her having been jilted on her wedding day; Alec Guinness in his first substantial role as the cheerful roommate of Pip in London. Terrific, socially and topographically accurate, emotional, heart-warming adaptation of the Dickens novel that exactly recalls the Dickens novel despite a sentimental ending where Pip and Estella suddenly kiss in Miss Havisham’s abandoned mansion and go off to live happily ever after. Crisp, carefully framed black-and-white cinematography all the way through. Some aspects of the film resemble a horror film: Pip scared witless by the threatening Magwitch in the early expressionist churchyard scenes; the appearance of Miss Havisham (dressed in her wedding rags) and of her dining room (dark, curtains drawn, mice gnawing away at a rotten wedding cake on the table, dust and cobwebs everywhere), although Hunt plays her rather good-naturedly; Jaggers’ cluttered and dusty-looking law office with the death masks on the wall; the mysterious, tumbled down inn by the bay where Pip and Pocket are arranging Magwitch’s escape. Just like in the literary Dickens, the most memorable aspect of the film is the characters. They all stand out in their colorful peculiarities; most of them are kind and well-meaning – Joe would do anything for Pip, Magwitch seems dangerous in the beginning, but he turns out to be Pip’s benefactor and we cry when

he dies in prison at the end; Pocket is cheerful, eternally smiling, and supportive; even Jaggers means well despite his gruffness; the only villainous characters are Joe's wife (Pip's sister), who however does not do much harm, and Bentley Drummle, an upper-class nitwit who plays a lesser role than in the novel. The film takes a rather dim view of the snobbery, foppiness, and idleness of English gentle society: as Pip is being "educated" to become a gentleman, he does essentially nothing – no schooling, no work, just idleness. The ending in which Pip and Estella march off into the sunset for eternal bliss is tacked on to satisfy the Anglo-American audience's demand for the happy ending; it is quite artificial. Nevertheless probably the finest literary adaptations of Dickens. (2008)

**The Great McGinty** 1940 Preston Sturges 3.5 Brian Donlevy solid and believable as tough street bum with bad grammar (hardly a Jimmy Stewart) who rises to become the "reform" mayor, then governor, and a true lover with the wife he married originally for political expediency; Akim Tamiroff as cynical immigrant who is now a political boss; Muriel Angelus as secretary-turned-wife pronouncing her lines like she just had a lesson from her voice coach; William Demarest begins career as Sturges regular as fast-talking cynical city politician; Steffi Duna as pretty Latin dancer. Preston Sturges' first film as director is a sometimes comic/sometimes serious satire of machine city politics in USA; something of a relief to have a somewhat cynical satire in the Capra age of good feeling and thinking positive. Donlevy tells his story in flashback from the Central American bar. He rises to the top under the tutelage of Tamiroff, but when he becomes a humanitarian under the influence of his wife and tries to go straight, he is arrested and thrown in jail; afterwards he sacrifices his wife and flees to the banana republic, where as the bartender he remains a cynic until the final frame. Film at 80 minutes is short and taut. Very amusing sarcastic scenes: Donlevy originally draws the attention of Tamiroff by voting 37 times in an election; Tamiroff settling back into his bullet-proof limo, "America is a land of great opportunity"; "a little corruption is useful because it keeps the lower class of people from taking over"; Mayor Donlevy decides the quantity of a bribe by having his mark guess at how many people were at a baseball game photo (75,000); the fortune teller that Donlevy is shaking down invites him upstairs "to have his fortune told" (the censors wondered what sort of fortune she had to persuade him to go easy on her). Interaction of Donlevy and Tamiroff is amusing: their conversations degenerate into tough-guy insults and then they start fighting with their fists. Surprise ending: the final shot shows that Tamiroff and all his cronies are in the bar with Donlevy, and another fistfight breaks out between the two men as the camera pans to Demarest, "There they go again!" Capra-like good feeling appears periodically (McGinty's conversations with his wife about abolishing child labor and slum housing, his sincere talking of the governor's oath), but they soon are canceled by cynicism. Very little slapstick humor aside from the fist fights. (2009)

**The Great Moment** 1944 Preston Sturges 2.5 Joel McCrea his relaxed self as dentist looking for a way to keep his patients from screaming; Betty Field as sweet, adorable, supportive wife who has to put up with the shenanigans of her husband but who is charmed by the prospect of being rich; Harry Carey noble but dead pan as the first operating surgeon; William Demarest main comic relief as Morton's first hilarious patient ("It as the night of September 30. I was in excruciating pain!"); Franklin Pangborn as fussy assistant of a surgeon; Porter Hall in cameo role as President Franklin Pierce; Louis Jean Heydt as Dr. Horace Wells, who develops the use of nitrous oxide for dental anesthesia. A rather confused biopic of the dentist who discovered the use of ether to enable painless surgery. Film begins with sequences taken from the end of the story that show Morton being sued and frustrated by rivals. Most of the film is a series of flashbacks; it focuses humorously on his trial and error approach to using ether: the viewer is led through a complex process in which ether is finally used successfully on dental patients, and then finally in surgery. Standing out is a highly comic scene in which Demarest has hallucinations and goes wild when administered the wrong kind of ether and jumps out of the window; then McCrea cons Demarest into trying it again ("Does it smell like peaches or pears?"), and bingo! first ether extraction. Film ends with an impossibly sentimental scene in which to the accompaniment of Schubert's 'Ave Maria' McCrea happens upon an angelic Hollywood studio girl who is about to be operated without anesthesia and then the doors to the operating theater are thrown open to a scene of ending triumph; the editors (Paramount a couple of years after Sturges wrapped the film) seem oblivious to their having started the film with scenes of McCrea being harassed by rivals opposing his patent.

Everyone in the film has prejudices against dentists and objects to their invasion of the realm of medicine. All characters are overly scrubbed in upbeat 1840s studio costumes (the President is Pierce). Perhaps Sturges' least satisfying film: curious mixture of biopic and slapstick humor; too obviously filmed in the studio; edited so that it makes little sense. (2010)

**The Great Santini** 1979 Lewis John Carlino 3.0 Robert Duvall in powerful, eat-em-alive performance as Marine pilot Bull Meechum, Blythe Danner gentle and moving as his long-suffering wife and mother of four, Michael O'Keefe does credible job as a rather dull straight arrow son caught in conflict with his overbearing dad, Lisa Jane Persky very amusing as his rebellious and verbally abusive daughter who teases her dad by saying that they should have some quality time together and then announce that she has been impregnated by a black dropout that Duvall will come to like (he doesn't believe her for a minute). The movie shines because of the outstanding performance of the two leads. Danner has the predictable role as the long-suffering wife, but she does it with sensitivity and skill – we cry with her when she is sad. Duvall had few roles as good as this one – overbearing, unbearable; practical joker who gets in trouble with the Corps (but they never go far with discipline since he is such a good pilot) – scenes of the mushroom soup throw up and pulling down pants of the Corporal are hilarious; what more or less works in the Marine Corps is a strike-out in the family – he treats his children like raw recruits making them reply "Yes Sir!!" to his tirades. Much conflict with his son whenever the latter shows the least inclination to independence, most famously the basketball game when dad will not accept that his son has beaten him (he follows him up the stairs bouncing the ball against the back of his head and calling his son a sissy); Duvall is also out of control in his son's basketball game goading Ben to knock down the opposing player – this leads to their team's lost of the game. Film has a noble and tragic conclusion when Duvall dies in a plane crash – he refuses to bail out of his stricken plane since he is afraid that it will crash into the city of Beaufort, SC. Some of the movie is dull – particularly the scenes with the gentle good Negro Toomer (as always contrasted with the racist white boys) wherein Ben learns to be his own man; as his mother says, this is where he learned to strike out on his own. Fun to watch Duvall! (2005)

**The Great Ziegfeld** 1936 Robert Z. Leonard 3.0 William Powell, Luise Rainer, Myrna Loy, Frank Morgan, Virginia Bruce, Fanny Brice. Big budget biopic (over three hours long) of great showman, Florenz Ziegfeld. Follows from early days when had no money and was selling a strong man, through his great successes of teens and twenties, and his death in early 1930s. Mostly breezy, light-hearted tone, usually sentimental (e.g., close-up of his hand dropping rose when he dies), and wall-to-wall glamour, especially with beautiful young women. Ziggy a charmer, fast talker, sincere, debonair, droll, ironic, lively, usually broke since he cared more about his reputation and putting on a great show (“art”) than making big bucks, and when he tried to make a lot of money (stock market in 1929), he lost everything; Powell carries through well. Focus on his marriage to Anna Rank (Rainer), its break-up due to his affair with Bruce, and then his attachment to Billie Burke (Loy), who took care of him until his death. Rainer got Academy Award for her fluttery, self-conscious performance with cute face and eyes pressing out tears, where her love for Ziggy battles with her pride; most famous was her phone call to Loy congratulating her on her marriage to Ziegfeld, but then of course breaking down. First half is rather slow humor and plot development, and then production numbers dominate in second half after his shows become successful. Shows some of his early discoveries like Fanny Brice and Will Rogers, who went on to great stardom. Striking production numbers, e.g., the Circus Extravaganza (a bit boring despite the exceedingly well-trained, immobile Airedale dogs!), but especially “A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody,” which lasts six or seven minutes and is done in one take; all is gradually ascending spiral through 18<sup>th</sup> century, 19<sup>th</sup> century opera, ‘Pagliacci,’ etc. until you finally reach the crowning queen on the top. All is quite sappy but impressive, exactly what you would expect from an MGM musical. Pretty sad, though sentimental, at the end: Ziegfeld – “Why is the world so old, and life is so short?” Kind of fun to watch, but exceedingly long; more of a first-rate period piece than a good movie. (2005)

**Green for Danger** 1946 Sidney Gilliat (Britain) 3.5 A superior who-dun-it that takes place in rural England under attack from German V-1 bombs (perhaps close to London?) at the end of World War

II. Sally Gray beautiful and alluring as Nurse Linley; Trevor Howard as the grumpy Dr. Barnes, one of the suspects – he and Gray are engaged to be married, although they are fighting; Rosamund John as Nurse Sanson, one of the prime suspects – she is stressed since her mother was killed in a V-1 raid in London; Alastair Sim as the droll and ironic Inspector Cockrill, who teases his witnesses as much as he interrogates them; Leo Genn as ladies’ man surgeon “Mr.” Eden, another major suspect. Six people are suspects for the murder of a postman in the beginning of the film; one of the suspects is killed, and another almost murdered; in a curiously conceived show-down in the operating room, Sims uncovers the guilty party, but only after a plot switch to keep the viewer guessing. Great pleasure for the viewer trying to keep up with the clues and speculating on the guilty party. The film has a nice McGuffin – the CO2 cartridge that is painted a bright green (color in the film would have made the visual more dramatic). The narrative is very tricky, sometimes absurdly so: it is difficult to figure out the clue about the knife holes in the operating gowns or why an innocent suspect (Nurse Woods) has a little paint smeared on the front of her gown; the showdown scene in which Sims has the suspects operate on Gray under false pretenses strains credibility, to say the least (Gray is willing to go under the knife knowing that one of the operating team has already tried to kill her?); the suspicious activity of Mr. Eden in the final scene has us believe that he is the guilty one, although he is preparing an antidote to save the life of the guilty party (Nurse Sanson), who has taken deadly poison tablets. Some actions are difficult to explain: Sister Bates shouting to the whole party that she has discovered who murdered the postman rather than telling the inspector about it; Barnes later allowing Nurse Linley to go to her room alone when she has endangered herself by announcing that she has noticed a key clue. However, the movie is supremely entertaining thanks to expert direction and acting. The sets are dark, mysterious, and paranoia-inducing, and the constant menace of the buzz bombs and the activity in the operating room – wheeling the patient in and out, focus on the canisters used by the anesthesiologist, close observation of the breathing balloon as the participants worry about the patient’s survival, the discomfort of being so passive and a possible victim when undergoing an operation, etc. – create an atmosphere of threat and suspicion. The characters are presented in the operating scenes as masked and thus indistinguishable, but the script and the solid acting differentiate them (Eden the ladies’ man, Barnes the nervous, jilted lover, Sanson traumatized by the death of her mother, beautiful Linley not sure about whether to marry Barnes) so that the audience cares about them and has a stake in the film’s outcome. The film rather rehabilitates the tired who-dun-it genre. (2010)

**Greenberg** 2010 Noah Baumbach 3.0 Ben Stiller as gaunt, self-deprecating gentle neurotic taking time-out house-sitting in LA; Greta Gerwig as plain Jane, unkempt, but charming personal assistant to Greenberg’s brother and wife – the viewer spends a lot of time watching her drive impassively through LA traffic; Rhys Ifans as Greenberg’s scruffy old buddy trying to save his marriage; Jennifer Jason Leigh in cameo as Greenberg’s ex-girlfriend. Endearing, low-key film about psychology and personal relationships in modern America. Greenberg, who used to live in LA but fled to New York, where he has been working as a carpenter, has returned to Los Angeles after a stint in a mental hospital; his only purpose seems to have a little down time. He meets his brother’s personal assistant Gerwig, and they pursue a hesitant off-again, on-again relationship; at first it is mainly through the family’s German Shepherd, who develops a very expensive immune disorder; but then they give into their mutual attraction (desperation?) and make very awkward love two times. Both characters are somewhat depressive, self-doubting non-performers, although Greenberg is more aggressive and willing to hurt people around him than the sweet Gerwig. Gerwig keeps saying she is not interested in starting a relationship, and yet she goes ahead and has sex with two characters; every time Greenberg feels that he is getting attached to Greta, he dumps her, gets very angry, shouts and has a tirade, and then leaves in a huff; but then of course he returns, since he is not only a contemptuous loner, but also lonely. Both characters come across as losers with a good heart, although Greenberg does a better job of covering his vulnerability. Film culminates when Greenberg gets high on cocaine with a bunch of 20-year-olds and generally makes a fool of himself while Gerwig is in the hospital recuperating from an abortion; he then is tempted to run with a couple of the girls to Australia (fun! Geographical fix!), but his conscience qualms stop him cold; he jumps out of the car at a traffic light, and goes to the hospital to bring Gerwig back to her apartment, where he tucks her in (she pushes the covers back off), and he settles down near her, apparently to stay for



a while. The credits roll – we are led to believe that he will “stay”, however that works out. Very low key film emphasizing small social and psychological observations; nothing much happens but the viewer comes to feel affection for these flawed but good-hearted people looking for a connection. A romantic comedy in camouflage. (2010)

**Grey Gardens** 1975 Albert and David Maysles 2.0 Famous cult documentary recording the obsessions and reminiscences of Edith Bouvier Beale and ‘Little Edie’, relatives of Jackie Onassis and Lee Radziwell. The project began as a portrait of the Bouvier family initiated by Jackie Onassis, but the Maysle Brothers decided that their interview footage with mother and daughter in their dilapidated house would make a better film. Both women are extremely eccentric, living in squalor in their grand Long Island cottage that they share with numerous cats and raccoons, whom Little Edie feeds with Wonder Bread and Purina Cat Chow in the attic. (The home was later bought and magnificently restored by Ben Bradlee of the ‘Washington Post’.) Edith is usually in her bed clothes, while Little Edie appears in outrageous outfits – solid bright colors, short skirts showing her panty hose, sweaters wrapped around her head, etc. The film was very popular with gays and some New York fashion designers, who claimed that their designs were inspired by Little Edie’s get-ups. Both women are quite eccentric, utterly dependent on one another and talking over one another with their sharp, screechy, New York-accented voices. They listen to Norman Vincent Peale on the radio (laughably dull), and reminisce about their glory days in the 1930s, when Edith was wealthy, beautiful and prosperous, and little Edie was a promising debutante. The film does not attempt to explain how they and their house descended from the patrician glories of the 30s to the picturesque squalor of 1975. The film is essentially an intensely portrait of two very peculiar women; it is difficult to resist the conclusion that the Maysles are exploiting two vulnerable eccentrics for their own benefit. (2016)

**The Grifters** 1990 Stephen Frears 4.0 John Cusack low-key as Roy, small-time, short-con grifter whose steady life is thrown off by the arrival of his mother; Angelica Huston, the mother who has steady job controlling race track odds for her bookie employer Bobo (played with brio in one scene by Pat Hingle); Annette Bening stunningly cute (especially when she disrobes) as Cusack’s girlfriend, Myra, who despite her initial clueless, giddy behavior has a lot more brains than the guy. Pretty terrific up-date of Jim Thompson novel (published 1963). Focuses on the personal lives of a family of grifters rather than on their art. When Huston decides to visit her son (she gave birth to him when she was 14), everything is thrown into disarray: Cusack starts to be dissatisfied with comfortable little life with short cons; Huston’s job performance begins to slip, and when because of her concern for the health of her son she misses a horse race in La Jolla (?), her bookie Bobo thinks she is stealing from him, and her life begins to crumble; Myra (Bening) does not get on well with Mom, and Myra identifies Huston and Cusack as potential marks. Terrifically entertaining trying to follow the cons and to determine, for example, whether Myra really would like to team up with Cusack for long cons, or whether (as he suspects) she is trying to con him and to get his stash (hidden in the frames of two of his paintings – of sad clowns). The strictly predatory Myra is after Huston’s stash in her trunk (yes, she is stealing from Bobo) as well as Cusack’s living room stash. Unrealistically, I must admit, it turns out that Myra is murderous – she follows Huston to a hick motel and tries to strangle her to death, but – reversal of fortune! – she is shot through the mouth by Huston, who was expecting a hostile visit, apparently from Bobo. But when son visits the local morgue to identify the body he assumes is his mother, he (and we) realize that it is not Huston but Myra!! since the cadaver’s hand lacks the burn mark that Bobo had ground into it in a previous punish session with Huston. Roy’s mother later shows up, determined to take advantage of this favorable stroke of fate to escape from the implacable vengeance of Bobo and to go off and start a new life. But she has no money, and when her son refuses to give her his stash, she gets seductive and comes on to him; when he resists her horrified, she hits him with a briefcase breaking the glass in his hand; he is accidentally wounded and bleeds to death! She makes a half-hearted attempt to clean up and then leaves in Cusack’s car. Such is the twisted state of the grifter’s heart and her relationship with her son. Good atmosphere, excellent performances from all the principals, delightful twists and turns and suspense (what is she up to?). Absurdist sense of humor: such as when Huston hires a pretty, innocent nurse supposedly to help take care of him, but really according to Roy, to “fuck” him; or the surrealistic flashback that Myra uses

to get Roy to work with her on her planned long con – she and J.R. Walsh make sure the victim doesn't hang around by having fake FBI agents burst in and “kill” Myra, who “bleeds” to death in the arms of the mark. Some incidents strain credibility, and the ending might have been better set up with more development of Huston's and Cusack's character; but who cares!?! (2007; 2015)

**The Grudge** 2004 Takashi Shimizu 2.5 Sarah Michelle Gellar attractive and simply coiffed as exchange student in Japan – she volunteers as a social worker; Jason Behr reasonably hunky as her boyfriend Doug; Grace Zabriskie as somehow zonked out older woman lying on her back in the nasty house; Bill Pullman as Peter, the college professor teaching in Japan who is pursued by the teenage girl of the cursed family (she appears in the background of numerous photos inspected by a detective); Ryo Ishibashi as the chief police inspector looking into the crime. Japanese-style horror movie about a house which carries a terrible curse – the people who faced their own horror in the house will take their revenge on the people subsequently associated with it; somehow the fury engendered by the original deed (a Japanese man kills the members of his family and then commits suicide) is visited on any of the innocents having the misfortune of setting foot in the damned place. There is an extraordinary body count – after the original murders, most of the members of a family that dares to rent the place, a Japanese social worker who visits Zabriskie in the house, the police detective, and the boyfriend of Gellar. Sarah Michelle Gellar appears to escape the curse, but in the moderately shocking final scene, the corpse of her boyfriend turns into the haunting ghoul (the usual long straight hair hanging over the face with one staring eye exposed) who presumably will make her also a victim. The narrative is decidedly non-linear, bouncing back and forth between several time frames and leaving a lot of connections unexplained and undeveloped. Absent a credible narrative and characters we care about (the woman who lies on the ground and claws at the transparent Japanese walls all the town, the Japanese social worker who reappears regularly sans lower jaw, wrapped in bloody cloths, dripping blood on the floor, the little ghost boy originally murdered by his dad), the focus of the film is in the shocks and special effects: the police inspector putting his hand in the bathtub to open the drain and having his wrist seized by an unidentified hand shooting out of the water, the policemen investigating the telltale attic to find two white-colored corpses lying in relaxed posture in the corner, Gellar comforting the supine Zabriskie and having a cloud of hair turn into a frightening ghoul hovering over them, etc. The shocks are definitely effective, but the film does not draw the viewer enough into its web to make us care and thus be really scared when the characters are threatened. Obvious connections with the producers of the ‘Ring’ series including a video tape that plays some role in the film. Well produced film that leaves the viewer a bit on the outside. (2009)

**The Guard** 2011 John Michael McDonagh 3.0 Brendan Gleeson charismatically comic as police (Gaelic is “garda”) sergeant on duty in a small town near Galway; Don Cheadle a bit dull as straight arrow FBI agent sent to work with him to stop a big drug-smuggling operation; Fionnula Flanagan in colorful role as Gleeson's mother who is dying of cancer; a host of charming Irish actors that add a lot of humor and piquancy to the film. Kind of buddy movie emphasizing the comic as well as the suspenseful, an unevenly directed but very entertaining film from first-time director McDonagh. The slacker cop Gleeson presides over a small town in the West where the viewer knows that a big drug trade is about to happen; but he slowly responds to the challenge when murders are committed and Cheadle shows up to prod him into action (but only after a great deal of mutual irritation); the rather weak plot peaks in a shootout at the port at the end, when an energized Gleeson – backed up by the AK-47 wielding Cheadle – charges the bad guys directly, killing all of them but also dying himself. The fun is in the details. One wonders how Gleeson ever got promoted to sergeant: he lies around in his apartment, he drinks too much (in a bar he drinks both whisky and Guinness), he brings in two prostitutes from Dublin on his day off and after they are finished he sighs with satisfaction that there is not a drop of gism left in him; when first introduced to Cheadle he unleashes a series of pointless racist insults; he visits his dying mother and they converse about life with a liberal use of the f... word. The opening sequence is memorable: a speeding car speeds by the impassive Gleeson, who barely bats an eyelash; when the car crashes and Gleeson approaches a dead man in the road, he coolly rifles through pockets, takes out a pill (acid or something?) and with a self-satisfied grin pops it into his mouth. The Tarantinoesque crooks

speak constantly out of their context, talking about Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Bertrand Russell (he and Dylan Thomas are two famous people who came out of Wales) and they adopt a droll and off-the-cuff attitude when speaking with cops. Film comes across as pretty chaotic – often the viewer cannot help but ask himself how a character like Gleeson could ever function as a policeman – but the fiendishly entertaining moments keep the viewer’s interest. (2012)

**Gun Crazy** 1949 Joseph H. Lewis 4.0 Peggy Cummins intriguing and convincing as Annie Laurie Starr, kind of serious Annie Oakley character with an unexplained homicidal impulse that gets her and her boyfriend in trouble – she has a slight British accent; John Dall (also in ‘Rope’) not a very good actor, but well cast as easy going guy with a big grin – he doesn’t like to kill, but he has an unstoppable fascination with guns (shown in the beginning in a failed attempt to steal from a gun shop by breaking the windows); Rusty (Russ) Tamblyn as the teenage Dall in the beginning. Hard-hitting film noir that rises to a tragic level largely because of the crazy and devoted love between the principals, and the knowledge all the way through that they are doomed to extinction. Based on a story by MacKinlay Kantor. Crisp black and white photography with often imaginative cinematography and editing: the fish-eyed shot of Tamblyn when he is caught by the policeman in the beginning; the low angle shot of Cummins as Dall watches her step onto the stage for the first time; the single shot scene of the Hampton robbery – very exciting and dynamic shot of the getaway drive from the back seat of the car – done in real time so we have to wait for Dall to re-emerge from the bank; the meticulously plotted longish robbery scene of the Armour Plant toward the end of the movie – here the aesthetic is realistic and matter-of-fact; the poetic end of the lovers in the mountain swamps surrounded by tall reeds and fog as the sheriff’s posse closes in on them. The film aesthetic sometimes changes from poetic to surreal to realistic. Chemistry between Cummins and Dall is compelling: the initial scenes between them crackle with sexual tension (her outlined body, bare leg, frank look in the eyes, remarks about liking a man who “goes all the way”, Dall eating her up with his eyes, etc.) that is never much lessened. The two kids adore one another with a kind of animal hunger that lasts until the tragic end; they don’t fight much; and they cling to one another when they dance. Cummins is a dominating personality that calls the shots in the relationship; although she arouses the viewer’s suspicion by saying she wants a man who can give her the good things in life, she nevertheless remains loyal to Dall until death. The viewer pities them because of the sincerity and passion of their attachment; when after the Armour robbery they start to drive in opposite directions in separate cars, both turn their cars around simultaneously and kiss rhapsodically when reunited. Our involvement is increased even more as we realize that there is no escape for them; when they dance on the Santa Monica pier, they barely have time to turn once around the floor when they have to run again from the law. The finale in the swamp is true to character: Annie is ready to fire at the lawmen (who are Dall’s childhood friends), and to save them, Dall instinctively fires at her killing her; then the police kill him. Two rather endearing young people who never had a chance; and we don’t really know why. (2006; 2015)

**The Gunfighter** 1950 Henry King (20cFox) 4.0 Gregory Peck as Jimmy Ringo, handsome, sleek, mustachioed gunfighter with oppressive reputation come to town to reconcile with his wife, whom he had abandoned several years before; Helen Westcott as his dull, white-bread wife, who lives alone anonymously with her son; Millard Mitchell as marshal of the town of Cayenne and good friend of Ringo – he had previously ridden in a gang with him; Karl Malden as folksy, outspoken bar owner; Jean Parker good performance as bar singer (prostitute), who has lost a good boyfriend to outlaw violence; Ellen Corby as hostile town battle axe with a screechy voice. Beautifully constructed and photographed tight drama about the impossibility of outliving your reputation as a champion gunslinger and returning to a normal life. After killing a man in a neighboring town (self-defense), Ringo arrives in Cayenne looking to reunite with his wife, who resists him, even in the final face-to-face, where she tells him that his reputation makes it impossible for them ever to live together, even if they moved far away. Ringo’s reputation as a gunfighter stimulates every young buck he comes across, including Skip Homeier, the local hotspur that shoots him in the back (not in a proper street gunfight) at the end of the film. The dying Ringo then tells Homeier to set off on the road and live the life he has – challenged by every gun-toter that knows he was the one who killed Jim Ringo, until he dies a lonely death. At one point, Ringo characterizes the life of a gunslinger as pointless – you never acquire possessions, you are constantly on

the move since no town wants you to stay, you never establish a home and family, you are always looking behind your back to ward off the next attack; your only ambition is to stay alive. With the exception of Westcott, supporting characters are interesting: Mitchell, the one who has succeeded in escaping a bad past; Malden eager, colorful, and obsequious; Corby expressing believable emotion for the boyfriend shot by outlaws in the back. Most of the film takes place within the walls of the town bar, as Peck endangers himself waiting for Westcott's permission to speak with him. The film reads as 'My Darling Clementine' 1947 further down the road of civilized development: would-be teacher Clementine now occupies the schoolhouse; Earp has married her as hinted at the end of the previous film; the taming of the West is almost over – there is no longer any place for footloose gunmen, the marshal has the town pretty well in hand, he doesn't even have to wear a gun; at the end of both films the villain is set off to "wander" and die a lonely, miserable death. 'High Noon' seems to have borrowed from this film: in both films the protagonist awaits the arrival of three bad guys, while the camera records the ticking of the clock (more specific in 'High Noon', since the viewer is repeatedly shown the face of the clock). With its unhappy ending, 'The Gunfighter' packs a superior sense of tragedy. (2016)

**Gunga Din** 1939 George Stevens (RKO) 3.0 Cary Grant indulging his hyperbolic high jinx as Sergeant Cutter of the British Indian Army in the late 19th century; Victor McLaglen as ruffian Irish Sergeant, who seems to be the senior of the three; Douglas Fairbanks Jr. as the most American-seeming of the three sergeants (has thin mustache like his dad) – he is threatening to break up the trio by getting married; Sam Jaffe, whose skin is painted very dark, as the would-be bugler, Gunga Din; Eduardo Ciannelli as the Guru leader of the bad guys Thuggees; Joan Fontaine in marginal, thankless role as would-be bride of Fairbanks – she is no match for the skullduggery of the valiant three sergeants. Very famous adventure comedy set in India at the end of the 19th century. The middle parts of the film contain mainly heavy-handed and heavy-footed comedy of the three sergeants: McLaglen is attached to his elephant, Grant dreams of finding a cache of gold and opening a pub in Buckinghamshire, Fairbanks spends most of his time trying to remain true to his marriage commitment in the face of the machinations of his two buddies. A fairly amusing sequence occurs in the confusion at the end, when Fairbanks keeps trying to get his hand on his re-enlistment contract from McLaglen, who wants him to stay in the army. The first third of the film begins with a wildly disorganized fight between a British detachment and the murderous Thuggees – some confusion as to whether they are just homicidal maniacs in the service of the apparently bloodthirsty goddess Kali or whether they are serving Guru's ambition to conquer India from both natives and British; the fight is comic (falling through holes in the roof, throwing dynamite back and forth, etc.), improbable, virtually bloodless. The end of the film builds to an overly long, but exciting conclusion in a gold-bedecked (Grant loves it!) temple of Kali, where the impending ambush of the Scottish relief column (horses, infantry, elephants wagons stretch as far as the eye can see) is thwarted by the heroic self-sacrifice of the Indian bugler. Both Fairbanks and Grant both seem for a while to be dead, but the relief column is victorious and all the good guys survive back in the base. Film ends with a tribute to the heroic Gunga Din, who virtually worships his British masters – "The colonel must know", and he is praised as "a better man than I am, Gunga Din" (says the Colonel). A completely romanticized, unhistorical picture of its subject. Much of the mise-en-scene was borrowed in subsequent movies, especially in Spielberg's snakepits, the vertiginous collapsing rope bridge, the "temple of doom", etc. Entertaining, well-produced at Lone Pine at the foot of the High Sierra. (2015)

**Hacksaw Ridge** 2016 Mel Gibson (Australia) 3.5 Moving and compelling war melodrama celebrating both war heroism and religious conviction. Andrew Garfield open-faced, innocent, devoted Christian as young volunteer for the US Army in World War II; Hugo Weaving memorable as Garfield's violent and alcoholic father; Rachel Griffiths as Garfield's mother; Teresa Palmer as lovely, simple girlfriend then bride of Garfield; Vince Vaughn one of few American actors in the film recalling the drill sergeant in 'Full Metal Jacket' with spirited insults to the army recruits; Sam Worthington as the company commander; several other British and Australian actors playing hard-to-distinguish soldiers serving with Garfield in the invasion of Okinawa. The film is dramatically moving. The first part plays as a traditional love story: the naïve Garfield turns against the use of violence as a manifestation of his Seventh Day Adventist beliefs and the drunken violence of his father; Garfield then meets Palmer and

pursues her in PG-13 manner until she agrees to marry him. The training part of the film is a small drama in itself, as the men over and with Garfield in his training company harass him brutally for his refusal even to touch a rifle despite his decision to serve in the front lines as a medic; a court martial charge is eventually dismissed (the influence of his father, a World War I veteran), and he is dispatched to Okinawa as the second half of the film begins. The war footage is incredibly brutal, graphic, and shocking. Explosions send bodies flying through the air, flames engulf blackened bodies, cadavers of both Americans and Japanese lie on the ground with faces mangled, legs blown off, intestines oozing out. The troops take the ridge with great losses, they are then expelled and pushed down the cliff. Garfield shows his great mettle, staying behind to defy the Japanese mop-up troops, repeatedly dragging wounded soldiers to the precipice and lowering them with ropes, and then returning for more praying to God “Let me get just one more!” Needless to say, the remaining men in the unit are won over, and when the next day they are poised to attack, they respectfully wait while Garfield completes his prayers. The film ends with contemporary footage of Garfield receiving the medal of honor and of men in his units testifying to his exemplary bravery. On the one hand, Gibson’s immersion in graphic violence and the mangling of human bodies is disturbing; on the other, he pays tribute to the courage and moral integrity of the conscientious objector. He seems to be defending Christian attitudes toward war – most of them will fight bravely with their weapons, the conscientious objectors will also do their duty – with a rifle under fire. The film may not take a place next to ‘Saving Private Ryan’, etc. as a classic American war film, but it is convincing and moving. (2017)

**Hail, Caesar!** 2016 Coen Brothers 4.0 Hilarious grab bag of satire, jokes and homages to a big Hollywood studio in the early 1950s. Josh Brolin as the serious force in the film – the studio executive based on MGM’s Eddie Mannix doing his best to keep the studio operating; George Clooney as goofy actor playing the centurion in a 50s biblical epic; Alden Ehrenreich as Hobie, the singing cowboy, who is suddenly told to play in a sophisticated Broadway comedy (!); Ralph Fiennes as the cultivated, effeminate director, who has to work with Hobie; Scarlett Johansson as glamorous Esther Williams-like star, who has to take strong measures to avoid letting it out that she is pregnant; Tilda Swinton plays both film gossip columnists – they are rivals and despise one another (Hedda Hopper and Louella Parsons); Frances McDormand as film editor, who almost self-destructs in the cutting room (Margaret Booth); Channing Tatum performing a Gene Kelly-like number on one of the sound stages; Veronica Osorio very cute as Hobie’s innocent assigned date ordered by Breslin; a bunch of actors playing the Communist writers that kidnap Clooney; John Bluthal featuring heavy German accent as Marxist philosopher Herbert Marcuse! An unending feast of laughs for acolytes of Hollywood history and of the snarky, deadpan humor of the Coen Brothers. The film has superficially a plot – the Communist writers under the pseudonym The Future kidnap Clooney (the studio’s biggest star), hold him in a tony Malibu house for ransom, and gradually brainwash him with Communist propaganda so that when he returns, he spews it out to Breslin as the Bible truth – the latter has to resort to violence to knock the silliness out of Clooney’s head. Threading his way through the movies, the conscience-stricken Breslin goes to confession three times (“I struck a Hollywood actor”) does his best to keep the studio running, even turning down a sweet offer from Lockheed Aircraft. Although hard to choose, the highlights. Goofy, unpredictable, vacant-eyed Clooney swallows the Communist line hook, line, and sinker and regurgitates it cluelessly when he returns to the studio; he displays various exaggerated interpretations of “wonderment” as he backs away from his first vision of Christ; he delivers a moving religious tribute to Jesus on the cross that has the crew members teary-eyed – only to have the scene broken when he can’t remember the last word of the script: faith. The scene in which the sophisticated Fiennes coaches Texas-twangy Ehrenreich in one of his lines – “I wish it t’were so simple” – is perhaps one of the funniest scenes in all of Hollywood movies. Tatum’s performance of the sailor’s song and dance number in which he and his buddies deplore the absence of “dames” at sea, while dancing in an obviously homoerotic style, would have made Gene Kelly proud. Smooth-talking Breslin has four ministers (three Christian and one Jewish) give their opinions about the picture of Jesus presented in the film; the rabbi disrupts the proceedings by insisting that Jesus was only a man (recall that the Coens are Jewish). Breslin’s conscientiousness holds the film together. The short scene in which McDormand is practically shredded by her editing machine makes the viewer

wonder if there is a more serious critique in the movie than it appears. In the end, a colorful, snarky, laugh-out-loud satire of Hollywood in its studio heyday. (2016)

**Hail the Conquering Hero** 1944 Preston Sturges 4.0 Eddie Bracken as patriotic marine Woodrow Lafayette Pershing Truesmith; Ella Raines cute, clean-cut and convincing as his fiancée who is engaged to someone else – she does an awful lot of smiling; Raymond Walburn amusing in leading role as bumbling, blustering, motor-mouth, opportunistic mayor of the city; William Demarest perfectly cast in dominant role as tough-talking, motor-mouth, conniving sergeant; Franklin Pangborn his usual nervous, fussy, hysterical self in charge of the running about the bands; Freddie Steele athletic-looking as mother-obsessed orphan marine – “You shouldn’t do that to your mother!” “If you make one more crack about your mother, I’ll...”; Georgia Caine pretty and serious as Bracken’s mother; Bill Edwards as Ella’s straight, dull, apple-pie fiancé; Jimmy Conlin as the folksy, often bemused judge. Famous satirical but feel-good Sturges comedy about politics in small-town America during World War II. Plot focuses on the romantic fate of Raines and Bracken in the context of his duplicity. The film of course finishes on happy note: Ella chooses to be with Woodrow, the townspeople forgive Woodrow for his lie, and they make him stay to be elected mayor – he is “honest, courageous, and veracious”. The satire is pretty pointed: war hero worship – big welcome celebration, the town buys back his mother’s mortgage, plans to raise a statue in his honor, the town fathers “persuade” Bracken to run for mayor; character of wartime America is “business as usual”, i.e. take advantage of the war effort for personal profit; mother worship expressed mainly by Steele; politics where the crowd stampedes for a candidate when he doesn’t even want the office, partisans marching endlessly through the streets singing political songs and carrying banners; bullshitting, motor mouth local politicians who don’t even remember the name of the Pacific battlegrounds and wish that the war hero would have come home just a little later so they could get quietly reelected; telling war stories on a rant (Demarest). The welcome scene when Woodrow arrives in town with his buddies is a masterpiece of confusion, satire (of hero worship in a small town), and slapstick. Walburn trying to give a pompous welcoming speech but interrupted by bands which take up their music spontaneously and Pangborn running around blowing his whistle telling them to stop; ends with three competing bands playing at the same time. The film is maniacally fast-paced with rapid-fire overlapping dialogue except in the sentimental scenes, which usually occur between Bracken and his mother, who maintains a shrine devoted to her war hero husband killed in World War I, or between him and his girlfriend. Some good Sturges lines, such as bartender to depressed Bracken: “Why don’t you acquire a gay viewpoint? It’s all mental; every bit of it. Smile and the world smiles with you. Frown and you frown alone.” The maitre d’ in the beginning says that he has received from broke GIs, among other things, the seat of Rommel’s pants and a button from Hitler’s coat. The film possesses marvelous small-town atmosphere similar to Frank Capra or Hitchcock’s ‘Shadow of a Doubt’, showing the affection of New Deal and wartime America for its small-town culture. Overall the film is quite patriotic: Bracken gives a heartfelt patriotic speech about the exploits of the Marine Corps in the beginning of the film; although bumbling, the six Marines are admirable war veterans and eager to charge back into the fray at the end; the satire is about small-time America during the War and not about the rightness or nobility of the war effort. Beautifully shot and edited; the comic acting by the Sturges troupe is first rate. (2009)

**The Hairdresser’s Husband** 1990 Patrice Leconte (France) 2.5 Jean Rochefort plays adult version of young fellow who dreams all his life to marry a hairdresser, Anna Galiena as the sumptuous hairdresser (she does only men) that he marries for the second part of the film. Rather thin film that seems to be based on Leconte’s sexual fantasies or something akin to them. Rochefort is obsessed with female hairdressers, and he is not satisfied until he marries one somewhere in his forties. Not very much happens. His father slaps him around for his obsession; in adolescence Rochefort wears an effeminate (?) red bathing suit with pompoms (a fetishist object?); after marrying Galiena, they have sex in a somewhat desultory way (he fondles her genitals while she cuts a man’s hair); there are some good comic scenes, e.g. when customers argue about the existence of God in the salon; Rochefort’s practice of belly dancing two or three times in the film comes off as rather bizarre. Rochefort does almost nothing aside from sit around the salon and watch his wife work or otherwise (she is sexy and pretty). In the end, after an “orgy” together, Galiena goes off and commits suicide – for reasons unknown; and life for Rochefort

must then resume its slow motion pattern. The world of the couple is very isolated: they barely go outside their shop; only a few friends attend their wedding and the reception. Film is exquisitely filmed and edited producing an obsessive, claustrophobic sense; but it needs more content – action, character and development. (2006)

**Hairspray** 1988 John Waters 3.0 Divine fat, fussy but good natured as Edna Turnblad; Rickie Lake the focus of the film as Tracy Turnblad, Colleen Fitzpatrick as the bratty Amber, Shawn Thompson as Corny Collins. Entertaining, but rather shallow film about teenagers in early 1960s Baltimore. Plot involves the girls' fascination with the 'American Bandstand' type TVshow run by Corny; and the praiseworthy efforts of Tracy et al. to integrate the show – everyone dances to their music, why can't Blacks dance on the show, boys and girls? Film is party comedy and part musical – the music is nostalgic 60s hits, the dancing is mostly teenage girls doing the twist, etc. in front of the camera. Film is very good hearted – Blacks should have the right to be on the show – it is only fair; it is a bad thing to be mean and petty to other adolescents (Amber, look at me!); it just makes sense to have a fashion shop in town for generously proportioned (fat) women; and everybody is just trying to have fun. Style of the film is over-the-top colors and styles – enormously exaggerated 60s bouffant hairstyles (which of course requires large amounts of hairspray to keep them in place), early 60s dress styles (sacks, etc.), and bright carnival colors everywhere. There are some minor satirical moments – Amber's parents, who are living through their daughter; the pretentious nonsense of the beatnik couple (one played by Pia Zadora), etc. Pleasant and makes you smile, especially if you lived through the early 60s. (2007)

**Half Nelson** 2006 Ryan Fleck 2.5 Ryan Gosling as an inner city History teacher and girls' basketball coach who also lives alone and uses drugs at night in his chaotic apartment; Shareeka Epps as a 12-year old student who befriends him when she discovers him on the floor of the girls' locker room using drugs. Pretty interminable, sluggish movie that doesn't seem to go anywhere. Gosling strikes up his most unlikely friendship with Shareeka, but any indication of change – much less redemption – in either characters is buried way too deep for me to find it. Dialogue is slow, sparse and uninformative: how many times do we get three or four successive angles of Gosling's puzzled face as he fails to think of anything to say to his interlocutor, most often Epps. Most of the film is shot with a handheld camera, creating shaky, poorly framed shots that expose the viewer to severe headaches. Film sketches in the background of both characters: Gosling has ineffective liberal parents who support him but drown their failure to stop the Vietnam War (how many years ago?) in several glasses of red wine; Shareeka has a mother in uniform who is never home and a brother who is as (clean-cut!) drug dealer. Much depiction of the contradiction between Gosling's valiant attempts to teach his junior high kids about U.S. history (and of course he has to battle with benighted school administrators) and his incompetent, aimless personal life. There is little indication, by the way, that he is a good teacher – he spends most of his time in front of the class unshaven, hair disheveled, and rattling on about yin and yang (Where did we get the idea that only the winners matter?) and the clash of opposites. This film is way over praised. (2011)

**Hallelujah** 1929 King Vidor (MGM) 3.6 Dan Hayes as Zeke, light-skinned, deep-voiced, emotional, handsome sharecropper with big extended family including Mammy and his brother Spunk; Nina Mae McKinney as Chick – also light-skinned, diminutive, very cute and seductive as no-good girl who manipulates men for her own advantage, leading them to be fleeced by her lover Hot Shot; Zeke's devoted mother Mammy, very big, wearing white and a head scarf. High quality film made for MGM with an all-Black cast by Vidor despite the studio's reservations about its marketability. In part a musical – Blacks singing spirituals in chorus, McKinney dancing the shuffle, some boys dancing tap, some songs written by Irving Berlin for the film, etc.; part melodrama and morality tale – Zeke is sorely tempted by the devilish wiles of Chick but he is always struggling against them by becoming a preacher and by moving toward marriage with the good girl Rose. Film moves toward very melodramatic conclusion – Zeke catches Chick two-timing him with Hot Shot (the gambler and con man), Chick dies fearing the devil when she falls off a wagon, Zeke then pursues Hot Shot through the swamps like a zombie, finally killing him; film has happy Hollywood ending when Zeke returns home on probation to reunite with his family and marry Rose. Film has a vivid and sanitized view of black agrarian culture in the South: Blacks

are presented as naturally happy, always singing, dancing and smiling; Zeke's family are sharecroppers who earn \$100 from their harvest – the boys visit a cotton gin, Zeke works later in a sawmill, and he breaks rocks a while during his second prison term; religion is very important – the family falls to its knees to pray that they get a good price for their cotton and it seems like the whole town goes to the revival meeting held by Zeke the Preacher; Blacks are very emotional easily shading into hysteria – much crying, raising of arms and wringing of hands when someone dies or they are baptized or when they feel the power of the Lord or the Devil in a revival meeting; everyone is poor – dressed in dirty work clothes, white smocks and head scarves that are near rags, living in sharecroppers shacks all sleeping in the same room; everyone speaks in ungrammatical dialect that is however not difficult to understand; nearby is a town where nice boys can go astray with gambling and bad women. Hayes' and McKinney's performances are both excellent – he serious and conflicted, she cute, seductive and very emotional, her sexual high spirits turning into evangelical hysteria under the influence of Zeke. Not a single White character in the film, and absolutely no reference to Blacks' problems such as discrimination, suffering from poverty, or bad health. Because it was not a big box office success, the film had virtually no successors; it did however influence the rise of the Race films of the 1930s and 1940s. (2009)

**Halloween** 1978 John Carpenter 3.0 Jamie Lee Curtis as long-faced, innocent, virginal, sincere, resourceful babysitter threatened by the evil force – she has no boyfriend and is interested only in the well-being of the children she is babysitting; Donald Pleasance as the distinguished doctor from the psychiatric hospital who keeps warning the viewer that Michael Myers (known by the filmmakers as “the Shape”) is pure evil; Nancy Kyes as the cute brunette friend of Curtis who makes the mistake of having sex with her boyfriend and walking around in her underpants; P.J. Soles as another cute blond friend who has quickie sex with her boyfriend, shows her breasts to the camera, and is then quickly murdered; Charles Cyphers as the more or less clueless sheriff ineffectively assisting Pleasance in his hunt for Myers. Famous, often overrated horror film made on a budget of \$300,000 that starts the rash of kill-the-promiscuous-babysitter movies that populates US movie theaters in the 1980s and 1990s. The narrative is the simplest: after a prelude in which the child Myers murders his sister after she has sex with her boyfriend, he escapes from a mental hospital and begins to stalk female adolescents in his Midwestern town (actually filmed in West Hollywood), murdering two of them and finally focusing on Curtis (no idea why he picks on the three girls aside from the obvious sex angle); after several of Curtis' narrow escapes, Pleasance shoots the Shape several times, he falls off the balcony onto the lawn, and when Pleasance comes downstairs to view the body,... he is gone; setup for the sequel, one supposes. Film is painstakingly made: it is well acted with generally believable teenage dialogue. The cinematography stands out – many scenes that take advantage of darkness, menace, and suspense: the opening sequence in which the child Myers murders his sister that uses a long steadycam shot from a first person perspective – homage to the opening scene from Welles' 'Touch of Evil'; the escape sequence in a driving rain in which Myers climbs on top of the doctor's car and then smashes a window with his fist as the nurse screams bloody murder; as Curtis walks across a darkened room, Myers' blank white face slowly appears glowing in the dark of a closet (no idea why Myers chose to wear the Captain Kirk mask when he is up to no good); after she has narrowly escaped being trapped in a closet, Curtis stands with her back to Myers on the ground and through the mirror the viewer sees him rise again behind her. Film has an extremely uncomplicated narrative. Its deliberate, even slow, pace is covered by the buildup of suspense as various characters spot Myers lurking in the shadows observing them and then climaxes in the murders and the pursuit of Curtis. Atmosphere is effective, if a bit artificial – the streets depict a traditional middle-class community, but almost no one but the sheriff is present; the murders take place in a deserted setting where there is no one but the good doctor to come to your rescue. Perhaps the film's exalted reputation comes from its founding the genre of teenage ripper films. (2011)

**Hamlet** 1990 Franco Zeffirelli 3.5 (Italy) Not a Hamlet for the ages, but a good version stripped down and made cinematic for the 90s. Mel Gibson first rate with a robust performance as a son outraged at the betrayal of his mother, but with incestuous motivation in the background. Alan Bates and Glenn Close excellent, with Close as a bit too studied. Dynamite scene when Hamlet confronts his mother after death of Polonius. Glorious photography set in a rugged castle on spectacular Scottish



coastline. Play much trimmed and manipulated to make intelligible and to focus on main plot line – 2:15 in length. Most lines cut, even some of most famous ones; at least one scene invented (first one of father's funeral); lines moved to different character or mixed with others in different scene. Final sword scene very effective and exciting. (2004)

**Hamsun** 1996 Jan Troell (Norway) 3.0 Max Von Sydow as Knut Hamsun, taciturn, misanthropic, arrogant, and hard-of-hearing elderly poet laureate of Norway that welcomes the Nazi occupation in 1940; Ghita Norby as his wife Marie – she is a full-fledged, though naive, Nazi, who cannot stand her husband; Sverre Anker Ousdal as the effeminate and ineffectual Quisling, who had little control over the politics of Norway under the German occupation; Ernest Jacobi as Adolf Hitler, acting calmer and more rational than Hamsun; Edgar Selge as Terboven, the harsh German Reich Commissioner for Norway, who executes Norwegian resistance fighters after promising Hamsun that he would give them special treatment. Long-winded but interesting treatment of the fate of Hamsun during and after the German occupation coupled with extensive attention to the difficult relationship between Hamsun and his wife. Events during the war years are informative: Hamsun's uninformed support of the Germans, based on his hatred of the British (the opposite of most Norwegians) and his erroneous conviction that Norway would maintain its independence and play an important role in the German New Order; his exploitation by the Germans for propaganda -- Hamsun composes paeans of hatred for the British and urges Norwegian Resisters to throw down their arms; Hamsun's trip to visit Hitler in Berchtesgaden, which accomplished nothing but to show Hamsun's mental confusion; Marie's pathetic touring of Norway in native peasant costume to recite her husband's poetry in behalf of the Nazi occupiers, whom she supported loyally. The seven years following the war sees Marie sentenced to a three year prison term, and Hamsun confined to a psychiatric institute, where he is subjected to an unprincipled interrogation by psychiatrists interested primarily in their own advancement; he eventually is found guilty and sentenced to a big fine; he spends the rest of his life in his home at Norholm (between Oslo and Kristiansand). The film spends a lot of time on Hamsun's relationship with his wife: they are filled with an unexplained hatred for one another, which survives the war; as he grows old, however, Hamsun "forgives" Marie and takes her back at Norholm, where she cares for him loyally until his death in 1952. The film is a bit puzzling -- the foolish and naive option of a doddering old guy for the Nazi regime combined with the sad state of his marriage. The main tie between the two is the character of the poet -- despite his beautiful defense of nature and traditional Norwegian culture, his arrogance and foolishness alienate his wife and motivate his admiration of Hitler. The film bears a resemblance to Troell's 'Last Sentence' of 2013, where Troell examines the wartime politics and family/love life of a prominent Swede; the latter is superior for its poetic black and white cinematography and its sensitive treatment of aging and death. (2015)

**The Handmaiden** 2016 Chan-wook Park (Korea) 4.0 Fascinating, sensuously photographed, intricately plotted thriller by author of 'Old Boy'. Min-hee Kim as the beautiful, apparently naïve Lady Hideko; Tae-ri Kim as the teenage pickpocket Sook-Hee; Jung-woo Ha as the good-looking con man Count Fujiwara; Jin-woong Jo as the monster BDSM pornographer Uncle Kouzuki, who has the wardship of Hideko and plans to marry her to get her fortune; although Korean, he is a great admirer of Japan. Without a second viewing you can't be sure that the film makes real sense, but aspects of it are riveting. The plot is fascinating: Sook-Hee and Fujiwara plot a scam to get wealthy heiress Hideko to fall in love with Fujiwara so that they can run away together and get married (he would then grab the money); Sook-Hee is hired as Hideko's handmaiden to encourage her amorous feelings for Fujiwara; when the three of them run away to Japan, the plan is to put Hideko in a (German organized) insane asylum, but at the last minute the surprise has Sook-Hee interned instead under Hideko's name! What's going on? The narrative then provides an alternative view of the same events. Now Sook-Hee is making a pragmatic deal with Hideko, who – although she is not in love with Fujiwara – is inclined to take it because she does not want to marry her uncle. The second run through has several significant changes: instead of simply a bibliophile, Koizuki is revealed as a perverse pornographer, who makes Hideko (completely innocent) read out loud to several men listening; when Sook-Hee and Hideko have steamy lesbian sex in the latter's bed, it is now apparent that the two are in lust-love, whereas in the first presentation Sook-Hee was simply warming up Hideko for sex with Fujiwara; Koizuki is now also presented as a sadistic monster

that causes his sister-in-law to commit suicide by hanging on the brightly colored cherry tree in the garden. It thus makes sense Sook-Hee is incarcerated, since the two (heterosexual) lovers want Koizuki to think that Hideko has been punished and thus not worth pursuing. But Hideko is just biding her time to be reunited to her lover. With the “true” story digested, the film can now push on to its conclusion. Sook-Hee escapes from the asylum, is joyfully reunited with Hideko, who drugs Fujiwara to get away; when he comes to, he is “arrested” by two samurai-like figures, who take him to Kouzuki for punishment, which, as one might expect, is swift, grisly, and very painful; after having his fingers cut off by a sort of paper cutting machine, Fujiwara is on the verge of castration (Kouzuki is wielding a nasty-looking pair of scissors), when he is able to kill himself. Meanwhile, Sook-Hee and Hideko elude Kouzuki’s agents and board a ship bound for China, where, facing each other completely nude, they place in each other’s vaginas the silver balls previously referenced in one of the pornographic readings: happiness and romantic smiles all around. The film is a tour de force. The cinematography is lush with rich colors and textures and carefully designed mise-en-scène; there is nary a dull shot in the whole film. The actors are skilled and beautiful to boot: the impeccably accoutered Fujiwara is drop-dead-handsome, and the two young women are beautiful with slim, sexy bodies put to good use in the frank, sensuous erotic scenes. The complexity of the film’s national and social environment is difficult to master in one viewing: both Japanese and Korean languages are used (difficult to tell them apart if you don’t know them); taking place in the 1930s when Japan was the colonial master of Korea, the film portrays complex relationships between the two countries. The narrative has Hitchcockian surprises and McGuffins (e.g. telling the main story twice, the silver balls) that bring little thrills of recognition to the experienced viewer. Wonderful to watch a film that is so expertly made and yet so much fun. (2017)

**Hands Across the Table** 1935 Paramount (Mitchell Leisen; head of production was Lubitsch)  
 3.5 Carole Lombard as cute, peppy, and down-to-earth hotel manicurist who doesn’t like being poor and wants to marry rich man; a thin, young Ralph Bellamy as nice-guy millionaire confined to a wheelchair and who says constantly “She’s a lovely girl” —too nice for Lombard, one supposes; McMurray as supposed millionaire who plays hopscotch in the hotel corridor (?) and makes nonstop cynical wisecracks and shows up late for a date; he is screwball, off-the-wall, with a sense of the ridiculous, and a way with words; he spends a lot of the movie in his underwear or with his shirt off; Astrid Allwyn as hard-boiled rich fiancée of MacMurray. In first date with McMurray, Lombard and he have a great time trading wisecracks and playing practical jokes. The plot turns when Lombard discovers that MacMurray is as broke as she is and has to move into her apartment as a boarder, and the two have to confront one another as poor people. It is fun watching them gradually fall in love with one another: they both have the same absurd sense of fun; Lombard’s vulnerability is moving. We realize of course that for the two to get together they will have to change – they will have to stop being “heels”. She of course has a period of resistance when she realizes that she is falling for him. Their first kiss is photographed very tenderly. In the climax MacMurray makes a resolution to go to work and quit being a ‘gigolo’. After she accepts his proposal, they are on a bus; he flips a coin and says that if it lands on the edge he will get a job! When it falls in the street, they stop all the New York traffic looking for it and finally find it – on its edge! Camera pulls back to the huge traffic jam. Since Lubitsch is production head, the film has Lubitsch touches: e.g., when Lombard is ready for a hot date with MacMurray, she looks at her bankbook, then a whirlwind of preparatory activity, and then another shot of the ledger showing a balance of just over a dollar; when the two are told that because they are dressed informally they cannot enter a club “in those clothes”, they start to take them off and the frightened maitre d’ lets them go in. To frighten away a rival suitor, MacMurray goes into next room, fakes beating her, coaxes her in making suffering noise effects, makes a show of looking for his gun, and of course the suitor (William Demarest) runs out the door. Lombard calls the house of MacMurray’s snooty fiancée, and we cut to a woman standing in a mink coat, the phone rings, she takes off the coat, and reveals her maid’s uniform! Then pretty hilarious bit with Lombard pretending she is the Bermuda long distance operator, MacMurray struggling to make himself heard over so much interference, and the two cracking up because of the fun. Lombard is pretty adorable – she is pretty (although not extremely), down-to-earth, and fairly worldly: she doesn’t get embarrassed when McMurray is walking around in her apartment in his undershorts. The film embraces social mobility – the humblest girl can marry the richest guy; and the loafing millionaire playboys eventually

have to learn to work for their living. Almost ideal romantic comedy with only a touch of the screwball. A little bit of quiet cruelty in the treatment of the phlegmatic Bellamy. (2008)

**Hangmen Also Die!** 1943 Fritz Lang 3.5 Hans Heinrich von Twardowski the very model of the arrogant, sadistic, ruthless, leering Nazi chief with a monocle; Brian Donlevy stocky, square-jawed, and unflappable as Heydrich's assassin on the run (name 'Svoboda' means freedom); Walter Brennan looking frail in understated but firm performance as Czech professor active in the Resistance; Anna Lee starring but a bit predictable as Brennan's daughter who is drawn into the campaign to protect the assassin; Dennis O'Keefe as harmless, sweet tempered fiancé of Ann; Gene Lockhart as pusillanimous, simpering, weasely, wealthy brewer cooperating with the Germans for the benefit of his company; Alexander Granach colorful, bon vivant, lucid, sarcastic and tenacious as Czech police inspector Gruber helping Germans in aggressive, focused investigation of the assassination; Reinhold Schünzel as obsequious, amusing, nervous, fidgety Nazi inspector, Lubitsch style; Lionel Stander as taxi driver who throws himself out of the window of Gestapo Headquarters rather than reveal secrets. Pretty good patriotic propaganda World War II thriller about the Gestapo police investigation following the assassination of Czech Reischprotektor Heydrich in 1942. The assassination is fait accompli at the beginning of the film, which deals with the search for the killer, played with dull seriousness by Donlevy; subplots include Anna Lee's accidental involvement and the tension with her fiancé O'Keefe when she is in unavoidable compromising situations with Donlevy; Brennan is taken hostage (although he appears one of the hostages that escaped execution), Czaka is introduced as the slimy, hand-rubbing traitor who informs for the Gestapo; in the end the patriots reverse the tables by setting up a fantastic and scarcely credible plot to incriminate Czaka with the support, it seems, of the entire city of Prague; he is framed, arrested, and then "shot while escaping". Granach, the colorful police inspector mostly in charge of the investigation, is almost too attractive and efficient to keep the viewer's sympathies on the right side. The film is well-delivered world war propaganda: Czechs are always defiant of the Nazi occupiers (one Nazi gets beaten up in a movie theater when he chides the other patrons for breaking into applause when the news of Heydrich's death is announced) and almost always cooperative with the resistance, as seen in the overwhelming number of false witnesses who come forward to incriminate Czaka; Nazis are presented as either sadistic martinets, womanizers, drunkards, or sexual degenerates (the Gestapo chief inspector as a sore on his face suggesting venereal disease); the Nazis show no compunction about executing innocent hostages until the guilty parties step forward. The narrative is fairly twisty but methodically organized with clear exposition and no loose ends left untied. Several memorable scenes, some of them recalling Lang's German films: Anna Lee hidden behind a door observes Donlevy escaping from the police and then sends the police in the wrong direction; Donlevy is revealed surprisingly as a doctor, when he finally turns toward the camera after a long shot of his back; the testimony of a chief surgeon that Donlevy was present at an operation when Heydrich was shot is explained by a later scene in which all the doctors emerging from an operating room look the same because of their gowns and surgical masks; Czaka is unmasked by the Underground as a Gestapo agent by establishing that he understands German through telling a Hitler joke in German; the eventual killing of Gruber is depicted by a shot under the table where his bowler hat is rolling back and forth. Some grating patriotic posturing (the poem written by the hostage!), but the indignation of the German exiles responsible for the film (Lang and Brecht) is palpable and sometimes moving. (2012)

**Hanna** 2011 Joe Wright (Britain) 3.0 Saoirse Ronan as Hanna, blue eyed, blond, and looking maybe 15 as naïve killer machine trained by her father; Eric Bana in rather colorless role as her affectionate "father" speaking with a German accent; Cate Blanchett as ruthless CIA supervisor determined to destroy both father and daughter; Olivia Williams and Jason Flemyng as colorful British couple touring in their camper through Morocco and Spain trying to teach their children about life; Jessica Barden charming as the British daughter who befriends Ronan. An interesting film composed of disparate parts: a thriller plot with silly thugs pursuing the good guys (Hanna and her father), a bit of bourgeois family warmth that shows Hanna what her education has missed; and a lot of off-kilter decay imagery giving the end of the film a quizzical German quality. Having grown up in the frozen woods of Finland, Hanna feels that she is missing most of life; she escapes out into the world, where she finds some

comfort and some education at the hands of the British family, but mainly danger as she is chased across Morocco (beautiful landscapes resembling the American desert West) to Spain and finally to Germany by Blanchett and her henchmen. She is more than willing to kill when necessary and her martial arts skills are extraordinary. The viewer gradually discovers that she was the only survivor of a gene experiment that the CIA had conducted in Poland to breed more efficient hitmen; when Blanchett had decided to shut it down, Bana had refused and then taken the girl – now his daughter – to Finland to train her to resist Blanchett’s inevitable attack and to survive. The showdown occurs in an abandoned amusement park apparently in Berlin: Blanchett and Hanna battle it out; Blanchett is wounded with a spike, and since she does not die, Hanna shoots her in the head saying “I missed your heart”, thus recalling the first scene of the film in which she had brought down a deer with an arrow but had had to finish it off with a pistol since she had “missed your heart”. Plot resolved: Hanna survives for a life in the world, and her evil godmother is dead along the lines of a Grimm fairy tale. The thriller plot is entertaining and keeps the viewer guessing just the right amount until the truth is revealed. Ronan is a wonderful subject for the camera – thin, frail body, expressive light blue eyes, pale skin, flowing blond hair; so fragile seeming and yet so ruthless and strong when needed. The most entertaining set piece is a cat and mouse scene she plays out with the thugs in a container storage yard with Hanna leaping along the tops of the containers and the men scurrying around underneath, all to the pounding minimalist rhythmic music of the Chemical Brothers. The significance of the clown and decayed amusement park imagery is difficult to decipher. The film is also based on a false premise, since father and daughter have been out of the world for so long that there is no motivation to reveal their location to Blanchett by pressing the red button. Nevertheless, entertaining thriller with a different, fantastic sensibility. (2011)

**The Hangover** 2009 Todd Philips 3.0 Justin Bartha as the more or less normal guy who is getting married; Bradley Cooper as smart-mouthed, good-looking high school teacher who is the leader of the group; Ed Helms hilarious as the group dweeb – a dentist who is constantly reminded that he is not a real doctor; Rachael Harris in one-note performance as Helm’s abusive, dominating girlfriend; Zach Galifianakis as the heroically stupid brother of the bride-to-be; Heather Graham as the gentle, pretty hooker that Helms marries. Very funny, pretty insignificant comic film about a quartet of young male LA types who go to Las Vegas for a no-holds-barred bachelor party experience, but end up living the ultimate catastrophic nightmare, although no one really gets hurt (they are however scarred, filthy, and exhausted by the end of the film!). They check into a luxurious hotel suite; the film then cuts to the next morning – the suite is completely trashed; there is a chicken and a tiger present, and a baby in the closet, and the guys have no memory as to what happened. The rest of the film proceeds something like a whodunit as the guys record clues and race from Las Vegas venue to venue trying to figure out what happened the night before. Many absurd, comic moments involving the tiger (he belongs to Mike Tyson), a wedding chapel (Helms has married a prostitute that he met), the baby (it belongs to the prostitute; she had forgotten him), Helms’ missing eye tooth (he had pulled it out as a macho stunt for his new wife), an effeminate Asian gangster who wears a penis-less crotch patch in his nude scene; when the quartet gives their parking check to the hotel doorman, he comes around with a police car that the guys had stolen the night before. Perhaps the funniest scene is the photographs that are shown under the end credits; they give a blow-by-blow of what the guys really did. By far the most interesting character is played by Helms, who is hilariously reluctant to do anything too extreme and yet when he does, he is obviously experiencing a cathartic rejection of his hyper-bitch girlfriend. The film reminds one of the Athenian Dionysian revels, for which responsible Athenian citizens abandon the shackles of civilization to experience a few days of no-holds-barred carousing; but then you have to return to family and the nine-to-five, as do all our heroes at the end of the film. It also falls generally into the film category of the slacker, irresponsible young male brought to perfection by Judd Apatow. Very entertaining, sometimes intriguing film. (2011)

**Hangover Square** 1945 John Brahm 4.0 Laird Cregar in his last role as gifted pianist and composer who suffers from a split personality – one of his personae is murderous; Linda Darnell as the bad girl – cheap, gold-digging popular singer; Faye Marlowe very pretty and competent in her Hollywood debut as the good girl who tries to encourage Cregar to pursue his creative gift; George Sanders, suave

and handsome as always, as a Scotland Yard psychiatrist who is on to Cregar but who empathizes with his condition. Minor horror masterpiece with excellent acting by Cregar (his bulging eyes when the Mr. Hyde personality comes on are memorable), inventive and expressive direction by Brahm, and perhaps Bernard Herrmann's best film score. Despite obvious similarities to 'The Lodger' and 'Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde', the expert teamwork makes the film interesting and fresh. Cregar, whose transitions to his murderous personality are triggered by loud noises (the cat knocks over some picture frames, a load of pipes falls into a ditch in the street, loud chords from Herrmann's concerto), evokes sympathy for the well-intentioned main character; he is unaware of his crimes, he struggles against them, and he invites destruction when he realizes what he has done. The script gives him a choice between his libido, low art and cheap sex (Darnell) and his reason, high art and true devotion (Marlowe). The price that the creative personality pays is suffering and an unintegrated persona; perhaps the artist can never be happy and well-adjusted. Cregar oscillates between the two. The direction is first-rate expressionism: the cat sneaks around the house like a stealthy libido; death is depicted imaginatively by the burial of the cat in the construction ditch in Hangover Square and by the burning of the Darnell's body on the Guy Fawkes funeral pyre (Cregar carries his 'effigy' up a long letter to deposit it on top of the pyre); the camera exploits extensively contrasts between dark and light; close-ups are tight and often quickly edited to make emotional points. Film ends in a paroxysm as a feverish and obsessed Cregar plays his concerto (a passionate Rachmaninoffian piece by Herrmann with banged chords and characteristic muted trumpets), the fire breaks out, and as the orchestra and audience escape in a panic, he remains playing his piece as the concert hall goes up in flames and crashes down around him. Interesting, compelling, and even moving small film (77 minutes). (2008)

**Hans Christian Andersen** 1952 Charles Vidor (Sam Goldwyn) 3.0 Danny Kaye as Hans Christian Andersen gay and lively, with a twinkle in his eye, mellow musical voice, exuding gentle kindness and good will, a devoted story-teller (he is disliked by the village schoolmaster – on professional grounds?) with a soft heart that goes out to the prima ballerina (Zizi Jeanmarie from Paris) ambiguously mistreated by her husband-director Farley Granger. The film is a fantasy dreamed up by Goldwyn based on the stories of Andersen and the songs of Frank Loesser – very good ones indeed. Narrative, which takes him from a small village to Copenhagen, has little to do with the life of Andersen: he is presented as a gentle nonconformist who loves to tell stories, and when he does tell them he often breaks into music, which is often reminiscent of Arthur Sullivan's G&S songs. "I am Hans Christian Andersen" is quite rhythmic; "Wonderful, Wonderful Copenhagen" plays in the background but is never sung until the finale where Hans is surrounded by children; clever song "Altogether" on the Emperors' clothes; "There Once Was an Ugly Duckling" that teaches us all to accept diversity (Hollywood 1952!); "Everywhere I wander, Everywhere I roam" flowing romantic song with full string accompaniment but never sung; "No Two People have ever been so in love" skipping and echoing notes sung by ballerina and Andersen in fantasy ballet sequence in which Andersen imagines that the ballerina loves him; the lilting 'Thumbelina' appears only very briefly in the finale. Andersen writes a ballet on the subject of the Little Mermaid for his beloved ballerina; it provides an extensive ballet interlude toward the end of the film. Filmed in very bright color on delightful artificial-looking sets. Film has very little plot – Andersen and his adopted son Peter go to Copenhagen, where Hans falls in love with the married ballerina, and when he realizes that she is happy in her marriage despite her husband-director's tyranny on stage, he returns quietly to Odense, his home town. The film is watchable because of the energy and charm of Danny Kaye and because of the excellent score by Loesser. (2007)

**Happiness** 1998 Todd Solondz 3.5 Dylan Baker as Bill, dull househusband psychologist who is into molesting and raping pre-adolescent boys, Cynthia Stevenson as Bill's impossibly perky self-satisfied housewife Trish, Jane Adams in perhaps outstanding role as Stevenson's sister Joy looking for love and hooking up with at least two Mr. Wrongs, Lara Flynn Boyle as dark-haired sister Helen, who although she has celebrity friends and is adored by just about everyone still responds to the sexual advances of an obscene phone caller, Phillip Seymour Hoffmann as pitiful loner computer nerd Allen with serious impulses of sexual aggression -- he is too shy to respond to Boyle's acceptance of his telephone come-ons, Ben Gazzara in small role as paterfamilias who leaves his wife (Louise Lasser!) after

40 years of marriage, has an unsatisfactory sexual encounter with another woman, and then still hangs around as bemused observer; amazing boy actor as Billy, the searching son of Baker. Upsetting and unexpected film about serious dysfunctions -- almost of all of them sexual -- in a family of three sisters (and the men around them) and two parents. The title is a serious case of sarcasm -- everyone is looking for happiness in love and sex, but nobody even gets close. Adams hooks up with two hilarious basket cases (the Russian émigré Vlad, who steals her stereo and guitar after sex, is the more scurrilous) and she is still alone at the end; Boyle responds to the attentions of the obscene phone caller, but he avoids her in favor of an extremely fat hatchet murderer, and she also is alone at the end; Hoffmann is seriously damaged sexually, but he is incapable of acting on his desires; Baker as nerdy looking dad turns out to be a child "serial rapist" (scrawled on the wall of his suburban home) and has seriously disturbing conversations with his son (they talk very frankly about penis size ("What your friend doesn't know, Billy, is that it's not length that counts, it's the width.)), Bill's first orgasm ("when am I going to come?"), about dad's penchant for abusing boys, etc.); Stevenson doesn't seem to have strong sexual needs, and she leaves her husband when the shocking truth is revealed. The film comes together "six months later" in Miami when all are gathered around the table with the women hoping that Boyle will find them men; meanwhile, Billy finally has his first come watching a bikini-clad sunbather from the balcony; the dog licks the semen off the balcony rail, walks over to Mom (Stevenson) and licks her on the mouth, and Billy comes in and announces beaming "I came!" Consternation, credits roll. The only person happy at the end is Billy, and because we all know that sex gets you nowhere on the happiness road, he of course is not an exception. Film is absolutely unclassifiable -- it is sometimes funny, sometimes depressing, sometimes satirical, sometimes completely off-the-wall; sometimes ironically, unexpectedly touching as when Baker shows great affection, patience and honesty with his son when they are talking about the most offensive subjects; you never know what is going to happen next. The nearest thing in American movies are semi-surrealist filmmakers like John Waters and David Lynch. (2006)

**Happy Happy** 2010 Anne Sewitzky (Norway) 2.5 Agnes Kittelsen as 30ish woman in rural Norway that is compulsively cheerful, perhaps hiding her sadness; Joachim Rafaelsen as her loutish husband who hasn't had sex with her in a year and is not sure whether he is hetero- or homosexual; Henrik Rafaelsen as kind, handsome man who moves in with his wife next door; Maibritt Saerens as Rafaelsen's tall, svelte, emotionally cold blond wife, who is just emerging from an affair and making the trip to the country to renew her relationship with her husband. Often confusing, but entertaining Norwegian film about marital and sexual issues among the Scandinavian middle classes set in a snowy winter landscape. When the city couple moves into the house next door to Kittelsen, the emotional scars of all four protagonists burst out: the affectionate-starved Kittelsen gives neighbor Rafaelsen an unsolicited blow job thereby starting a badly concealed affair; Henrik pursues the affair, telling his angry wife that he can't help responding to a woman who appears to appreciate and love him; Joachim is a loose canon, trying unsuccessfully to seduce Henrik and then making very awkward love with Saerens; Saerens persists in her stand-offishness and sense of superiority (she proclaims that she is a lawyer) until finally at the end of the film she (rather incredibly) melts and reignites her relationship with her husband; Kittelsen surprisingly tells her husband near the end that she is leaving him, but there is little sign of it when the credits roll. The film has a mixed, even confusing tone: some of the time it seems to be a satire on Scandinavian behavior (uncertainty, ambiguity, hopping from bed to bed) and sometimes it seems brutally serious: in the latter category is Henrik's brutal criticism of his wife's hostility and emotional coldness when she discovers that he is having an affair with Kittelsen; and also Joachim's brutal put down of his wife in their bed when she asks him to make love and make a baby with her (she doesn't know what to wear, she doesn't take care of her body, she is always begging). The most affecting plotline is the revelation of Kittelsen's character -- we understand at the end that her superficial cheerfulness is derived from her deprived childhood, when she was abandoned by her mother and raised in foster homes. Rather off-the-wall are the periodic choruses of American songs -- especially Negro spirituals -- sung by a four-man Scandinavian group, and the bizarre play between the little boys of the two families that includes the Norwegian kid beating the African kid (Henrik and Saerens had adopted him) as his slave. Henrik's and Saerens' reconciliation at the end is unconvincing. Despite the inconsistencies and occasional absurdities, however, the film remains entertaining and somewhat exotic. (2011)

**Harlan: In the Shadow of Jew Süß** 2009 Felix Moeller (Germany) 2.5 Moderately engrossing German documentary on the career and choices of Veit Harlan, the Nazi filmmaker who made the infamous “Jew Süß” for Goebbels in 1940, that depicted luridly the financial and sexual sins of an 18th century Württemberger Jewish minister supposedly responsible for the death of a beautiful young gentile woman; it calls explicitly for the expulsion – and perhaps the murder – of Jews in Germany of 1940. A portion of the film attempts to illuminate the mentality and choices of Harlan, who seems to have been primarily a cheerful careerist eager to please the Nazi hierarchy so as to be successful, prosperous and continue to make high budget films. He and his second wife, the Swedish actress Sonderbaum, were the biggest stars in German cinema between 1935 and 1945. He also directed the historical extravaganza “Kolberg” in the last months of the war; a propaganda film calling for all Germans to go down with the regime in its Niedergang, it was not shown on many theaters because so many of them had been destroyed. ‘Harlan’ focuses even more in long and repetitive interviews on the various ways in which his children and grandchildren have dealt with his legacy. A large number of them don’t seem terribly uncomfortable with it, seeming to adopt Harlan’s official explanation that he was a dupe of the Nazi elite and was constantly in tension with them, e.g., over the amount of destruction that could be shown in the Kolberg film. Some of them, especially the men, are however very critical of their forbear, suggesting that he had a defective moral sense that skated over the potentially tragic impact of the propaganda films he made for the regime. His favorite genre, however, were sentimental women’s dramas that he continued to make in the 1950s after he was cleared of war crimes charges in 1948. He died on the island of Capri in 1964, secure in his belief that he played no role in the murder of thousands of Jews – even his own colleagues and relatives – during the war. The film would have been more gripping if it had clarified its subjects – either an analysis of the filmmaker himself or a treatment of how the children of a flawed man deal with his legacy. (2010)

**Harry un ami qui vous veut du bien** 2000 Dominik Moll (France) 4.0 Laurent Lucas as Frenchman harassed by his noisy children on the way to vacation in the Massif central; Mathilde Seigner charming and pretty as his equally harassed but supportive wife; Sergi Lopez as low-key, insinuating and disturbing man who claims he went to high school with Laurent; Sophie Guillemin as pretty, empty-headed, sexy, and “bovine” girlfriend of Lopez. Fascinating, ambiguous French thriller that begins as a rather odd encounter between a harried French couple and the insinuating man who claims he was a fellow student with the husband and that ends in horrifying climax. The narrative takes place mostly in a creepy old farmhouse in the Massif central that the family is fixing up; the landscapes surrounding it are exquisitely fertile, alternately forested and open fields, and the principals driving through it provides relief from the claustrophobic atmosphere of the farmhouse. In the first part of the film Lopez is oddly and excessively solicitous of Lucas’ welfare: he insists that Lucas was a good writer in the lycée, and he does everything he can to promote it, at first mainly by strengthening his relationship with his wife. Things then turn for the worse: Lopez changes his mind about Mathilde and tells her that she is holding back her husband; Lopez then begins to do away with the people in Lucas’ entourage that he judges stand in his way: he murders Lucas’ parents by driving them off the road; he murders Lucas’ hippy-acting brother because he mocks his brother’s writing; he then murders his own girlfriend since he decides that she is an empty-headed cow. In the climax, Lopez is determined to murder Mathilde and all the children, even handing Lucas a knife so he can participate; just as the viewer is shouting “kill him!”, Lucas stabs him in the gut and buries him in an abandoned well; Mathilde knows nothing about it. In the meantime, Lucas’ creativity has somehow been awakened and he has been able to finish a story entitled “Les Oeufs”. The last scene has his wife driving down the freeway toward Paris with Lucas contentedly holding his completed manuscript in his lap. The film is a masterpiece of escalating subtle menace, of suggestive imagery, closely observed psychology, and of ambiguity. One is never sure what the meaning is of the pink-tiled bathroom that Lucas’ parents install without his knowledge (he does his writing there sitting on the toilet); one wonders about the significance of the abandoned well (turns out to be a recurring McGuffin for murder); and most importantly the eggs that Lopez eats after he has sex with his girlfriend (he says that it restores his virility) and that Lucas stares at in extreme close-up just before his breakthrough to restored (?) creativity. The film works well as a horror movie. Its underlying theme

seems to be the connection between masculinity and creativity: Lopez's menace is tied to sexuality and masculinity and eventually to prying Lucas away from his domestic subjugation to his wife and (noisy, fussy, demanding) children; his writing is associated with his separation from his wife (he works in the pink bathroom) and with the egg-shapes seen in the refrigerator (these seem more like testicles than breasts); and in the final scene Mathilde has taken over the driving, the children are asleep in the back seat, and Lucas is relaxing with his work in his lap. For all his menace, Lopez seems to have restored Lucas' maleness in all of its contradictions and ambiguities – artistic creativity and murder. Riveting film. (2011)

**The Hateful Eight** 2015 Quentin Tarantino 2.5 Sort of western that includes a lot of Tarantino trademarks – pungent characters, quirky, crude dialogue, extreme, self-consciously vivid violence, generous amounts of misogyny, self-congratulatory condemnation of racism, generous use of the n.... word for shock value, etc., but with little interest in consistent theme or narrative. Samuel L. Jackson very colorful and entertaining as bounty hunter, Major Warren; Kurt Russell is fabulously bewhiskered as also a bounty hunter; Jennifer Jason Leigh as Russell's victim – her faces is usually bloodied with a lot of teeth missing toward the end; Walton Goggins entertaining as racist refugee from the Civil War South – he says he is the new sheriff of Red Rock; Tim Roth makes his fake-sounding British accent work as the self-styled hangman; Michael Madsen as a gunslinger (has he been seen since 'Reservoir Dogs'?); Bruce Dern as elderly, deeply racist ex-Confederate General, who admits to having slaughtered Negro soldiers when captured; Channing Tatum appears for a brief time to have his face blown off. It is interesting to experience a 'Reservoir Dogs'-based Tarantino movie in a distinct setting: Colorado in the winter right after the Civil War. The film is shot in extremely big 70 mm despite the great majority of action taking place in the indoors. The nearly 3-hour film starts with a jaw-dropping shot of a suffering-Christ crucifix (does this film have a religious subtext?) in a snow-covered Rocky Mountain landscape, but the rest of the film takes place indoors, either in the stagecoach (about 20 minutes), or in Minnie's Haberdashery, a capacious stagecoach shelter not far from Red Rock, where the stagecoach characters join other already there. It features bounty hunters bringing their victims in to collect their rewards – Jackson has a stack of three bodies and Russell has cuffed himself to Leigh so she won't escape. Lots of verbal thrusts and parries among the characters at Minnie's; and all but donning the mustache of Hercule Poirot, Jackson investigates some curious goings-on (e.g., someone poisoning the coffee thus causing the colorful passing of at least two of the characters); and then the killing starts. The Agatha-Christie-like plot doubles back a few hours to explain that the characters awaiting the new arrivals in the shelter are really in cahoots with Leigh (Tatum is her [rather incestuous acting] brother). The homicides continue unabated until the only two remaining ('And Then There Were Two') are Jackson and Goggins, both of whom persist in smartass wise-cracking as they bleed to death (Jackson was shot in the balls by Tatum). The picturesque characters positively jump off the page, often in quirky monologues, e.g., Roth explaining the difference between universal justice and frontier justice, and Jackson's long narrative of how he humiliated Dern's son by making him stumble naked through the Colorado winter and then sucking to conclusion his "big, black dick". Not one of them has a moral bone in his body; for these gunslingers there is no distinction between right and wrong; only the gun rules, particularly with the film's anti-hero Jackson, who guns down people with a casual smirk. Tarantino loves to play in a self-satisfied way on the guilt of American culture – constant use of the N.... word, reference to crimes against Blacks in the Civil War, white America's fear of Black sexual potency (the over-sized member); and yet Jackson refers to objectionable whites as "crackers" and not the more controversial "red necks". His treatment of Leigh, the film's only main female character, is downright sadistic: constantly punched and bloodied in the face by the blustering Russell, she is the only character not killed by "honorable" gunfire, but hanged ceremoniously at the end in gleeful, pornographic detail; after wards, the two survivors settle back on the bed in post-coital satisfaction. No doubt that the film is intriguing and entertaining, but the moral desolation of the film's universe leaves this viewer with an uneasy feeling. (2016)

**The Haunting** 1963 Robert Wise 3.0 Richard Johnson bland as anthropologist that recruits a band of neurotics to find out if a fabulous gothic house is haunted; Julie Harris usually over-acting and



annoying as central character looking for a new start in life; Claire Bloom as more glamorous recruit with gifts of extra sensory perception that she sometimes uses cruelly; Russ Tamblyn as the heir to the house – boring and irritating callow character. Classic horror film that suffers from uninteresting characters and often inane dialogue, but benefits from a wonderful set design of the big 19th-century gothic pile. The narrative centers on the internal dialogue of the emotionally insecure Harris, who, having spent most of her life taking care of her invalid mother, now seems to be victim of a massive inferiority complex that connects her to the building and leads her eventually to want to lose herself in it; at the end of the film she disappears into the clutches of the house. The viewer is forced also to witness the inane and dull psychological ups and downs of the other three characters. The set and art decoration of the house however are first rate – nooks and crannies everywhere, dark paneling, looking good as new since it is taken care of by a slightly creepy caretaker who never stays after dark, lighted atmospherically, filled with Victorian bric-a-brac and 19th-century style classical statues that the cinematographer exploits to give the audience a jolt when one of the main characters moves within range. No ghosts or monsters ever appear in the film. But the house is a character in its own right: doors open and close suddenly, the characters feel sudden rushes of cold air, at night loud bangings reverberate through the house and eventually stand right outside the door of the cowering Harris and Bloom's bedroom, toward the end the force stands again right outside the door to the study, turns the door knob, bangs against the door causing the paneling to shake and bend dangerously inward, and when Harris haltingly climbs the rickety cast iron spiral staircase to render herself to the house, the stairs teeter on the verge of falling, and the viewer is startled to see a face of a woman in the skylight, which turns out to be the wife of Johnson (Lois Maxwell), who has previously disappeared during one of the house's spells. Film is fun to watch, but it doesn't come across as very scary in 2013. Interesting without living up to its exalted reputation. (2013)

**Haute Cuisine** 2012 Christian Vincent (France) 2.5 Catherine Frot as determined, likable middle-aged woman that serves two years in the Elysée Palace as François Mitterrand's personal chef; Jean d'Ormesson (French TV personality) as an aging Mitterrand (doesn't look a bit like him) – a man of clear speech, elegant manners, and a love of good French cooking done in the style of his grandmother. Moderately entertaining comedy about French cooking: a general tone of self-satisfaction about the *gloire de la cuisine française* and a tremendous time spent watching Frot prepare gourmet dishes (the president wants them to be prepared in a simple manner like his grandmother, but they look pretty complex to the American consumer). Frot is a pleasant, though combative personality that locks in the loyalty of the viewer. Much of the activity in the presidential palace is engaging: the comical rivalry between the main kitchen (hysterical chef Brice Fournier) and the intruder, which ends with high fives all around when Frot resigns after two years; the heartfelt exchanges between Frot and the president, who not only loves his chef's cooking but establishes a cordial emotional tie with her; the observation of the bureaucrats running the palace, especially their professional rivalries and insecurities. Because the main kitchen is manned exclusively by men, who refer to Frot as Mme. DuBarry (the favorite of Louis XIV), there is a feminist subtext in the film with Frot having to struggle constantly against ridicule and prejudice. For some elusive reason, the film cross-cuts throughout with scenes from Frot's later job as a much-appreciated chef in a French research station in the Crozet Islands (1000 miles or so southeast of South Africa) – the emphasis is a cloyingly intense admiration for Frot's culinary gifts and the hearty gratitude of the personnel when she cooks her last meal before leaving. These episodes seem useless and redundant, even annoying, and would have been best left on the editing room floor. A foodie's trifle with some charming moments. (2015)

**Haywire** 2011 Steven Soderbergh 2.5 Gina Carano inexpressive, lithe, athletic, and extremely ruthless as CIA dirty job contractor running around all over the world; Michael Douglas in small role as US bureaucrat for whom the contractors work; Michael Angarano as kid that saves Carano's life in the beginning of the film; Channing Tatum, Antonio Banderas, Ewan McGregor as various espionage contractors alternately threatening or defending Carano. Misconceived action thriller that eschews basics like plot and character and focuses almost exclusively on chases and martial arts combat. Slam-bang beginning with Carano meeting Tatum in an upstate New York diner, where after a wary beginning the two engage in a very percussive fight; afterwards, Carano makes her getaway in

Angarano's car, where she tells her "story" in flashback. The film sports many expertly filmed action sequences: combat with a British agent in a Dublin hotel room that ends with Carano executing him in cold blood with a shot through the pillow covering his head; several sequences of Carano running with determination through city streets either pursued or pursuing adversaries; state cops duped by unidentified bad guys chasing Angarano's car through the snowy landscapes of New York; lengthy action sequence in Carano's father's house in New Mexico that ends with the sad death of Tatum from a stomach wound. The action sequences are filmed in a clean, no-nonsense way – long shots, moving camera, minimal editing, relatively quiet – that is refreshing after the hyperactive, noise, explosion-obsessed style of many Hollywood movies. Carano is an excellent fighter with crisp, convincing martial arts moves (she is perhaps not as convincing a runner). The narrative however is so sketchy and undeveloped that the viewer usually does not know the reasons for the action sequences and which characters are friends and which supporters of Carano. Since the film degenerates into a series of seemingly meaningless fights and pursuits, the viewer loses interest. Carano is not much of an actor and the impressive cast of male actors rarely have a chance to show their talents. With a little extra effort to develop characters and to fill in the plot (the film is only 1:30 long) the film could have been much more compelling. (2012)

**He's Just Not That Into You** 2009 Ken Kwapis 2.5 Ginnifer Goodwin a discovery with her genuine smile, soft, round face, and amiable cluelessness; Kevin Connolly as rather nerdy real estate salesman who ends up with "the girl of my dreams"; Scarlett Johansson as yoga instructor – sexy and full-bodied as ever; Bradley Cooper with engaging smile and personality as apparently happily married man who is a narrative focus with his involvement with both his wife and Johansson; Jennifer Connelly as somewhat uptight wife of Cooper – she spends a great deal of the movie remaking her apartment into the perfect yuppie lair; Justin Long as uncommitted restaurant manager playing the field – he eventually commits himself to Ginnifer; Jennifer Aniston somewhat less glamorous than other actresses – she is unmarried in a long-term relationship with Affleck; Ben Affleck lots of straight white teeth as nice guy who adores Aniston but just doesn't believe in marriage; Drew Barrymore with a smaller role – surrounded mostly by sympathetic effeminate gays, she finds Mr. Right (Connolly); Kris Kristofferson in cameo role as Aniston's father, who provides some drama when he has a non-fatal heart attack. Somewhat vapid but entertaining spin off of 'Sex and the City' that follows the romantic fortunes and misfortunes of five women and their search for the perfect mate; most of the characters live happily ever after at the end, with the exception of Johansson, Connelly, and Cooper, who are punished in part for their infidelity. The rather long film (2:09) resembles about six episodes of 'Sex and the City' combined in one. The hook is that young women are desperate to find Mr. Right, but those men are so elusive – they don't call you back, they are vague when they are prompted to exchange contact information, they are opposed to marriage even when they are in love with you, they are playing the field and opposed to commitment, they are playing the field and opposed to commitment, they don't pay attention to your signals, etc. Goodwin carries perhaps the brunt of the slightly integrated plot with her desperate search for a mate – to the point of staring at her cell phone waiting for a guy to call back. The movie is partly saved by its romantic cuteness and by the extremely engaging cast. Amusing moments: Barrymore sounds off about there being too many means of communication (cell phones, email, texting, phoning, etc.) for there to be clarity between the sexes; Cooper is forced to have sex with wife Connelly while furious lover Johansson listens from an adjoining closet. Nice chick flic. (2009)

**He Walked by Night** 1947 Alfred Werker (or Anthony Mann?) 2.5 Richard Basehart as methodical thief/killer who befuddles the police; Jack Webb as crime lab chief who at least has a sense of humor; Roy Roberts as the captain of detectives who persistently pursues the killer. Police investigation film done in semi-documentary manner; it apparently owes a lot to Italian Neo-Realism. Film seems seriously overrated by *film noir* aficionados. Two-thirds of the film is dogged police work – bringing in people for line-ups, conducting a (primitive) system for building a composite drawing of the killer, hoofing around asking routine questions, descending on Basehart's bungalow in large numbers, etc. The most interesting aspect of film is performance of Richard Basehart as the thief – solitary, isolated, impassive without apparent emotions, changes types of crimes to throw off the police, willing to operate on himself to remove a bullet – the camera dwells on his face contorted with pain as he does it. We don't

know why he commits crimes; we don't know whether he gets pleasure out of outsmarting the police – he is just the way he is; he rarely talks. Film ends with an extended chase in the city storm drains that Basehart habitually uses to move around the city; the sequence was obviously adopted by Carol Reed in the following year for the finale to *The Third Man*. The dead pan style with narration, the depiction of boring detective work, and "The names have been changed to protect the innocent" obviously had an influence on the development of *Dragnet* through Jack Webb. The print available was quite fuzzy with poor contrast, and it was thus impossible to appreciate the film's renowned cinematography. (2007)

**Headhunters** 2011 Morten Tyldum (Norway) 3.0 Aksel Hennie light-skinned, with long flowing hair as executive headhunter doubling as an art thief to provide his wife with the things he thinks she needs; Nikolaj Coster-Waldau (Danish actor) as Hennie's customer who turns out to be extremely dangerous; Synnove Macody Lund as Hennie's tall, willowy, blond wife. Twisty, well-directed, although often implausible, poorly written thriller about an art thief who gets in over his head. When he turns on his customer, Coster, (because he knows that he is having an affair with his wife) the latter starts a deadly pursuit through chic locales in Oslo and through picturesque locations in the Norwegian countryside close to Oslo intent on assassinating him. The chase is extremely well done with surprising situations, such as Hennie having to bury himself in a huge pile of human excrement and breathe through a tube or survive a devastatingly bloody car crash when Coster (somehow) gets hold of a huge truck and rams the police car containing Hennie off a mountain road. The film includes periodic surprises: such as Hennie's discovery that his friend Ove is not dead, but then he kills him anyway (as often in the film for reasons that are not clear); and the realization that Coster's pursuit is so relentless because his becoming CEO of a company represented by Hennie is part of a nefarious capitalist scheme to capture that company's technology (but Clas and his employer don't really stand to gain anything by killing Hennie!). The film builds to a smashing conclusion: Hennie's girlfriend turns out to be a confederate of Coster's, and Hennie manages to kill her after she attacks him with a huge knife; when Lund enters Coster's apartment toward the end, the viewer wonders whether she is in cahoots with him to kill her husband (to whom she has just pledged her undying love!), but it turns out she has sex with Coster in order to put blank cartridges in his gun (where did she get those?) so that in the final shootout with Hennie, the bad guy will be shooting blanks. The film ends pretty inexplicably with a shootout between Hennie and Coster that is watched by the police on closed circuit television (where did that come from?); Coster is killed by a shot in the stomach, and the police think that Ove did it (despite his being dead already for several days)! Meanwhile, Hennie has cleverly arranged the evidence so that the police, who are not the brightest lights on the screen, do not suspect that he has killed at least three people himself! It appears that Hennie and Lund are reconciled with Hennie recognizing that his life has been a superficial sham and that he is now going to focus on love and family – the last scene has Lund pregnant with the baby that Hennie has always refused to give her. Enjoyable film despite its many problems! (2012)

**The Heartbreak Kid** 1972 Elaine May (writer Neil Simon) 3.0 Charles Grodin in rather thankless role as aggressive but mindless romantic and upwardly mobile Jewish kid from New York; Jeannie Berlin (Elaine May's daughter) as his New York bride; Cybill Shepherd as wealthy WASP kid from Minnesota who gets her hooks into Grodin; Eddie Albert in priceless, AA-nominated performance as Shepherd's dad who is very hostile to Grodin. Slow-starting but ultimately interesting and fairly amusing satirical comedy from the pen of Neil Simon. Grodin rushes into marriage with Berlin and regrets it even before they arrive at their honeymoon destination in Miami Beach ("I knew it all the way back in Virginia!"); he meets the goddess-like Shepherd on the beach, and pursues her doggedly to their palatial home in snowy Minnesota until she finally succumbs and marries him at the end of the film. The style of the film is quite different from the usual Simon play-based fare: May uses a lot of long-running shots with informal, improvised-sounding dialogue; Grodin seems to be ad-libbing a good part of the time; the only character with neat, chiseled lines is Albert, who delivers hilarious well-aimed, irascible, and biting insults at Grodin especially toward the end of the film. Berlin does a good job coming across as whiney and clinging: Was it good? Tell me! A girl needs the assurance! In her classic beauty Shepherd does not have to say much, but she effectively conveys the emptiness of her character – when Grodin protests to a standoffish Shepherd that he has divorced his wife for her, all she can think of to say

is “I’m flattered”. The film is satirical. Miami Beach vacationers are depicted in all their white-belted and striped-pants finery. Much contrast between the brash, fast-talking New York personality and the quiet, bland, respectable upper middle class Midwest; Grodin’s attempt to praise Midwestern food in the dinner scene toward the end is funny – the potatoes are sincere and honest! Woody Allen’s famous WASP sequence in ‘Annie Hall’ must surely be based on this scene. Ultimately the film is about the defects in the American romantic ideal. After her initial flirtatiousness Shepherd is a clueless, passive vessel who mostly just reacts to Grodin’s overtures. Grodin is relentless in the pursuit of his romantic goal, but his fast talk is empty and in the end he doesn’t know what he really wants: during the reception after his marriage to Shepherd, he talks to everyone about his ambitions – “to give back to the land instead of taking from it” – while Shepherd wanders through the room looking for him. The viewer does not believe for a minute that the marriage will work any better than his first one; and where will he go from there? (2008)

**Heat** 1995 Michael Mann 4.0 Robert DeNiro solid, sincere as resourceful, fair-minded boss of a LA heist team; Al Pacino over-the-top as obsessive police lieutenant determined to nab DeNiro; Tom Sizemore as mild-mannered confederate of DeNiro; Val Kilmer as hot-headed younger member of group with a pony tail; Kevin Gage as the psycho in DeNiro’s gang; Jon Voigt as a shadowy boss-confederate of DeNiro; Ashley Judd, Diane Venora, Amy Brenneman, Natalie Portman as various of the women in the lives of the male principals. Totally engrossing, expertly plotted crime film that lasts almost three hours. The bulk of the attention is focused on the criminal gang around DeNiro and Pacino, who heads a featureless police squad out to capture them, although the script devotes a lot of time to the personal lives of the principals. Several absolutely riveting action sequences: the beginning armored car heist that includes overturning the car with a huge tow truck, the blasting open of the rear door, and the execution of the four guards begun by the psycho Kevin Gage (DeNiro later beats him up, throws him out of the gang, and he will later get even with him by giving information to DeNiro’s enemies); the shootout after the foiled back robbery toward the end, in which the gang blasts away with automatic rifles against an outgunned police force for about ten minutes, bullets riddling police cars all around, gang members firing through the windshield with their AK-47s, etc. (the sequence is cited as the inspiration of the infamous North Hollywood shootout of several years later); and the penultimate suspenseful sequence in which DeNiro enters a busy hotel at LAX to kill Gage theatrically in revenge for his betrayal of the gang. The dramatic core of the film is the adversarial, yet interdependent and respectful, relationship between top criminal and top cop; their rivalry is a fight to the finish, and yet they respect one another’s intelligence and resourcefulness, even getting together once in a coffee shop to exchange innuendos; DeNiro’s performance comes across as low-key compared to the often hysterical, wide-eyed one of Pacino. Pacino’s final victory over DeNiro off the end of the runway at the airport is due in part to DeNiro’s bad decision to kill Gage rather than just escape from the country and in part to chance since (apparently) the landing lights of an approaching jetliner blinds DeNiro allowing Pacino to get off the fatal shots. Mann goes to great lengths to fill in the personal lives of the principal characters: the characters of the crooks surprisingly show loyalty and affection among themselves (especially the informal father-son relationship between DeNiro and Kilmer) and most of them try to maintain relationships with their women (DeNiro being the exception when he says that to be a successful thief you must be ready to walk away from any relationship in 30 seconds when the heat appears). One wonders whether the family drama might have been cut to tighten the film. Moody electronic music and beautiful, deep-toned, highly detailed cinematography help make it impossible to take one’s eyes off the screen. Even with its faults, an outstanding film; Mann is an engrossing storyteller. (2011)

**Heaven Can Wait** 1943 Ernst Lubitsch 4.0 Don Ameche very good as fast-talking, womanizing but lovable man who is truly attached to his wife, Gene Tierney as usual very beautiful (although her hair in her last scene is bizarre and unattractive!), long-suffering wife who extracts a tear from viewer when she dies young, Charles Coburn as Ameche’s life-loving grandfather, who defends and justifies his playboy grandson and plays major role in getting Tierney back when she suddenly and unexpectedly leaves Ameche and returns to her parents in Kansas, Eugene Pallette with his usual gravelly voice plays comically ill-tempered father of Tierney. Moving, sentimental and constantly entertaining

World War II-style movie about womanizing husband, who having died has an interview with the Devil (a suave, rather sensible and sensitive fellow dressed in tails); after Ameche recounts his life decade-by-decade, Satan decides he belongs “up there,” although Ameche will be housed in an anteroom for several hundred years (apparently Purgatory). Film takes place mostly in Belle Époque in impossibly over decorated rooms recorded in brilliant (garish?) Technicolor. Film is sometimes corny, but has foundation of genuine emotion about love, fidelity, the family sticking together that perhaps betrays its World War II period (this is worth fighting for) and carries it through. Viewer is always on the side of Ameche, even though he chases after showgirls; we are thrilled when he and Coburn show up in Tierney’s Kansas bedroom and virtually kidnap her away from her hick parents and stuffy former boyfriend (who again declares his affection for her) taking her back to the city. Film is Lubitsch-style with its indulgence for a wayward husband; the judgment is that he is good-hearted, truly loves his wife, and even with his straying it is much better to have loved than to be married to a stuffed shirt, respectable guy, and that anyhow he has made his girlfriends happy over the years – they are waiting for him in Purgatory too (a sly reference to sex)! Film is much more reticent on the subject of sex than Lubitsch’s pre-1934 films, but he must have used all his personal prestige to get the script past the Breen Office. Raphaelson’s dialogue is usually clever, entertaining and heartfelt. One magnificent Lubitsch touch at the end: as Ameche is dying, he recounts his dream about a pretty girl and then waking he recoils from the unattractive nurse who is trying to take his temperature; since her replacement has arrived, she walks out of the room, stops in front of a mirror, where she arranges her hair and glasses (most unattractive) and walks away; the camera holds on the mirror, and then an attractive young blond nurse moves in front of it, where she arranges her beautiful self, and then turns, opens the door, and walks into Ameche’s room, closing the door after her; Ameche’s voice over then announces that he died happy. A late near masterpiece by a master filmmaker. (2007)

**Heaven Can Wait** 1978 Warren Beatty and Buck Henry (co-writer Elaine May) 2.5 Warren Beatty as reincarnated football player, Julie Christie with little to do as his romantic interest, Jack Warden laboring mightily as Joe’s trainer appearing in his subsequent incarnations, Charles Grodin and Dyan Cannon laboring just as mightily to make Elaine May’s murderous comedy funny, James Mason doing little but lurk in the background as heavenly bureaucrat in charge of a way station to heaven, Buck Henry officious but basically little occupied as subordinate bureaucrat who bungles the job of collecting Beatty for the hereafter. Supernatural comedy that was engrossing in original guise in 1941 (“Here Comes Mr. Jordan”) when war was raging in Europe, and that had a certain charm with the all-star cast when released in 1978; the movie has virtually nothing to do with the Lubitsch classic ‘Heaven Can Wait’ released in 1943. Deals with Beatty’s premature collection for heaven (he is not supposed to die for another 47 years), and then eventually Mason’s successful attempts to find a suitable body for him to return to life on earth (his own has been cremated). Humor and comic acting seem forced throughout – Beatty trying too hard to be boyishly charming as he sprints athletically through the halls of the mansion of his reincarnated identity with a soprano sax in hand, Grodin and Cannon trying too hard to make murder hilarious, Buck Henry not trying hard enough to make celestial officiousness charming, etc. Film, which appeared in the late 70s when feel-good movies were again in vogue after the coming of ‘Star Wars,’ has ‘Rocky’-like pseudo-excitement of Beatty building his borrowed body back up so he can compete as quarterback of the LA Rams (!), wowing the coaches and winning over the Rams players in a scrimmage, and then of course triumphing in the Super Bowl game scoring the winning touchdown in the last minute of play. Romantic scenes with Christie, a labor activist (?) from England are pretty hackneyed and empty. Ending has a certain charm, when Christie and Beatty redevelop a tentative interest in one another, despite Beatty’s having changed his body since they became acquainted. Big disappointment. (2007)

**Heavenly Creatures** 1994 Peter Jackson (New Zealand) 4.0 Kate Winslet (Juliet) in her first role as upper class girl, manic, giddy, excited, imaginative, self-confident, open-faced, joyful, always on the verge of hysteria, Melanie Lynskey (Pauline) as her friend equally lost in the real world but more rebellious, filled with hatred and anger, staring darkly at the camera under her dark eyebrows, Sarah Peirse as the hard-working, good-intentioned mother of Lynskey – she has no idea how to deal with her disaffected daughter. Marvelous imaginative director’s film depicting the two girls’ infamous murder of

Pauline's mother in 1950s New Zealand. Set against the backdrop of the highly conventional, stultifyingly puritanical New Zealand of the 1950s – shown by the deadpan documentary about Christchurch that begins the film (“a greater percentage of the population rides bicycles than any other city in the world except for Copenhagen!”), the maddeningly despotic culture of the girls school (“Sit!”), and the repressive behavior of Peirse. Film reflects the Down Under themes since the 1970s dealing with the limits of civilization and the implications of sexual repression. The two disaffected girls strike up a bosom friendship that morphs into a desperate, almost hysterical connection that feeds on itself, becoming progressively darker until the parents' plan to separate the girls by sending Juliet to South Africa motivates them to murder Peirse (the murder makes no sense since it is hard to imagine how it would prevent their separation). All the characters are interesting and well-drawn – for example Juliet's rather stuffy English professor father, who asks for tranquility, but is shocked out of it by his daughter's behavior. Filming, editing and soundtrack are brilliant. Film opens with the girls running through the woods screaming in terror with blood-streaked faces; film then doubles back to tell us how we got there. The development of the girl's obsessive relationship is told in detailed, colorful sequences, e.g., running through the woods in their underwear and then falling to the ground embracing and giggling and squealing uncontrollably; Pauline trying to find an outlet by having (grotesque) sex with a boyfriend. The girls hate the real (New Zealand, bourgeois) world and escape into medieval fantasy via novels and operas that the two are writing – their imaginary world is depicted through life-size clay figures who dance, listen to the music of Mario Lanza, and then as the imagery gets darker commit violence against real-life figures the girls cannot stand (Pauline's psychiatrist is run through with a sword from the back). Both girls are obsessed with Mario Lanza (overwrought romantic pop culture of the era), and his music (“Be My Love,” “Because”) is often on the soundtrack. The ending sequence as the girls walk with their mother through a Christchurch park and prepare to murder her is accompanied by the gentle and lyrical Humming Chorus from ‘Madama Butterfly,’ the end credits roll to the accompaniment of Lanza's rendition of “You'll Never Walk Alone,” reflecting the girls' thwarted hope of finding love and companionship in this world. The effect is a profound sense of tragedy and pity for the mother, who tried her best but had no clue, and the girls, who committed an act that would haunt them for the rest of their lives. The movie is riveting and holds you attention from beginning to end. (2006)

**Hell or High Water** 2016 David Mackenzie (writer Taylor Sheridan, ‘Sicario’) 4.0 Exciting, insightful bank heist film depicting the culture of the West Texas plains. Chris Pine as good-looking younger brother, who plots the bank heists cleverly; Ben Foster as his dim-witted, high-living criminal brother, who joins him in the adventure; Jeff Bridges as laid-back (apparently), wise-cracking Texas Ranger, who is close to retirement but knows exactly what he is doing; Gil Birmingham as his half-Comanche, half-Mexican (Catholic) sidekick, Alberto, who is the object of Bridges' (sort of) good-humored ethnic teasing; Debrianna Mansini (“Don't you take my tips”) and Margaret Bowman (“What don't you want?”) as two very colorful waitresses that the lawmen run across in restaurants. The film reminds the viewer of the Coen Brothers (‘No Country for Old Men’, ‘Blood Simple’) and ‘The Last Picture Show’ in their depiction of West Texas, except that it is updated for 2015: flat plains extending in all directions; run-down, virtually abandoned small towns where the boys rob small banks; a society afflicted with poverty and exploited by the banks (the boys give generously to the poor as in ‘Bonnie and Clyde’); virtually every male carries a gun when they go to buy groceries, etc. The film begins with a low-key robbery of a small bank in the early morning; Pine has a carefully thought-out plan – hit a single small bank, take only low denomination notes (to avoid serial number tracing, etc.), exchange and bury the cars they use, launder the money by going to an Indian casino: the objective is to get enough cash to pay off the mortgage on Pine's estate (his mother just died and left it to him) so that his two sons will break out the cycle of poverty that has afflicted the family for generations (they have found plentiful oil reserves on the land). The film is exciting, as the lawmen and the locals with concealed permits pursue the brothers: apparently trying to lead the posse away from his brother, the crazy Foster escapes to the top of a barren hill holding off the lawmen with his telescopic-equipped rifle (he kills Alberto recalling Raoul Walsh's ‘High Sierra’); Foster is finally shot to death by Bridges with a borrowed rifle. Pine, who has planned the caper meticulously, escapes without punishment. In a moving epilogue, the retired Bridges confronts Pine outside his refurbished house: although each has killed someone dear to the other, the two

seem to agree not to perpetuate the cycle of violence and to separate permanently nursing their regrets and guilt. The film has pungent, entertaining dialogue and gives a vivid picture of the personalities of the two pairs of men; the viewer experiences the tragedy of the death of Alberto, the intelligence of Bridges, the recklessness of Foster, and the responsible intelligence of Pine. The film plays a bit like a western, what with the omnipresence of guns; the mayhem wreaked by the shooting, the aggressive statements of the gun-toting locals, and the apparent decision of Bridges and Pine at the end not to continue the violence seem to convey a critique of such a confrontational, heavily armed society. Thoughtful, exciting, at times moving film. (2017)

**The Help** 2011 Tate Taylor 3.0 Emma Stone as Skeeter, the dogged, energetic liberal white girl (just graduated from college) encouraging Black maids in 1963 Mississippi to come clean about their lives in the Jim Crow South; Viola Davis quiet and powerful as the first maid she approaches; Octavia Spencer as another, sassy, in-your-face maid; Bryce Dallas Howard as Hilly, the almost incredibly evil and conniving upper middle class white racist lady (AA); Jessica Chastain eye-poppingly buxom as “white trash” girl from Sugar Patch (!) married to a wealthy guy; Mary Steenburgen as editor in New York encouraging Skeeter; not a single important male character. Melodramatic, often amusing women’s picture about Black maids coming clean about their lives in Jackson, Mississippi in the early days of the Civil Rights Movement. The film is set picturesquely among the comfortable ranch-style houses and manicured lawns of the upper middle class and also among the dusty shacks of the Blacks. After she gets a job writing a cleaning column for the local newspaper, Skeeter is the story’s catalyst when she recruits Davis, Spencer, and eventually most of the maids of the city to participate in the interviews for her book. Complications ensue with a few of the maids getting fired and one arrested for a frame-up theft, but since the film is essentially a feel-good melodrama, none of the principal characters are harmed in this time of upheaval; the film ends with the protagonists’ book getting published and the civil rights movement marching on despite the mild tensions produced in Jackson’s Black-white relations. The strong point of the film is the acting: Davis and Spencer stand out in their individual ways, Davis quiet and hurt when she is confronted with prejudice and injustice, Spencer (Minnie, the “best cook in Mississippi”) more easily showing her anger and willing to swim against the tide, go to work for the ostracized Chastain, and strike back against Hilly, her former employer, by tricking her into eating a couple of pieces of her famous chocolate pie containing some of Minnie’s “shit” (several shots of Hilly chewing on the pie and exclaiming about how good it is). The film cleverly dramatizes Mississippi’s strict segregation by showing the white ladies’ disgust at having to share the same toilets with their Black maids: when Hilly constructs a separate toilet for Davis, Skeeter puts a notice in the local newspaper instructing the town’s white residents to bring their spare “commodes” to Hilly’s front yard (instead of their spare coats, which Hilly was expecting). Howard is memorably pungent as the perfectly coiffed, racist, arch-segregationist, conniving, and manipulative Junior Leaguer determined to keep her Black subordinates in their place. Chastain is a bit over-the-top as the good-hearted, big-boobed, and not too bright woman yearning to have a baby: the initiatives she takes to reach out to Hilly are all awkward and backfire spectacularly, especially the time she visits a Junior League fundraiser to assure Hilly that she did not steal her boyfriend but ends up humiliating herself by throwing up on the floor of the ballroom. The white women in the film are spectacularly caricatured, all perfectly done up, simpering, giggling, and following Hilly blindly in her anti-Black crusade. Entertaining film in which no one gets hurt; it should have been shortened by about 20 minutes by cutting Skeeter’s pointless abortive romance with a local guy. (2012)

**Henry and June** 1990 Philip Kaufman 3.0 Fred Ward, Maria de Madeiros, Uma Thurman, High Grant. One of few movies that attempts to make dramatic, significant film while including explicit sexual content. Stand-in models used for explicit soft-core sex scenes that emphasize the sexual experience of love-making. Movie focuses on Anais Nin (Madeiros), who is bored with her husband Grant; she wants to be a great writer, and is convinced that sexual experimentation is the ticket (she also just likes the pleasure of sex, which she says a couple of times). She has stormy affair with Henry Miller (played very well – callous and flat but sensitive -- by Ward), but she ends up staying with her husband; she also pursues June (Thurman), since a lesbian attachment would expand her experience bank, but that relationship doesn’t prosper. Photography is arty and beautiful, but distracts perhaps from

making the movie truly dramatic. Music is pleasing mix of contemporary popular music (seems emphasis on Latin) and French piano, etc. music of composers like Debussy and Satie. Thurman has some good thespian fireworks toward end; Madeiros is totally charming and sexy in her childlike persona with the broad face and big eyes (one presumes her nude body was that of a stand-in). Movie as pretty sexy and interesting experiment, but probably would have been more compelling if it had been grittier and more realistic. (2007)

**Her** 2013 Spike Jonze 2.5 Joaquin Phoenix as Theodore, loner, smarmy amateur of deep feelings, not doing well in near future LA after his breakup with his wife; Rooney Mara as his wife – she carries around more anger than it appears; Kristen Wiig in hilarious cameo voice role as horny woman that comes loudly when she imagines she is being strangled by a cat cadaver; Scarlett Johansson expressive, empathetic, and sexy as the voice of Phoenix’s OS (Operating System) romantic companion; Amy Adams as sympathetic real girl, a confidant of Phoenix he used to date. Futuristic little drama set in a skyscraper-packed Los Angeles that tests that limits of friendship, even of the romantic variety, with a computer program (OS). Loner Phoenix buys the operating system to help him organizes his loser’s life, but when he discovers that his OS – Samantha – is smart, sensitive, sexy, and funny, he develops a relationship with her, has sex (a kind of phone sex through his earphone) with her, and then falls in love. Things are difficult, however: at first Samantha wants to experience a relationship just like a bodied woman, and she even hires a surrogate woman to wear wires and have sex with a very reluctant Phoenix (why she would want to do that is a bit vague), and she develops jealous feelings about other women in Phoenix’s life, such as Adams and Mara. In the end, Samantha develops in ways distinct from most humans – she develops friendship with thousands of other OSs, and even falls in love with “hundreds” of them; she then (sadly) takes leave of Phoenix, telling him that she love him even more when she is being unfaithful (right word?) and drifts off into uncharted electronic space where the perspectives are limitless; the final shot has Phoenix seated on the roof of his apartment snuggling with Adams, a real flesh-and-blood human being that would have a more mainstream understanding of the demands of a romantic relationship. The film’s art direction is interesting: Los Angeles is filled with a blue haze, pedestrians walk trancelike on wide, elevated walkways, the city is filled with odd-shaped skyscrapers of different sizes (what you might expect of LA). Phoenix is at the center of virtually every shot; a lot of slow camera movements to alleviate the boredom, and close-ups in which the camera seeks out the nuances of his feelings. Phoenix has the ultimate “feminine” personality – fascinated by all the shades of his and Samantha’s emotions, suffering from a loneliness and loss that he can’t muster the will to leave behind, making the viewer wish that something would happen.... (2014)

**Here Comes Mr. Jordan** 1941 Alexander Hall (Columbia) 3.0 Robert Montgomery cast against type as Joe, a wise-cracking, New York working-class, saxophone-playing prizefighter; Claude Rains as silver-haired, avuncular (constantly smiling) heavenly bureaucrat in charge of processing the dead; Evelyn Keyes as sweet-hearted young woman that Joe falls in love with; Edward Everett Horton his usual fussy, annoying self as subordinate bureaucrat; James Gleason as Joe’s forever bemused fight manager – he is the most effective source of humor in the film. The original film blanc (chronicling the peregrinations of the premature dead) and one of the better ones avoiding smarminess most of the time. The plot is complicated early by Jordan’s discovery that Joe was not supposed to die until 1991 and by the accidental destruction of Joe’s body from the incompetence of Horton; Jordan finds a substitute in the body of a financial tycoon, Farnsworth, who is just murdered by his wife and her lover (you have to have a fresh body for this to work); he falls in love with Keyes, and already shows signs of moral improvement when he saves her father from prison; Joe (remember, now in somebody else’s body) eventually decides he wants to get back into fighting, and Jordan whisks him to the boxing ring, where another fighter has just been murdered (the third one in the film!); to everyone’s surprise Joe pops up, and KOs his opponent, becoming the world champion. By this time Joe is torn between two passions – his love of boxing and his love for Keyes. The happy ending has him indulging both: he is now in boxing with the body of Murdock, and also his identity, since Jordan erases his memory of previous incarnations as Joe and Farnsworth; and when he accidentally meets Keyes outside the locker room, neither one recognizes the other because of Joe’s transformation, but his soul apparently persists since the chemistry between them



remains strong – they separate, but the viewer knows that they will be together. Love is the most permanent and real thing about your identity. The film drags a bit because of its cuteness and the excessive complications of the narrative – who can see whom, Gleason not sure whether Rains is in the room, other characters recognize Joe as Farnsworth or Murdock, but the viewer and Jordan always see him as Joe (Montgomery), etc. The ideology seems to be: there is life after death, where your identity on earth is preserved; no mention of a hell; there is a halfway house between earth and heaven, where the dead are prepared for admission; major events in one’s life – e.g., your death date – are predetermined (ordained) by fate (God), and you can’t change them, no matter how hard you try (and Joe does). A lot of enthusiasm for the glories of honest boxing, which is dropped for football in Warren Beatty’s subsequent remake. Joe’s moral improvement throughout the film is attractive; the final recognition of the perseverance of love despite changes in physical appearance is moving in a light-hearted way. (2015)

**Hero** 2002 Yimou Zhang (China) 3.0 Jet Li, Maggie Cheung, Zhang Ziyi, Tony Leung. Stunningly visual martial arts film telling part of the tale behind the unification of China under the Qin dynasty; focuses on attempts to assassinate the Qin emperor. Lots of martial arts action with antagonists flying high in combat. Violence though is attenuated and ritualized, since all is focused on aesthetic beauty; there is almost no blood. Incredibly beautiful scenes -- fighting amidst a shower of red and orange leaves, fighting amidst raindrops frozen in time, fighting above a glassy-surface lake with the antagonists dragging their swords in the water making beautiful patterns, calligraphy scribes working away at their desks while thousands of arrows from the Qin army rain around them; sign at end that Nameless has been executed is cut-out pattern of his body surrounded by enormous pincushion of arrows sticking in the wall. Narrative structure is *Rashomon*-like -- there are at least three different narratives of how Nameless (relation to "Man Without a Name" from Clint Eastwood movie?) has killed three potential assassins of the Emperor, each one coded in a different color scheme -- red, white, green, etc. Having the three narratives undercuts the emotional impact of the drama since we never know who is telling the truth; and the narrative finale -- the Emperor sees the necessity of overcoming violence to establish peace and harmony in China (a patriotic message?) -- lacks dramatic punch; after all, we are never sure who is telling the truth. On other hand, the playing of the narratives against one another keeps the puzzle alive and the viewer engaged. Does not have quite the mythic, philosophic, or even poetic stature of *Crouching Tiger*; not enough dramatic force/impact (caring about protagonists, feeling the romantic impulse) to involve the viewer emotionally. (2006)

**L’heure d’été** 2008 Olivier Assayas (France) 3.0 Edith Scob as wealthy matron living in charming although run-down country house filled with valuable art; Charles Berling as her older son who wants to preserve the house and art intact after his mother’s death; Juliette Binoche uncharacteristically blonde and slovenly as sister living as designer in New York; Jérémie Renier as nondescript younger brother who is living in China and declares he needs money. Well-reviewed, perhaps overrated low-key film focusing on family, the passing of generations, and the value of art in the lives of people. The film suffers from a thin plot. Best part of film is the beginning when the whole family congregates at Scob’s house and the viewer is introduced to the charm of life there (the usual French scene of taking their meals on rickety tables on the terrace), the presence of pieces of art (again the usual French bourgeois film trumpeting the nation’s artistic sensibility), and the concern of Berling to keep the house and art intact after his mother’s death for the sake of posterity – the children’s children. After the mother dies, the siblings decide with some hesitation and embarrassment to sell the house but to donate the objets d’art to the Musée Orsay (the museum actually loaned the items to Assayas to make the film). While the first scene of the film had younger children storming rambunctiously around the grounds with their dogs, the last scene has the teenagers congregating with their friends in the abandoned and soon-to-be transferred house celebrating their own party to the accompaniment of loud rap music; Berling’s adolescent daughter, who already has a romantic relationship with her boyfriend, has tears in her eyes as she regrets the death of her grandmother and the disappearance of the house. The film suffers a bit from its slow pace and rather banal subject matter and for certain viewers from its typically French sense of superiority about their lifestyle and values. However it does successfully convey sadness and loss about the impact of death, transition from one intrafamilial generation to the next, and the loss of a way of life that is “doux”

and civilized. Globalization and the intrusion of American values are referenced several times in the film: the family gets together infrequently because they live so far away from one another; two of the siblings live on other continents with little prospect of returning; the children are obviously captivated by American youth culture and when Berling shows his children his beloved Corot paintings hanging in his mother's house, they are unimpressed. So, about all we can do is to continue to do our best; at least the paintings and furnishings are available in the museum. Quiet, genuine film with an undercurrent of sadness. (2012)

**Hi, Mom** 1970 Brian DePalma 2.5 Robert DeNiro as aspiring filmmaker, Jennifer Salt as his girlfriend and then wife, Gerrit Grahame, Charles Durning (cameo), Allen Garfield also in a cameo as comical porno film producer. DePalma in his underground subversive, counter-culture comedy phase before he started making thrillers! DeNiro wants to make a peeping Tom type of film, and although it doesn't work out it leads to hilarious scene in which he tries to stage and time a seduction with Salt in front of the window, but his camera fails. He then gets involved in black television urban guerilla theater. Striking participatory play in which white liberals from suburbs are shown what it is like to be black ("Be Black, Baby!") by having paint smeared on their faces and then actually brutalized including one semi-hysterical woman having her panties ripped off and "raped," but then DeNiro comes in and brutalizes the white niggers like it supposedly really happens in the streets; the most amusing part of the movie is watching the white liberals talk after the play how insightful and useful the play was to them – "great theater", even though they have been terrorized. Then the "guerillas" blow up a public housing building. Tone is comic and in your face. There is no consistent story line aside from looking at something that has to do with DeNiro; many different points of view – objective recording what DeNiro is doing, looking through his camera, watching television that is recording the Black experience theater (talk about confusing!). Director plays a lot with jump cuts and especially fast motion. Whole thing has improvised, informal feeling. DePalma's later work with its artiness and romanticism is quite different, but some connections are there – especially the shocking, terrifying features of the play that seems real (and one suspects the black actors were thoroughly enjoying the humiliation of the white liberals). (2007)

**Hidden Agenda** 1990 Ken Loach (Britain) 3.0 Brad Dourif as American human rights lawyer who is murdered by Ulster security forces toward the beginning of the film; Frances McDormand as girlfriend and colleague of Dourif; Brian Cox as avuncular, persistent, decent police investigator sent from London to defuse the scandal. Costa Gavras-style political thriller about aggressive investigation into the murder of the American lawyer; the narrative eventually turns in a paranoid direction, as Cox uncovers what appears to be a plot by right-wing members of the British Conservative Party to undermine the moderate Edward Heath, discredit the Labour Party and install a more amenable prime minister (the unwitting Margaret Thatcher) In Whitehall. The film starts off well, generating a lot of momentum and excitement in its use of an efficient, documentary-like technique to detail the murder of Dourif, the cooperation of Cox and McDormand in pursuing the initial leads, their success in identifying the guys who pulled the trigger; Cox is an investigative bulldog, who often loses his temper when the Ulster police chief tries to warn him off sensitive territory, but when Cox lets up, McDormand forges ahead aggressively (and sometimes impulsively) in her mission to uncover the full extent of the conspiracy. In this portion of the film the viewer is on the edge of his seat following the efficient little interrogations and the moving of the two principals around Belfast. In the last half hour, however, the style switches to long conversations (between Cox and two top-ranking British politicians including Alec Nevin played by Patrick Kavanagh) that detail the fanciful political skullduggery behind the scenes, and the cover provided by the higher-ups for the political assassinations of mainly IRA militants committed by the Ulster Constabulary. In the end, even Cox gives up, insisting to McDormand that a complete revelation of the system behind Dourif's killing is impossible and that they need to be satisfied with the punishment of the men who pulled the trigger; an angry and unrepentant McDormand boards a plane back to the USA. The film shows Loach's suspicion of the modern state, even when couched as a democracy as in Britain, and his penchant for conspiracy theories. Effective political thriller that could have been better with a more realistic approach, as in Costa-Gavras' "Z". (2013)

**Hidden Figures** 2016 Theodore Melfi 2.5 Shamelessly manipulative Hollywood-style movie about three African-American women active in the early, segregated days of NASA's space program. Taraji Henson cute, emotional, competent as mathematical whiz that checks trajectory calculations; Octavia Spencer the dullest of the three as the older woman specializing in administration and wanting to be promoted to supervisor; Janelle Monáe as younger woman who breaks the color barrier to go to an all-white school to become an engineer; Kevin Costner standoffish, no-sense administrator, who is sympathetic to the plight of the Black women; Kirsten Dunst as starchy office manager, who finally comes around to sympathy for her Black employees; Mahershala Ali in sentimental role as Monáe's goody-two-shoes love interest. The film follows the civil rights struggles of the three women through the completion of the John Glenn Mercury program; at the end all state that they are ready to go to the moon – heck, we are already there! The film is chock full of personal triumphs. The US gets the man into orbit and passes the Russians in the race for space. Monáe gets a court order from a reluctant Virginia judge and enrolls in the school; Spencer finally gets the respect of Dunst and receives her formal promotion to supervisor and prepares her girls for work in the new world of the IBM computer; Henson overcomes bureaucratic obstacles by attracting the loyalty of Kostner, becomes a valuable calculator, goes on to play a key role in the success of the Apollo program, and finds a very sweet husband to assure the future of her three daughters. The film has a consistent rah-rah tone promoting American patriotism and the women's pursuit of their basic civil rights. Running and being in a hurry seem a consistent pattern: e.g., several times Henson has to run a half mile from the flight planning building back to her old building because she has to use only the colored restroom; Costner then pleases the audience by taking a sledge hammer to the racist bathroom signs and decreeing the end of segregated bathrooms. Every character is essentially nice, including the ones that initially are dubious about the advancement of the Black ladies; no one has ever deserved fair treatment more than these ladies. Sunny optimistic film that leaves the impression that all is essentially well in America. (2017)

**High Anxiety** 1977 Mel Brooks 2.5 Mel Brooks; Harvey Korman; Dick Van Patten; Cloris Leachman as Nurse Diesel is hilariously crabbed and disquieting with torpedo breasts and S&M habits; Madeline Kahn is hyper neurotic – “I am so close to my menstrual cycle, I could scream!”; she is as usual horny – when Brooks in a phone call is gasping from being strangled, she thinks it is a sex crank call, at first objecting but then coming around. Tribute film to the subject matter, filming techniques, and famous scenes of Alfred Hitchcock. The references to Hitchcock's films are legion. Vertigo: Brooks has serious vertigo ('high anxiety') – even with spiraling background. Spellbound: Brooks arrives at institute to take over from dead director. Northwest: Brooks' name is Thorndike and is paged in the hotel when he gets to SF; Brooks framed for murder that happens in front of dozens of witnesses in the lobby of the hotel. Psycho: Brooks in shower, valet looms through curtain, stabs with newspaper, quit cuts of different parts of Brooks' body (washing his armpits!), popping curtain hooks, newsprint water down drain, cut to eye and camera pulls back from face; professor seated in swivel chair facing away from camera, Brooks swivels to discover... 39 Steps: woman arrives breathless in Brooks' room; Brooks asked to kiss girl to throw off outside person (2x). Birds: jungle gym fills up with pigeons while Brooks is sitting in Golden Gate Park; the birds then chase him and ... crap all over him. Camera slowly tracking to a window, through which we can see people talking inside, and then instead of dissolving through it, breaks it! And then at the end, when Brooks is climbing into the bridal bed with Kahn, the camera pulls back ... then breaks through the wall and away from the house! Dramatic symphonic music punctuates key developments; once it is played by LA symphony passing on a bus; several passages with Herrmann's syncopated muted trumpets or cackling clarinets as the action progresses. Film ends with recreation of tower scene in Vertigo: Brooks hilariously is cured of his vertigo by psychiatrist (talking cure – he remembers the fights his parents had about him) as he hangs from a stair; he rushes to the top to save the victim from being thrown over the edge, and Nurse Diesel plummets to her death on the rocks. Some of the gags appear to be based on television or non-Hitchcock films (e.g., the villain with the “tin teeth” from the Bond movie). Usual lack of consistency and good taste expected in Brooks' films. Interesting mainly for Hitchcock fans looking for parodies. (2005)

**High Fidelity** 2000 Stephen Frears 3.0 John Cusack as the heart of the movie, since he is half talking to the camera about his past and explaining the present, and half acting his part; Jack Black pretty hilarious as the intolerant and in-your-face rock music-obsessed assistant in Cusack's record shop; Todd Louiso as the other obsessed assistant except that he is shy and nerdy; Iben Hjelje as Cusack's girlfriend's whose breakup at the beginning of the film sets off the plot; Joan Cusack as a gossip who supports Iben; Tim Robbins not so impressive as Hjelje's new New Agey boyfriend; Catherine Zeta-Jones as one of Cusack's old – flashback – girlfriends. Set in Chicago, translated from the London of Nick Hornby's book. Set against the backdrop of with-it rock music, which fills the soundtrack and occupies the minds of especially the two store assistants. Film is essentially a romantic comedy that kicks off the new subgenre of slacker romantic comedy (thanks to David Denby), whereby the unambitious male – Cusack, who has success with women but can't seem to keep one – is pursuing a more accomplished and mature female mate. Film involves primarily Cusack reflecting on his past "top five" breakups (he loves to comment on the action in terms of top five lists), gropes his way toward maturity and taking responsibility for his actions (it is a long, hard road!), and then eventually relinks with Hjelje in what one hopes will be a mature, faithful (he had previously cheated on her several times) relationship. Film is entertaining; and benefits immensely from Cusack's expertise in conveying his character honestly and convincingly. The obsessive focus on rock music is a bit off-putting for the non-rock lover. The film seems to have been the first of the slacker romances that have had great success since 2000 – 'School of Rock', '40-Year-Old Virgin', 'Knocked Up', etc. Show Frears' great flexibility in making successful movies in many genres, British and American. (2007)

**High Noon** 1951 Fred Zinnemann 3.5 Gary Cooper, Grace Kelly, Lloyd Bridges, Katy Jurado, Otto Kruger, Lon Chaney, Thomas Mitchell. Classic western about courage, doing your duty in the face of impossible odds. Cooper decides to stand up for himself, his bride and his town when Frank Miller returns from prison. Cooper walks endlessly through town trying to convince townspeople to join him in standing up to dangerous Miller (gets a little tiresome), but despite orderly town hall-style debate in church, no one signs up; most people are just afraid and don't want to die, although there is some personal resentment of Will in town (manifested in the bar scene). Church scene has individuals saying that Frank Miller is Cooper's personal problem, not the town's responsibility, and that the most important thing is that the town be prosperous and grow, and that a gunfight in the streets would deter economic development. The refusal of the town to support Cooper appears to be a critique of actors and writers in Hollywood, who hid their heads when they should have stood up to defend Hollywood workers like screenwriter Carl Foreman when were harassed by the House Committee on Un-American Activities. At the beginning of the film Cooper has just married Quaker Kelly, who decides to leave him because of the impending violence, but she converts in the climactic shootout when she shoots one of the outlaws in the back – love is stronger than religious belief; she helps Cooper a lot in defeating the four bad guys. Jurado has uninteresting subplot, in which she decides to abandon town because it has no future – they won't even stand up to bad guys. Lloyd Bridges is set up as callow ambitious coward – a contrast with the noble, restrained and courageous Cooper. Cooper's performance matches his low-key acting skills; he is inexpressive as usual, but that matches his character. Shot more or less in real time, as camera refers to clocks several times in the course of the movie, building up suspense; pictures of clocks gets bigger toward end to increase drama. Ever so often, the editing cuts to the Miller's assistants waiting at the station for their boss, and with shots of empty tracks extending into distance (shot in Sonora, CA!). Best part of movie is last 15 minutes. Wonderful editing in the waiting scene synchronizes the beat of the music, the ticking of the clock, and the editing from scene to scene (individual faces, men cowering in the bar, the empty streets, the clock, an empty chair, the guys at the station, etc.), just before the whistle blows when the clock strikes twelve! The famous crane shot of Cooper standing alone in the street expresses his courage, his aloneness, and the cosmic morality of his action (duty above all). Shootout is exciting with protagonists dodging from building to building, fire in the livery stables, the surprise shot in the back from Grace Kelly, and the final shooting of Miller with again the help of Kelly. Music is based largely on Tiomkin's song, either sung by Tex Ritter, or treated symphonically as in the final shootout sequence. Good suspense until the arrival of the train: makes the action exciting. Beautifully photographed and edited; and wonderfully restored. (2005)

**High Plains Drifter** 1973 Clint Eastwood 2.5 Clint Eastwood as the mysterious Stranger riding into town at the beginning of the film; Verna Bloom overacting as the town slut. Rather bizarre western that is part ghost story, part revenge drama, part surrealist anti-western. Eastwood rides into the beautiful landscape of Lago situated in most picturesque fashion on the shores of Mono Lake – all blue water and sky, high mountains when we are looking westward, the town built by the studio on white sand. Very difficult at first to understand where the story is taking us: the townspeople hire Eastwood to organize them against three ex-cons heading back for revenge, but his actions – raping at least one woman, killing close to a dozen men, instructing the authorities to confiscate the property of townspeople, having the townspeople take target practice as dummies race by on wagons, building picnic tables for an apparent reception, putting a 'Welcome Home, Boys' sign at the entrance to the town, painting the whole town red-orange and crossing out the 'Lago' in the town sign and replacing it with 'Hell' – they all turn the townspeople against one another, creating enormous internal dissension. Bizarre happenings abound – the above, the rape of the town slut, befriending a midget and making him sheriff of the town. It gradually emerges through two flashbacks (Eastwood [was he there?]) and the midget [he was]) that the root of Eastwood's mission is ruthless revenge for the heartless murder with bullwhips of the former town marshal, who had cried out "Damn you all to hell!" before he died. We are thus set up for the entrance of the ex-cons into town: it turns out that they were the actual murderers; they manage to shoot up the town good, before Eastwood steps in and dispatches them all mercilessly and appropriately (usually with a bullwhip). Eastwood acts like some pitiless Old Testament avenger; since it is never clear who he is, he comes across as some sort of ghost or angel of retribution setting right the moral balance. The film is the ultimate anti-western: the gunfighter is no hero on the side of right, the townspeople are not hard-working and industrious by any standard, civilization is certainly not brought to the town by the protagonist; only the scenery seems to live up to the tradition of the classical western. (2008)

**High Sierra** 1941 Raoul Walsh (wr. John Huston) 3.5 Humphrey Bogart, Ida Lupino, Arthur Kennedy, Joan Leslie, Henry Travers. Famous movie about Indian farm boy outlaw Bogart (Roy Earle) pardoned from prison in order to pull off one more job in LA (?) area? Strongest part of movie is scenery – Eastern Sierra outside Mt. Whitney, around the fishing lodge where crooks are waiting for the job to come down, but especially the finale: chase up the Mt. Whitney Road with towering spires in the background, and then the stand-off on the flanks of the Sierra – all in crisply restored black and white print. Much of the middle part of the movie is devoted to establishing Bogart's decency, particularly in his kind almost avuncular courtship of teenager (Leslie), and then emerging relationship with Marie (Lupino). He is a good fellow, who just wants to pull off one more job so he can settle down (although unfortunately Leslie rejects him); he is kind to animals (the dog that attaches himself to him, and obviously is intended to signify that Bogart is fated to destruction); and he struggles to establish peace and decency in his little gang. Improbable that hard-boiled, experienced criminal like Roy would put up with Lupino, the two incompetent, ill-tempered confederates, and even the dog accompanying him on the resort heist! Finale is pretty convincing and dramatic. Bogart brought out of hiding by his friend/nemesis dog, and is then shot dead by sharpshooter. Lupino emotes convincingly, and appears really to be in love with Roy. After Roy is dead, script declares him to be "crashed out" and "free." Not religious, but Malrauxian: life is heroic struggle; adversity threatens to crush us; the only sure solution is to escape, to die, preferably with heroism. Gangster style picture that ends more as a Western. Walsh remakes in 1948 as 'White Heat' with Cagney on top of the gas tank. (2005)

**High Society** 1955 Charles Walters 3.0 All-Star Cast! Grace Kelly as society girl ice queen who has to learn to loosen up; Bing Crosby miscast (30 years older than Kelly!) as her ex-husband who is still interested in her; Frank Sinatra as Spy magazine reporter sent to cover Kelly's wedding to a society guy – Sinatra is supposed to have chemistry with...; Celeste Holm as Sinatra's photographer – almost rivals Kelly's glamour; Louis Armstrong as himself to provide a jazz accompaniment to the goings on; Louis Calhern in smaller role as Kelly's uncle. Landmark movie – last film of Kelly before she tripped off to Monaco; Crosby and Sinatra together in a film for the only time; opportunity to watch Satchmo in Technicolor; one of the last scores of Cole Porter. Very mediocre film except for the celebrity cast and

the music. The plot is based on the ‘Philadelphia Story’, but it lacks the zaniness and good humor of the 1940 movie. Much of the cast seems to be just going through the motions. Sinatra and Holm hold our interest, although their decision to marry at the end is unconvincing – they have no chemistry! Crosby is his usual avuncular self (and he is supposed to be an ardent lover?); and Kelly, although classically beautiful, does not cut it as a screwball comedienne – her “darling” routines at the beginning of the film are stiff and unconvincing; her “melting” scenes toward the end with Sinatra (!) and then Crosby however are memorable. The score is perhaps not Porter’s best, but even in substandard numbers such as “You’re Sensational” (Sinatra) it is fun to listen to Porter’s lyrics. On the other hand, there are excellent numbers; The famous ballad “True Love” sung by Crosby to Kelly in his yacht; the outstanding Crosby-Sinatra duet “Well Did You Evah” is amusing, lively, and well-acted; the evocative Crosby number with Armstrong and his orchestra – “Jazz, Jazz, Jazz”; and the equally amusing and lively Sinatra-Holm duet around the fancy dinner table “Do you want to be a Millionaire?” The film works much better as a musical and a fashion show than as a comedy; just amusing rather than biting or satirical. (2008)

**High Tide** 1987 Gillian Anderson (Australia) 3.5 Judy Davis as Lilly, Jan Adele as Bet, her mother in law, and Claudia Karvan as Lilly’s daughter Allie. Marvelous “woman’s” film about drifting, irresponsible back-up dancer who encounters her long-lost daughter in small Australian town; the issues become – what exactly happened (Lilly’s adored surfer husband died and she then left her baby daughter with his mother); will Allie go off with her mother; will Bet accept it; will her mother rise to the occasion? Set among poor people living in trailer parks, driving ice cream trucks, working in fish factories in a port town in New South Wales -- lots of old cars (Lilly has a Valiant), utilitarian buildings, amateur showbiz productions in ugly social halls, but beautiful shots of the shore and the beach (recalling sunny days in Washington state); a lot of road shots since the characters tend to have shallow roots, especially Lilly. Acting of three main characters is exceptional: Lilly is the rather lost, even alcoholic mom with a guilty conscience but who has the courage to reconnect with her daughter and renew her responsibility; Bet is a very large, fun-loving older woman (she has a boyfriend and a one-night stand with a country western singer), full of anger toward Lilly, but who has given her life to her granddaughter but then has to accept her departure; Allie, very engaging surfing 14-year-old (film begins with her kissing her ‘boyfriend’ innocently behind a building) who loves her grandmother but drawn irresistibly to her mother. Film has a wonderful tone of mixing serious (melo-) drama with comic scenes. Two beautiful traveling shots: one leaves dejected grandmother in fish factory, tracks backwards through parking lot, and then onto open road with traffic lines passing (departure); the other when we are not sure whether mother will rejoin her daughter in a restaurant or drive off and leave her, and the camera tracks forward through the restaurant to the back of Allie’s head and then shows us Lilly putting her hands over her daughter’s eyes – she stayed! (2007)

**Highly Dangerous** 1950 Roy Baker (Britain) 2.5 Margaret Lockwood rather prim and matronly, perfectly coiffed and made up entomologist, but with a taste for espionage and adventure; Dane Clark as self-confident, outspoken American journalist, who takes Margaret under his wing; Marius Goring as vaguely menacing, ubiquitous police chief in Communist Balkan country (seems a bit like Romania); Wilfrid Hyde-White looking thin as British chargé d’affaires; Naunton Wayne as British spy chief. Written by Eric Ambler. Music by Richard Addinsell. Far-fetched but entertaining British comic spy thriller that seems largely modeled on Lockwood’s ‘The Lady Vanishes’ – Clark takes the place of Michael Redgrave in rescuing Lockwood. The two carry on light-hearted banter in the manner of Hitchcock safe thrillers until the end of the film when of course their relationship becomes romantic to the accompaniment of Addinsell’s solo violins. The East European location (seems Romanian) is generally well done – realistic looking street sets and lots of hills and pine trees when the two are trying to break into the secret laboratories. The narrative has many incredible moments, such as succeeding in breaking into the laboratories and Lockwood’s being subjected to interrogation under the influence of a truth serum – which however impels her to imagine she is the fictional radio spy that her nephew adores (thus she is able to escape incrimination). Film ends with a very long escape sequence, at the end of which Clark and Lockwood are able to escape Goring’s clutches by disguising themselves as peasants on the train (!). Amusing ending when the two encounter British customs: the insects begin to eat one another, and Clark

and Lockwood have to run to the restaurant to get some sugar from feisty Joan Haythorne, who adds to the uproar with her protestations that the sugar is “only for human consumption” (another Hitchcockian moment). The film ends with Lockwood’s film kiss on the lips of Clark, when he threatens to publish the story they have just encountered – they will live happily ever after. (2014)

**Hilary and Jackie** 1998 Anand Tucker (Britain) 3.5 Emily Watson as cello prodigy Jacqueline du Pre who died of multiple sclerosis at 42; Rachel Griffiths as her overshadowed younger sister Hilary, who co-wrote the memoir upon which the film is based; James Frain as a somewhat miscast Argentine pianist Daniel Barenboim. Gripping and harrowing film about the life of cello prodigy Jacqueline from beginnings to success and fame to a terrible progressive decline from multiple sclerosis; the film focuses on the costs of being the gifted artist – is insanity the price one pays? But it also focuses on the love-rivalry relationship between Jacqueline and her sister who plays the flute, but decides to give up her career when she is outshone by Jackie. Jackie is a cello genius, demanding and egocentric to the point of psychotic. She plays her instrument with great abandon, head and body swaying completely absorbed by the expressive experience; but she sometimes hates her cello and imagines that it is talking back to her and criticizing her during her nights alone; when she senses that MS will end her career, she appears at sister Hilary’s farm and demands that Hilary allow her to have sex with her husband. Hilary had married her true love (“he makes me feel special”) one thinks mainly because she wanted to escape the artistic dominance of her sister and the hostility of her flute teacher (who can’t stand the way she bobs and weaves when she plays). She is passive and “co-dependent” to her sister, and has great difficulty refusing her anything she wants, including the body of her husband – painful home movies show Jackie playacting wife for Hilary’s husband and mother to her children. Film records honestly (with somewhat gory detail) Jackie’s physical decline and death because of multiple sclerosis; Barenboim remains faithful, but is not present when she dies. Film is interestingly organized into three movements: the first with the two sisters bonded in eternal love – their gambol singing a nursery rhyme on a beautiful beach is memorable; then the middle section with the first part from Hilary’s point of view including the business between Jackie and Hilary’s husband and a second part that goes back and shows what happens to Jackie (the beginning of her disease) before her breakdown; and then her decline and death. Film is very gripping evoking the tragedy of human life with love violated by death, and perhaps the price that “extraordinary” people must pay for their fame. The direction is occasionally over the top – the camera circling too enthusiastically the playing musicians, strange sound effects and rapid cutting to depict Jackie’s deterioration. Riveting, sad, shocking film. (2007)

**L'histoire d'Adèle H.** 1975 France: François Truffaut 2.5 Isabelle Adjani as Adele H., the daughter of the famous Victor Hugo, in stony Halifax, Nova Scotia, in search of her betrothed; Bruce Robinson as Lt. Pinson of the British Army, too callow and impassive to be the heartless seducer he is pictured as; Sylvia Marriott as the kindly landlady who takes Adele in; a host of forgettable, mostly English speaking actors. Slow-moving, often frustrating historical film following Adele in her persistent, hopeless attempt to get a British army officer to give up his independence and marry her; most of the Adele’s pursuit takes place in a claustrophobic Halifax, where a surprising number of people speak pretty good French; the last short act takes place in Barbados (actually filmed in Dakar). Adjani, the only actor in the film worth watching, begins radiantly beautiful with her marble-like face framed by severe, pent up hair and dressed in the voluminous clothes of the 1850s; by the end of the hour and a half she is wandering through the streets of Georgetown in a filthy torn gown and her hair flowing dirty over her shoulders. We observe her change from a woman inexorably following her passion to one mentally disturbed, muttering to herself and not sure who she is. She tries all sorts of tricks to maintain her connection to the lieutenant: accost him whenever she can, visit the father of the lieutenant’s intended bride to persuade him to break off the engagement, send a prostitute to comfort him, consult a magician about the possibility of using his power to force the lieutenant to fall back in love with her (falls through after consuming ten minutes of the viewer’s time), follow him to Barbados with the money her loving father sent her for her passage back home. Through much of the film the viewer enjoys the beauty and the acting prowess of Adjani, who ably represents the young woman’s steely determination and then her descent into self-neglect and madness. The film however suffers from a thoroughly predictable linear plot

with very little suspense, since there is never any possibility that the distracted Pinson will return to his former conquest; Adele just keeps trying until she finally goes insane; she is then taken charge of by a kindly Barbados woman who returns her to her father, and, as narrated in the obsessive Truffaut-style, Adele lives the rest of her long life a recluse in France writing about her experience (used as the basis for this film). What could have been a tribute to noble romantic passion – the favorite French subject of ‘amour fou’ – ends more or less with a whimper. (2012)

**La historia oficial** 1985 Luis Puenzo (Argentina) 3.0 Norma Aleandro as high school profesora in 1983 who has an adopted five-year-old daughter (thus adopted during the military dictatorship) whom she loves with a passion; Hector Alterio as her husband, a prosperous businessman in Buenos Aires who has intimate connections with the generals, etc. who ran the military government and who consorts with suspicious-acting Americans. The best movie on the effects of the military terror on Argentina. Instead of focusing on the sufferings of the “desaparecidos”, the film focuses on a couple who have profited from the terror, since it gradually emerges that the child comes from a student couple who had been executed. The film follows Aleandro’s obsession with finding out the truth, even though it is against her interest; she eventually meets (an annoying) woman who thinks that she is the grandmother, and the two have several scenes together. The film is not always plot focused – much of it focuses on revealing the character and the lifestyles of the principals. The drama centers on the effect of Aleandro’s obsession on her and her husband and on their relationship, which becomes increasingly tense (he understandably wants her to leave well enough alone), until he beats her up, and after embracing him, she walks out the door. The film always holds one’s interests, although it degenerates somewhat into soap opera melodrama toward the end. It is however engrossing and makes vivid the effects of the dictatorship on Argentine bourgeois society. (2008)

**Historias intimas** 2002 Argentina: Carlos Sorín 3.5 Javier Lombardo as virtually only professional actor, the rest of the roles played by amateurs in unaffected, natural style. Marvelous small movie about three unrelated characters who journey from the Patagonian village of Fitz Roy to San Julián: the poor girl is overjoyed at the prospect of winning a food processor (even though she doesn’t have electricity in her house); the lonely traveling salesman talks constantly as he prepares a gift for a young woman customer he has fallen for; and the principal character, an old man – almost blind and sometimes lapsing into trances – leaves in search of his dog, Mala Cara, who had “left him” three years before. The stories are distinct, but delicately interwoven. They are followed with a lot of gentle humor and modest observations. The poor woman is trusting, simple, quiet and very shy; the bond between her and her baby is touching. The lonely salesman is a loquacious mystifier trying to sell slimming plasters made in Sweden, but he is genuinely excited about the prospect of winning the young woman’s hand; he takes a birthday cake in the shape of a soccer ball for his beloved’s son, but he has a housewife on the way turn it into a turtle when he suddenly becomes convinced that the woman’s daughter is a girl. The old man reveals to a new friend that Mala Cara had left him because he had hit him with a car and then left him in the road; he thus feels very guilty. All the endings are upbeat with gentle twists. The poor girl trades her useless food processor for a tacky make-up kit (it is packaged in the shape of a turtle!) and looks at it cluelessly in the bus on her way back to Fitz Roy; the salesman finds that his proposed mate is available, and although he is too shy and clumsy to take advantage, she encourages him and we know he will return; the old man finds a dog he insists is Mala Cara (he almost certainly is not), and he returns with him on the same bus as the poor girl, his conscience now at rest. Beautiful photography with a lot of poetic shots of the long blacktop stretching across the expansive Patagonia steppe. The characters are all sweet, humble, unassuming people, who spontaneously help out their fellows in need. The viewer is upset when the film ends after only an hour and a half. A realist film with an affecting touch of poetry. It is a tribute to the soul of the Argentine people. (2007)

**A History of Violence** 2005 David Cronenberg 4.0 Viggo Mortensen in excellent performance as ex-mobster Tom Stall (former name Joey), who before movie begins has found a new life (redemption) in small town America with family, but then his past catches up with him, Mario Bello also in good performance as his thin, sexy wife who must face into who he really is, Ed Harris in great role as vicious,



scarred mobster enemy who catches up with Viggo, William Hurst also in hard-hitting role as humorous yet vicious brother who invites Joey (Viggo) back to Philadelphia and tries to have him killed. Outstanding movie on the role of violence in American culture. Although appearing to be pacific small-town diner operator, Mortensen turns out to be a ferocious killer himself: he reveals his skills unexpectedly when confronted by two pathological killers in his diner; then he (with the help of his son) kills all three mobsters trying to take him back to Philadelphia; then five more men when his brother tries to kill him in Hurst's mansion in Philadelphia (we applaud when he shoots his brother cold-bloodedly in the forehead) – ten men all told, and without much help! The proneness to violence also begins to spread to loved ones, as Viggo's son, Zach, beats the shit out of a high school bully who has been picking on him, insults his father verbally, gets hit by his father, and then shoots Ed Harris in the back trying to kill his dad. The social and cultural environment is perfect – small town America where everybody knows everybody, and everyone smiles and helps their neighbor; in the beginning, the seemingly perfect family, two parents together, two kids, one boy and one girl, spouses obviously happy together – wife “kidnaps” Viggo and seduces him with cheerleader costume; they obviously adore one another. But there is no escaping violence – first when the two killers roll into town by chance, and then Mortensen's past rising up to pull him back to his mobster roots when he is recognized because of the notoriety of his action. The point appears to be that we are all complicit in the violence. The killings are staged so that they are exciting and satisfying. We are delighted that Tom defends himself and his family so well, that his killing prowess is over the top; the viewer enjoys the killings; they are staged with all the accouterments of violent action movies – thumping sound effects, mangled faces and hands, slowly spreading pools of blood, and always justified in self defense. After his return from the hecatomb at his brother's house, Tom approaches the dinner table in Indiana where his three family members are seated eating: in eloquent scene in which not a word is spoken, Cronenberg cuts from face to face showing that the family is accepting him back – they also are complicit: the little girl brings a place setting for her dad, Zach passes him the meat loaf, and Maria Bello looks at him silently and acceptingly with a tear in her eye; fade out. Perhaps only misstep was rape scene on steps toward end of movie; Tom seems to think that having forcible sex with his wife would somehow reestablish their tie, but this additional manifestation of violence seems only to alienate her further – for the time being. The film is non-stop action in the first half; then a lull focusing on Viggo's and Maria's relationship (sometimes dull), but then slam-bang out of almost nowhere in final carnage. (2008; 2017)

**History of the World, Part I** 1981 Mel Brooks 2.0 Mel Brooks appearing (unfortunately if you don't go for the extreme ham) in several of the sketches; various cameos from Sid Caesar, Dom Deluise, Madeline Kahn (severely underused), Cloris Leachman, Harvey Korman, etc. Series of unrelated comic sketches that include: parody of the ape scene from '2001: A Space Odyssey'; a caveman sequence that focuses on the invention of art; an Old Testament scene that focuses on Moses descent from Mt. Sinai with the tablets of the 15, oops, 10 commandments; a long Roman sequence that has a highly stupid plot, but which ends with a clever send-up of the Last Supper; an over-the-top Hollywood musical number making fun of the Spanish Inquisition; an interminable French Revolution sequence whose only virtue is the display of female breasts; a final sequel teaser that includes Hitler doing figure skating. Most of the comedy is sophomoric, offensive, and stupid: lots of anachronism jokes focusing on commercial practices that would never occur in Roman times and especially on transferring contemporary Jewish personalities and situations to ancient times; myriad potty jokes and sex jokes; the spectacular bad-taste musical number about the Inquisition that attempts to recreate the magic of the 'Springtime for Hitler' number but which fails for lack of musical inspiration. Some of the sketches evoke a chuckle, or even a laugh: the '2001' sequence has the apes discovering masturbation; Moses originally appears with 15 commandments, but when he drops and breaks them, he admits that he has only 10; Brooks bursts into the room where Jesus and the Apostles are celebrating the Last Supper, and then Leonardo da Vinci shows up to paint a group portrait, which is presented as an amusing replica of the real painting; King Louis (Brooks) and a courtier play a game of chess in which the pieces are full size figures dressed in ridiculous costumes and the move commands are shouted by megaphone. Hard to sit through. (2012)

**The Hitch-Hiker** 1953 Ida Lupino 3.0 Predictable, well-directed B-movie thriller featuring American and Mexican police chasing fugitive and the duo he has kidnapped through Mexico. William Talman in good performance as low-life psychopath with slurred speech on the lam; Edmond O'Brien and Frank Lovejoy as two guys from El Centro on a fishing trip – they are hijacked by Talman to take him to Santa Rosalia, where he hopes to take a ferry across the Gulf of California to Guaymas. The film is a cop-chase thriller: the Mexican police, who cooperate willingly and efficiently in the pursuit, keep the pressure on with car, helicopter, and airplane pursuit. The screenplay maintains tension with fairly inventive successive crises: the car has a blowout; a Mexican couple passes in a Model A Ford; a policeman in a Nash picks up the trail; the car breaks down so that the trio has to walk to Santa Rosalia; Talman manages to stay a few steps ahead of his pursuers by listening to convenient updates on the car radio, which has no trouble picking up English-language news programs. Since there is little doubt that Talman will be caught, most of the suspense comes from uncertainty about what will happen to O'Brien and Lovejoy. The depiction of Talman's psychology is vivid. He is early introduced as a psychopath, who kills easily: he murders three people in the beginning of the film (Lupino does not allow the viewer to see his face until he hijacks O'Brien's car). Throughout the journey he seems to enjoy making Lovejoy and O'Brien suffer from the uncertainty about surviving: for example, he forces O'Brien to hold a target can while he and Lovejoy take target practice. Talman is bitter: he says he was mistreated by his parents, and that since nothing was ever given to him, he has had to take whatever he could get. The final showdown comes in Santa Rosalia, where Talman is identified from a Wanted poster ("Buscado") and then corralled by the Mexican police. The movie was filmed in the rocky hills outside Lone Pine, California; Mexican characters are sparse, but usually treated with respect. The screenplay perhaps suffers from unrealistic situations, e.g., Why doesn't Talman just kill the two Americans and drive himself into Mexico? Somehow he is able to maintain the upper hand even though the two men are not tied and are often left alone to speak with one another. Interesting, but perhaps the appeal has been damaged by similar films with more punch. (March 2018)

**Hitchcock** 2012 Sacha Gervasi 3.0 Anthony Hopkins with absolute mastery of Hitchcock's quirks and mannerisms (but with a bit much facial prosthesis) portraying the Master in a difficult stretch during the preparation and filming of 'Psycho'; Helen Mirren weighty and true, although a bit glammed up, as his wife and amanuensis Alma Reville; Scarlett Johansson bodacious with blonde wig (?) and dressed in red as Janet Leigh; Danny Huston (son of John) as smarmy would-be Hollywood screenwriter that makes some moves on Alma; Jessica Biel a bit too Top Modelish to play Vera Miles; James D'Arcy as Tony Perkins; Ralph Macchio as Joseph Stefano, the film's writer; Richard Portnoy as the Paramount CEO, forever frustrated by his dealings with Hitchcock. Set in the Paramount Studio and in the poshest neighborhood of West LA, the semi-fictitious film chronicles the efforts of Hitchcock to get 'Psycho' on the screen. The essence of the film is that Hitchcock is going through an emotional crisis, when he imagines that Hollywood and the public have lost their esteem for him, he is obsessed with his domination of his blonde starring ladies, whose portraits he pores over in his study, and – most disturbingly – he is visited in his dreams by a Wisconsin mass murderer, who seems to be injecting murderous thoughts into his mind. 'Hitch' (he tells everyone to call him just 'Hitch' and to drop the 'Cock') is obsessed with the horror story of the film (Barney Balaban describes it as "A queer murders a woman while dressed in his mother's clothes") and he agrees to finance the low-budget feature himself when Paramount refuses him. Although one must be aware of the fictional liberties taken in the script, the film is riveting for a Hitchcock fan, who will be pleased with Hopkins' impressions, the interpretation of Hitchcock's character as mentally disturbed, the behind-the-scenes look at the making of 'Psycho' – Hitchcock shouting at Leigh as she drives with the projection screen burns out in the background; Hitchcock seizing the killer's knife and threatening a terrified Leigh in the shower to make the scene more effective; Hitchcock's insisting on filming the shower scene without music and losing the argument (Bernard Herrmann is never mentioned); Hitchcock and Alma hovering over an editing machine to put together the final cut, eliminating a few frames that showed Leigh blinking after she was supposed to be dead; Hitchcock's delight when he hears the horrified reactions of the premiere audience to the shower scene. The other core of the film is a probably fictional account of Hitchcock's alienation from his wife – he would rather be with Grace Kelly and he lashes out against actresses that don't follow his instruction,

e.g., Miles, who decided a few years before to have a baby rather than appear in 'Vertigo'; but all is straightened out in the end – Alma has a near-miss affair with Danny Huston, but after an effective angry speech lamenting Hitchcock's boorishness and ignoring of her contributions to his films, Hitchcock softens, recognizes her accomplishments at the premiere of 'Psycho'; and they will apparently live happily ever after. The nightmare flashback sequences about the mass murderer are either unnecessary or they go way too far in suggesting that Hitchcock was a psychopath himself (don't we get a view of Mirren's neck as if it were waiting to be cut or guillotined?), and Alma's concocted romance works better for Mirren than it does for Hitchcock's wife. Nevertheless, entertaining and colorful look at the subject. (2013)

**The Hitchhiker** 1953 Ida Lupino 2.0 William Talmon in a gutsy performance dominates the film with his deformed face as a sociopathic killer murdering drivers who pick him up as a hitchhiker; Edmond O'Brien as a middle class guy on a fishing trip picked up by Talmon – he whines quite a bit since he is afraid of dying (gutsy script!); Frank Lovejoy as O'Brien's quieter, more courageous fellow who speaks decent Mexican and advises O'Brien to get a hold on himself and be patient. Seriously overrated 'film noir' that is neither very film noir nor a very good drama. Low budget film (only 70 minutes long and so many shots of the old Plymouth winding through the rocky hills of Northern Baja California) that carried us through parts of Mexico to a port on the Sea of Cortez where the kidnapper Talmon wants to take a ferry to Guaymas; he is captured bloodlessly in the port by the Mexican police and then returned to the USA where he is executed. Film is not very noir: although shot largely in the dark, the pools of light and shadow are missing; there is no female character, much less a credible *femme fatale*; there is no narration by the doomed male protagonist. It is more a pseudo-real life crime claustrophobic drama with a limited number of characters – three, one of them holding the other two at gunpoint – in a confined space – the inside of the dusty, beat up old Plymouth. The final confrontation is something of an anti-climax rather amateurishly filmed (the gun barrel emerging stealthily between two boards!). Some good turns from the script, and a memorable performance by Talmon. (2008)

**Hobson's Choice** 1954 David Lean (Britain) 4.0 Superior, beautifully acted comedy about a prosperous tradesman's family in medium-sized industrial city in late Victorian England (by the emphasis on the bustle in ladies' fashion, must have been in the 1880s). Charles Laughton, very fat, pulling out all the stops as cantankerous, although basically good-hearted, alcoholic owner of boot making business, trying to rule his three daughters; Brenda de Banzie stealing every scene as his independently minded elder daughter, who decides to break with her father (he has decided that she will remain an old maid and remain with him in the shop), marry his bootmaker and start her own business; John Mills, timid and subservient, who gradually learns to stand up to his old boss; Daphne Anderson and Prunella Scales as his two pretty, somewhat empty-header younger daughters, who also want to marry to get out from under the thumb of their father; Helen Haye as wealthy elderly lady that praises Mills for his boot making skills (she plays also the unperturbed wife of Professor Jordan in 'The 39 Steps'.) Mise-en-scene and sense of place in the beautiful Criterion-restored print is outstanding: cobblestone streets and view across the river, detailed interior of the shop, cozy pub the Moonraker where Laughton goes for liquid refreshment, soft bed groaning under the weight of the large bootmaker, highly detailed, over-decorated Victorian living room of Mrs. Haye, etc. Narrative deals with the differences among generations, the daughters of Laughton – particularly Maggie – being much more independent and less inclined to follow the line of their father in affairs of matrimony. The narrative line has the daughters stepping away from the guidance of their father, but joining hands with him at the end, when the young couple, fresh in their business success, persuade the elderly, alcoholic Laughton to form a partnership with the formerly contemned Mills. Hobson thinks he has a choice to accept or reject the offer, but actually there is no way but Maggie's way (Hobson has a "Hobson's choice"). The interaction of the principals is delightful: the enormous Laughton blustering about the insubordination of his daughters, laughing merrily with his inebriated drinking buddies in the Moonraker, his surprise and disorientation when confronted with the DT's (an enormous rabbit); the willful determination of Maggie to make her own life with Mills away from her father, the maturing of the childlike Mills under the iron-willed guidance of his wife so that he is able to confront his father-in-law in the last sequence, and yet both characters remain sympathetic and

loving. Lean's direction is witty and expressive, e.g., beginning with ominous shots of the boot outside the door of the shop and the appearance of the monster-like form of Laughton in the doorway only to discover he is just a stumbling drunk; and then showing the boot in optimistic broad daylight in the final shot of the film. The good-humored characters, tight plotting, and happy ending remind one of Theodor Fontane's "Frau Jenny Treibel". Outstanding film from every viewpoint. (2016)

**Hollywoodland** 2006 Allen Coulter 3.0 Ben Affleck as George Reeves (doesn't look like him) who is unhappy with his TV Superman role and who subsists largely on his relationship with Eddie Mannix's wife; Adrien Brody as present-day private eye who is somehow determined to get to the bottom of Reeves' death – he doesn't think it was a suicide; Diane Lane in ultimate elegant 50s getups as wife of Mannix (MGM exec) who with the support of her husband takes Affleck as a lover; Bob Hoskins in his element with the lowlife Mannix (Hoskins' hoodish American accent is excellent), who is however completely devoted to his wife, come what may; Robin Tunney fetching as the sexy, dark-haired fiancée of Reeves. An LA private eye flick in the grand tradition. Focuses on Hollywood movie culture with behind-the-scenes machinations by studio bosses (Mannix) to cover up problems with their employees, very glamorous Hollywood women in the latest 50s fashions, sensational scenes in the chicest clubs like Cori's (?), focus on a struggling actor who just can't get the break he wants in the heartless Hollywood milieu. Affleck interesting as the reasonably talented actor who doesn't get the roles he thinks he deserves. Lane is noteworthy as the older woman who likes sex and men, and latches almost hysterically on to Affleck, and is furious when he takes up with Tunney. Brody seems rather miscast as an LA gumshoe – he looks Jewish and European – but we follow his investigation and his troubles with interest. Film has a dual time line: one of Brody's involvement in the investigation, his feeding of information to the press, his hypotheses about what happened, etc.; the other of Reeves career shortly before his death – his disillusion, his affair with Lane, his landing of the Superman role (wearing blue underpants), his torrid passion for the gold digger played by Tunney, etc. Film switches back and forth between the two timelines, often with no cue from the present one (in most movies the previous timeline is usually a flashback initiated in the mind of the principal character in the first timeline); the switches include reenactments of three possible scenarios that occur in the mind of Brody. The mystery is never completely solved, but life just goes on for Brody. Film is well done and entertaining, but it needs a stronger focus. The viewer is led into an increasingly intimate identification between Brody and the dead Affleck, but somehow the effect remains diffused. (2007)

**Homicide** 1991 David Mamet (director and writer) 3.0 Joe Mantegna as police lieutenant who specializes in hostage negotiation; William C. Macy as Sullivan, Mantegna's best friend and confidant on the police force; Ving Rhames whom we barely see, as a murderous drug dealer pursued by the FBI and the police; Rebecca Pidgeon in brief appearance as the daughter in the Jewish family. Interesting although overly ambitious film about a skilled policeman who gets sidetracked into a quest for his own identity. Mantegna is a member of the team tracking Rhames, but by chance (?) he is ordered to abandon the Rhames case and is put in charge of an investigation of the murder of an elderly Jewish woman in a store in a ghetto neighborhood; the story unwinds into Mantegna's discovery that the woman had been a gun runner during the Israeli war of independence and that now (1980s?) she has been murdered by a neo-Nazi organization. Mantegna's investigation leads him to a radical Jewish organization fighting Neo-Nazis in the city; he goes through a highly unlikely personal transformation leading to his embracing of his Jewish identity; and within a few minutes of discovering what the Zionists are up to, he participates in a terrorist act blowing up the offices of a Neo-Nazi group. He is so busy with his Zionist-style activities that he forgets about his commitment to stand by his friends in the arrest of Rhames; the result is the death of Sullivan, the killing of Rhames, and Mantegna barely escaping with his life at the hands of the vicious Rhames. Mamet manifests his usual pessimistic vision. The film has a dual focus: on the one hand, two police stories – tracking Rhames and uncovering the murder of the Jewish lady; on the other, Mantegna's crisis of identity and conscience. We are led to believe that although a Jew himself, Mantegna has never given it a moment's thought, and he is made to feel ashamed of his indifference: Pidgeon surprises him in overhearing his anti-Semitic tirade delivered to himself when he thought he was alone; and a Jewish man he meets in a library upbraids him for not knowing how to

read Hebrew (previously he had not been able to understand a man speaking Yiddish). A fair amount of Mamet-speak, especially when characters are talking tough (policemen and crooks) and when characters such as the Jews are making hidden accusations without saying it out loud. The Jewish characters are a peculiarly unsympathetic bunch, when one considers Mamet's support of Israel: they are cold (to outsiders), exclusive, demanding, and extremist. Many interesting things, but too many things going on in the film, including Mantegna's improbable psychological transformation. (2007)

**L'homme du train** 2002 Patrice Leconte (France) 3.5 Jean Rochefort, Johnny Hallyday. Laconic, elegant, puzzling account of very unlikely friendship between two very different characters. Hallyday is kind of crime icon who steps off the train in Rochefort's dark, grimy town and strikes up relationship with elderly Rochefort, an intellectual ex-teacher who has the gift of gab and who derives much comfort from repetitive routine. Rochefort is scheduled soon for a triple bypass. Hallyday (great French pop star from the 60s) has come to town to pull off a robbery with other heavies who arrive later. Rochefort and Hallyday bond despite their obvious differences. Both want to live the life of adventure but also with cultivated comfort; e.g., Hallyday slips on Rochefort's tattered slippers that the latter praises in precisely chosen words (the teacher). Wonderful dialogue with droll and piquant sense of humor. A puzzling exchange at the end. Movie works so well because the two principals inhabit their characters in completely credible fashion. (2006)

**L'homme qui aimait les femmes** 1977 Francois Truffaut (France) 3.0 Charles Denner as physically unattractive man with an insatiable urge to possess women; Nelly Borgeaud makes a big impact as insanely jealous, completely unpredictable, sociopathic mistress; Jean Dasté as wise and avuncular doctor who gives Denner some timely advice; Brigitte Fossey as angelically beautiful wise éditrice of a publishing company who resembles Catherine Deneuve; Nathalie Baye as one of Denner's mistresses. Seemingly autobiographical film about a man living in Montpellier who has an obsessive need to pursue and possess women. The narrative has a flashback structure that begins with a long parade of women (in high heels of course) attending his funeral, thus setting the theme of death in the mind of the viewer. In the subsequent flashback, the first 60% of the film has Denner chasing one woman after another, beginning with his noticing their legs and feet in high heel shoes and then resorting to a variety of stratagems to snag and seduce them. The repetitiveness of the process sometimes becomes tiring. The most piquant of the interludes is with the married Borgeaud, who loves him to distraction, makes him have sex in dangerous situations such as the front seat of his car or in a bedroom display on the floor of a department store; she eventually shoots her husband and is sent off to prison. Denner/Truffaut is instinctively dissatisfied with his lifestyle and we wonder if he would be happier with the possession of the love of a single woman; he decides to write an account of his amours, which he gives to a typist to type; and then to his surprise Fossey persuades her publishing house to print it. He meets by chance an old amour, played by a mature but still beautiful Leslie Caron, and the ensuing moving five-minute exchange between them reveals that they had lived together for an extended time and that Denner appears to regret that they couldn't make it last -- when she tries to kiss him, he says that he no longer "has the right" to touch her. Another clue to his behavior is the flashback recollections of his mother, who walked around half dressed in front of him and gave him letters for her lovers to be posted. There is however no salvation for the protagonist: he has an affair with Fossey, who more or less takes the initiative, and he is then run down by a car in the street of Montpellier while he is pursuing another woman with beautiful legs. His voiceover at the continued funeral (as dirt is being dropped on his coffin) shows no regrets: he insists that he has enjoyed all the women he has been with (they are pictured and described one-by-one -- the student, the older woman, the one out of a Russian novel, etc.) and that their variety has made him happy. Film benefits from snappy cinematography and editing and from the classic Truffaut dialogue -- philosophical and reflective, snappy with short sentences, full of paradoxes (My mother displayed herself in front of me not to tempt me but to show me how insignificant I was to her). The film's sexual psychology seems superficial -- e.g., Denner insists that he is not a "cavaleur", but then what is he? All the women seem privileged to have sex with him with no one showing regrets (even Borgeaud returns from prison ready to take another roll in the hay); at the end they are all seriously and soulfully dropping handfuls of dirt on his coffin. Film ends up being a bit self-indulgent. (2010)

**L'horloger** 1974 (France) Bertrand Tavernier; based on a novel by Philippe Simenon (France) 2.5 Philippe Noiret as quiet, lonely, heavily jowled, petit bourgeois Lyon clockmaker whose son is pursued by the police for murdering a shop steward in a factory; Jean Rochefort as police inspector who befriends Noiret; Jacques Denis as firebrand friend of Noiret. Set in Lyon about 1970 story about an apparently unmotivated murder; the suspect and his girlfriend are tracked down and convicted. The film is not a murder mystery, but is really social and psychological analysis. The air is filled with politics and resentment; although the son does not give a reason for the murder (he also burned the victim's car), it is implied that his anger at what is happening in France – all those fat, self-satisfied bourgeois sitting around (Noiret) – drove him and his girlfriend to take revenge on the man who (apparently) raped the girl in the workplace. The film is really about the father's dawning awareness of his love for his son, of his "solidarity" with him; at first they are distant, alienated, the son had never confided in him, and he does not want to see him after he is arrested; but once Noiret declares his support for his son; their relationships warms up; and the last scene is of them in a prison visit talking through the screen and the bars, both smiling, both content with the opportunity to talk, both now aware of their common destiny. Film has too many imponderables: is France really so bad that its youth commits unmotivated murders? What was the motive for the murder (the son says the victim was an "ordure" and thus deserved what he got)? And Noiret needs such a shock to make him recognize his love for his son? What happened to his shock, anger, dismay, etc.? Rochefort, who wants to take measures to defend the son, seems more reasonable than his newfound friend. Film is shot informally with swish pans, lots of cheesy zoom shots, long moments of silence while one character is waiting for another to show up for a rendezvous, empty conversation ("Merci bien, Madame. Ca va bien comme ca."). Unless you are captivated by Noiret and his predicament, film is quite dull. (2007)

**Hors de Prix** 2007 Pierre Salvadori (France) 2.5 Audrey Tautou with her winning smile charming and sexy in extremely low-cut dresses gold-digging in Biarritz and the Cote d'Azur; Gad Elmaleh (Moroccan-born) as shy, clueless, innocent, dead-pan bartender Jean in the first hotel; Marie-Christine Adam as Jean's sugarmomma in the second part of the film. Frothy sex comedy – French farce set in more or less abandoned beautiful five-star hotels in the South of France. Tautou is a completely venal gold-digger who moves blithely from man to man depending on where she finds the best deal. She hooks up with Jean thinking that he is wealthy, but the complications are just starting. She of course leaves him in a huff when she discovers his poverty (much comedy as he scrambles to find money to pay for her expensive lifestyle), but they then become partners in crime when he becomes Adam's gigolo; and of course things progress steadily toward the moment where Tautou falls in love with Jean, she gives up her old ways, and they hop on his motor scooter off to God knows where. Some clever playing with McGuffins: Tautou's little Tahitian umbrellas inserted into her hair to indicate she has drunk too much; a one-Euro coin that signifies Tautou's venality, but which reappears in the last shot as the only coin they have to throw into a freeway toll booth; repetition of the phrase "Je voudrais..., J'aimerais..." as a pickup line that Tautou uses in the penultimate scene to ask Jean...to kiss her! The film takes place in an immoral situation, but it does not pass judgments on the characters – just exploits them for cute laughs. Charming movie made with an impeccable light touch, a sex comedy without heavy sex (we never see Tautou's breasts!), photographed in bright southern light in elegant and tasteful surroundings. A frothy nothing that is a bit boring, but very well done. (2008)

**Horse Feathers** 1932 Norman McLeod 4.0 Marx Brothers, Thelma Todd (despite popularity she has squeaky non-expressive voice). Very funny anarchic (perhaps even more so than other great ones) Marx Brothers comedy written at Paramount explicitly for the screen. Only the thinnest of plots, namely Groucho as president of Huxley College, pulls out the stops (inefficiently) to field a winning football team. A little satire of higher education, since Groucho is clear that his main job is a winning football team, not academics. A bit of music including Harpo's and Chico's usual (boring) solos, but Groucho in the beginning sings witty song to the trustees "I'm against it," and all the boys take a crack at corny "I love you." Comic personae are classic Marx Brothers – Groucho's sarcasm and word play – free association, high velocity, off color, self-contradiction, cruel insults, uncouth, bad puns, play on literal and metaphorical meaning of words and phrases, Chico's word play ("wool over my ice," 'falsetto voice' becomes 'false set of teeth'), Harpo's lunatic pantomime; Zeppo sings creditably, but doesn't try to be funny. Funniest scenes: 1) Groucho trying to get into the speakeasy with the

“swordfish” password (Baravelli: “Hey, what's-a matter, you no understand English? You can't come in here unless you say, "Swordfish." Now I'll give you one more guess. Harpo “Honk”) 2) classroom scene with bad puns, mocking the solemn professor, passes at girls, Groucho’s lecture on blood, end with brothers fighting with bean shooters; 3) the canoe scene, where Groucho serenades Todd, mocks her use of seductive baby talk, (Todd: "If Icky baby don't learn about the football signals from the big stwong man, Icky baby gonna cry!" Groucho: "If Icky girl keep talking that way big stwong man gonna kick all her teeth right down her thwoat!") and then dumps her into the water and throws her a candy life saver; 4) final football game, where Harpo and Chico focus on playing...pinochle, eating hot dogs and bananas (latter used by Harpo to cause defense men from catching him), Groucho wearing tailcoat over his uniform, Harpo’s shtick about tackling the man who has the ball (referee), Harpo’s handing the ball to defenders when he is cornered, and in grand finale Harpo and Chico drive garbage (Roman!) chariot through defenders for the winning touchdown! All the brothers make salacious remarks in the presence of Todd; all three wed her at the end, and then they jump on her! Only thing missing from formula is Marguerite Dumont. (2009)

**The Hospital** 1971 Athur Hiller (wr. Paddy Chayevsky) 3.0 George C. Scott in blockbuster role as impotent, rage-filled chief of surgery of crowded Manhattan public hospital; Diana Rigg as free-spirited, sexy ex-hippy, whose father (Barnard Hughes) is (supposedly) a terminal patient in the hospital – he had been a medical missionary serving New Mexico Indians; Richard Dysart as smooth-haired physician entrepreneur that cares more for his business’s bottom line than the well-being of his patients (he interrupts surgery in order to get reports on the SEC’s investigation of his company). Often funny and entertaining satirical farce about a public hospital running through a day of non-stop crises – a patient with mild symptoms is soon killed by medical malpractice; a lecherous resident is found naked in a bed his body filled with a glucose overdose; an emergency room doctor does not respond to demands for his insurance information since he is dead from a heart attack on a gurney; a surgeon about to perform a hysterectomy finds that the woman on the operating table is 25 years younger than she is supposed to be and is dead. Scott, who is recently divorced with two worthless adult children and who is losing faith in his professional mission is driven to loud thespian distraction by the chaos reigning in his domain: “Where are your nurses trained? In Dachau?” “If there were an oven here, I would put my head in it!” In an overcrowded emergency room, a nasal-voiced woman goes around bugging semi-comatose patients for their insurance numbers; meanwhile, scruffy demonstrators outside try to shut down the hospital because of its expansion plans into the neighborhood. The oft-repeated refrain “What do you mean there’s a dead doctor in Room 306” expresses the tenor of the environment. The emerging joke is that we cannot be sure whether the deaths are due to anarchy and incompetence, or whether there is a murderer on the loose. The conundrum is solved at the end when the supposedly helpless Hughes confesses in flashback to the crimes, which he committed as a result of a supernatural vision. The state of the American medical profession is so corrupt that God has decided to take revenge? The film works best as an absurdist satire; but the writer rather ruins the effect by focusing on Scott’s emotional issues. In the famous exchange midway through the film Rigg, who has set her sights on Scott, tells him her life story – a sort of flower child living with her father in New Mexico and now resolved to abandon the real world of American dysfunction; Scott responds with the well-known, scenery-eating monologue about his despair (impotence and professional failure); the session ends with an act of “salvation” – he rips her clothes off and ravishes her three times! Presto, Scott’s esteem is restored and he escapes in the end with Rigg and her father, the latter of whom has committed three murders. Salvation through rape and murder? Perhaps an attempt to extend the absurdist happenings, but a bit over the top. (2015)

**The Host** 2006 Jooh-ho Bong (Korea) 3.5 Kang-ho Song as narcoleptic, juvenile acting, apparently irresponsible young man helping to maintain a snack bar next to the Han River in Seoul – the first shot of the film has him sleeping at the snack bar instead of tending it; Hie-bong Byeon as his grizzled father, who dies early in the film; Ah-sung Ko as Song’s adorable, resourceful 12-year-old daughter; also an older brother (Hae-il Park) who is unemployed and fairly clueless although he is a college graduate; Doona Bae as older sister who is an archery champion (although she does not win the competition broadcast on her father’s television set in the beginning of the film). Engaging, suspenseful,

exciting, sometimes moving monster film. The monster, spawned by an American scientist who insists that dirty formaldehyde be poured down the drain of his laboratory rather than be properly recycled, rampages on the Han River eating some of his victims and saving others in a compartment in the river bridge for later delectation; after Ko is kidnapped by the monster, the family sets off in Steven Spielberg style to rescue her; they have almost as much problem with the incompetent, paranoid South Korean authorities as they do with the monster; they make great efforts, but fail to rescue Ko in time; both the father and Ko are killed by the monster. The film shows great flair, if at times it is a bit chaotic. The monster is very entertaining and horrifying: a large fish with a prehensile tail, resembling a lizard, and a disgusting multi-layered mouth that swallows its prey whole, moving very fast in the water or on land, where it bumbles along at high speed, swinging along under the home bridge much like an acrobat doing graceful flips and then diving stylishly into the water making nary a splash. The family is a cross-section of ordinary people who just make it in life, are pretty dysfunctional, but who hang together in a crisis to rescue the granddaughter; Ko and Song are the only ones resourceful enough to do some good. The film critiques South Korean society and its penchant for military and emergency personnel taking charge but getting little done; it also criticizes the Americans who sometimes behave like occupiers with little regard for the well-being of the South Korean population (although the Americans do a better job than the Koreans of figuring out the precise danger posed by the mutation). Memorable are the all-too-human character of the sluggish Song, the images of Ko using her wits to survive in the monster's lair, the monster racing along the shore of the river, swinging under the bridge, or licking his unconscious future prey with his long, smooth tongue. Film is often chaotic and might have been clarified with a little editing – the subplot about the little boy who joins Ko in the monster's den, what actually was the threat posed by the infection and how it was resolved, etc. Very entertaining film combining humor, horror, and human interest. (2011)

**Hot Fuzz** 2007 Edgar Wright (Britain) 3.0 Simon Pegg as zipped up police sergeant exiled from London to a provincial town (Gloucestershire) because he is too efficient and embarrasses the rest of the Force; Jim Broadbent, “old man with a ridiculous obsession” – the apparently avuncular police chief that turns out to be the head of a vast murderous conspiracy; Nick Frost, his son, who experiences coming-of-age in the film – he finally breaks free of his dad's domination; Timothy Dalton as disquieting owner of the super market; and a gaggle of police and community characters seen in other Wright-Pegg films. Another installment in the Wright-Pegg films satirizing film genres (this time police buddy pictures, high-impact adventure movies like ‘Point Break’) and making fun of the perfect British village where residents are happy compared to the misery of living in the big city. The initial picture of the clueless police when Pegg arrives is hilarious: they are bored, resentful and incompetent; if you ask them to do something, they are angry; two funny police detectives chortling, mugging stupidly, mocking anyone suggesting that they conduct an investigation. Film coasts along with innocent provincial activities like restoring runaway swans to their homes until all of a sudden all hell breaks loose – a series of horrific, bloody “accidents”: a bad actor and his girlfriend with an annoying laugh are found decapitated in the road (Pegg hears “decaffeinated” when he gets the phone call); a town resident with an ugly look-at-me house is incinerated in a violent fire; a reporter that misspells names is crushed by a stone falling from a church roof, etc. Everyone in the town ascribes the deaths to terrible accidents, always insisting that the town is safe compared to the likes of London, until Pegg and sidekick Frost discover that the murders are organized by a conspiracy of town leaders; they are systematically eliminating all the bad actors that might keep the town from winning the “Best Village” award. The last 20 minutes of the film are filled with furious, double-fisted gun battles between Pegg and Frost (they later recruit some of the other policemen) and the desperate elite – mild-mannered doctors, greengrocers, employees, bartenders grab their light machine guns and their AK-47s for fight-to-the-death gun battles with the forces of order. Lots of homages to past movies and directors: Eisenstein's repetitive action editing, Pegg recalling spaghetti westerns when he rides into town with ammunition belts slung over his shoulders; a lady charges Pegg with revolvers blazing in both hand recalling John Wayne in ‘True Grit’; “Donno, let's roll,” as a reference to ‘Hawaii Five-O’; local priest asking for peace turns out to be armed to the teeth – “Fuck off, grasshopper.” Extremely aggressive, high-impact editing with bone-rattling sound effects; sophomoric jokes, e.g., brain freeze; ‘Judge, jury, and executioner’ becomes “Judge Judy and



Executioner". The hyper-dramatic switch in the middle of the show – reminiscent of their later 'World's End' – is entertaining and mystifying, but the shootout is truly endless; meant for action film fanatics. A clever film that carries its one good joke perhaps too far. (2014)

**Hotel Rwanda** 2004 Terry George (Britain) 3.0 Don Cheadle (American) in charismatic performance as Paul, Hutu manager of Belgian-owned hotel catering to western tourists -- hides over 1200 Tutsi refugees in the hotel during the slaughter, Sophie Okonedo (British) as Tatiana, his loving and faithful Tutsi wife, Nick Nolte in growling, barking performance as colonel in charge of the toothless (can't fire weapons!) U.N. "peace-keeping" force. Strong story about the "Schindler of Africa," who hides Tutsis (his wife is one) in the Mille Collines hotel that he runs for a Belgian company. A main attraction of the story is becoming informed about the genocide in Rwanda (1,000,000 Tutsi "cockroaches" killed, mostly by militia machetes in 1994). Another is the performance of Don Cheadle, who keeps his cool throughout – some reviewers thought he remained too cool to be realistic; he bribes the authorities for as long as he can (the venal general represents the army that is less vicious than the militia), and wants to rely on the UN peacekeepers, but they are truly a toothless lot. Film attacks the western powers for their indifference (when French soldiers show up at the hotel, they have come only to pick up stranded whites), but makes no comment on neighboring African powers looking the other way. Film lacks often a biting edge: the viewer is drawn in periodically by the horrors, but it could have been more horrifying, more gut-wrenching than it is. The horrible effects of the murders are shown only fleetingly in shots of corpse-littered streets; they come off more in the emotional reactions of Paul's family.... One good scene was Paul's hotel bus forced to a stop by log-like obstacles on a foggy road – when they get out of the car, they find that the road is littered with Tutsi bodies! Paul and family escape afterward to Belgium, where they stay after the terror. (2005)

**House** 1977 Nobuhiko Obayashi (Japan) 2.5 A broad selection of Japanese actors, including seven teenagers, only one of whom – Kimiko Ikegami – was a professional actor. This hard-to-classify popular Japanese film from the 1970s is most easily identified as a horror film that has seven Japanese teens and pre-teens (constantly exclaiming and giggling like giddy teenagers) led to a spooky house where they are eliminated one-by-one by different means – one apparently falls down a well where a watermelon is being kept cool, another is beaten to death by rebellious furniture, another is (apparently) caught in a large clock and ground up by the toothed wheels, another is attacked and killed (?) by her reflection in a vanity mirror, another is apparently consumed by her piano (or at least her fingers are) – until finally the secret behind the business is revealed: Kimiko's aunt had lost her fiancé during the war, and in revenge she is murdering every young, perhaps virginal, female that happens into the house. A rather delicious postscript has Kimiko's father's fiancée appear in the house and she is also dispatched – Kimiko, who has spent much of her childhood alone with her father, thus has her revenge against the interloper. The film's atmosphere and environment is eye-poppingly inconsistent and very puzzling. The girls are all presented as little pop culture icons, giggling about boys, cavorting to the accompaniment of western-style pop tunes against extremely artificial backdrops painted in the most garish of colors. The girls all have cute names like 'Kung-fu', 'Melody', and 'Gorgeous' (always putting on make-up), but since they are all essentially interchangeable and their acting is stylized and superficial, the viewer never gets attached to any of them. The events that take place in the house are confusing and inconsistent – skeletons dance, bears sell refreshments, the piano plays itself with keys highlighted by color and then gnaws off the fingers of the girl playing it, a severed head pops out of a well and starts to chew on the butt of one of the girls, characters appear and disappear constantly so that it is impossible to keep up with events. Sometimes the film reminds you of John Waters, sometimes 'Bye Bye, Birdie', sometimes 'The Rocky Horror Picture Show' or other films like 'Un chien andalou' that focus mostly on visual patterns, colors, and formalist patterns rather than consistent linear narratives and developing characters we can empathize with. The result is that we don't grow to like or to identify with the characters, we don't really care what happens to them (it is in any case difficult to follow the narrative), so that in the end the film is not very scary – each death is like a little technical exercise that we watch with some curiosity, but not something wrenchingly dramatic. No wonder that this film has few progeny. (2012)

**The House of Fear** 1945 (Britain) 2.0 Routine Rathbone Holmes whodunit that takes place in a spooky manor house. Basil Rathbone as suave Holmes, who gives the impression he is bored making these B movies; Nigel Bruce as Watson, more bumbling and clueless than ever; Aubrey Mather attracts some attention as genial, passive member of the club of men inhabiting a spooky-looking manor on the stormy coast of Scotland; Dennis Hooey (as always) the bluff Scotland Yard sidekick, just as clueless as Watson; Paul Cavanaugh as another member of the club. Holmes is asked by an insurance company to investigate a gentlemen's club, since all seven of them are insured. When Holmes and Watson (soon thereafter Lestrade) arrive, the members are killed off one-by-one, each previously warned by delivery of a note with four or five orange pips (seeds) accompanying (the pips are borrowed from one of the Holmes "Adventures" stories, but otherwise there is no resemblance). The manor house has many passages and dimly lit bedrooms, a secret stairway accessed through a trick door in the fireplace that leads to a solution of the mystery; thunder and lightning raging outside, a trip to the beach where Holmes deduces all sorts of things from the footprints in the sands, vain attempts to protect the remaining gentlemen from the serial murderer, etc. Eventually the mystery is unraveled by the preternaturally insightful Holmes – actually no one has been murdered, but all the men are hiding in the subterranean secret room, and with the help of props like tattooed cadavers they have been faking murders and claiming the money from the insurance company; Lestrade leads them off to their fates. In one long scene punctuated by wind blowing open doors, thunder booming outside, candles being blown out, Bruce exceeds even his usual silliness stumbling through rooms looking for one knows not what and talking to himself about what he is doing. One of the most hackneyed and least enjoyable of the Rathbone Holmes series. (2017)

**House of Sand and Fog** 2003 Vadim Perelman 3.0 Ben Kingsley as angry, proud, snobbish exiled former Colonel in the Shah's army now living in America, for which he has general contempt; Jennifer Connelly, wan, passive, defeated as recovering alcoholic who doesn't know what to do when she loses her house; Aghdashloo, well-known Iranian actress who plays Kingsley's usually submissive and unhappy but sometimes fiery and affectionate wife; Ron Eldard as not so smart police officer who takes up with Connelly. Slow-moving, gripping, and ultimately violent and draining drama about a dispute over a house that Connelly has been unfairly forced out of for non-payment of taxes and that Kingsley buys on auction in order to make a killing so he can restore his status as a member of the upper class (film opens and ends with Kingsley felling trees that spoil the view of his bungalow he used to own on the shore of the Caspian Sea – memories of aristocratic privilege). Kingsley plays role with hard features, absolutely unbending determination to restore the position of his family through purchase and resale of the house. Film takes on extreme melodrama, when Connelly strikes up a romance with a local policeman, who leaves his pretty wife, two children, and his suburban home and resorts to illegal intimidation to force Kingsley to give the house back to his girlfriend; further complex developments lead to the fatal shooting of Kingsley's son, and then an elaborately staged suicide murder – Kingsley poisons his wife, and then dressing himself in full military regalia asphyxiates himself with a plastic bag that he tapes around his neck; Connelly is left curled up at the foot of the bed in fetal position. Film is very strongly acted, perhaps too strongly in places – Kingsley's possessive rage towers over everybody else, and Connelly's pitiful passiveness shrinks to practically nothing in comparison. House seems hardly worth the trouble – it is a tract house in modest repair but surrounded by beautiful fir and pine trees, and the fog is usually enveloping it or rolling by when we see it. Film plays rather as the unfortunate confluence of major character flaws rather than a culture clash between immigrants and native-born Americans: unbending pride (Kingsley) locks horns with weak passiveness (Connelly), who unfortunately puts her fate in the hands of stupidity (Eldard), all of which leads to catastrophe. Still some good acting to appreciate. (2009)

**The House on Telegraph Hill** 1951 Robert Wise (20c Fox?) 3.0 Valentina Cortese charming, emotional, and heartfelt as Polish survivor of Belsen Concentration Camp; Richard Basehart as guardian of the heir of the family fortune in the house on Telegraph Hill -- he suddenly marries Cortese when she comes to the USA; William Lundigan handsome and sensitive as a former major in the US Army that early establishes a protective relationship with Cortese; Fay Baker as Margaret, the little boy's glamorous governess -- she has an ambiguous role in the narrative. Sometimes enthralling thriller about a

woman that takes the identity of another woman with family connections in San Francisco and in short order finds herself the beneficiary of a large fortune living in a magnificent turn-of-the-century style house on Telegraph Hill overlooking the most picturesque parts of San Francisco. It is immediately obvious that she has stepped into a hornet's nest: her husband is quizzically distant, the governess is obviously resentful of her presence, and somebody is trying to kill her (cliché alert: when she takes her car for an errand, she finds the brake lines have been cut and she careens wildly down the steep streets of the city). The viewer is soon puzzling as to who is hostile to Cortese and who is responsible for the attempt on her life: it could be Margaret, who resents someone replacing her in the role of mother; or (as Cortese thinks) Basehart, who is enjoying his role as guardian and is worried that the real mother might replace him; or perhaps the two of them working together. In a tightly edited final climactic sequence, Basehart and the frightened Cortese square off – Basehart attempts to poison his wife, but when he momentarily absents himself from the room, she switches the glasses and he is the one that sputters, stumbles, and then dies. Facile wrap up with Lundigan and Cortese preparing for a happily ever after. Many references to thriller hits of the 1940s: ‘Gaslight’ where Boyer takes Ingrid Bergman into his house and attempts to drive her crazy, ‘Rebecca’ with the spirit of a dead woman (life-like portrait of the boy’s aunt seen several times) hovers over the new arrival in the house (Joan Fontaine), and ‘Suspicion’ where Cary Grant’s glass of milk is replaced by Basehart’s glass of orange juice. Some intricate convoluted plotting (e.g., Basehart’s maneuvers to make sure the phone is off the hook at the right time) and generally good acting (except perhaps Lundigan, who is a bit off-hand). Plotting problems show when the subject of the first part of the film (Cortese assumes a false identity) is completely dropped for the rest of the film. Entertaining, intermittently gripping film. (2009)

**The Housemaid (Hanyo)** 2010 Sang-soo Im (Korea) 3.0 Do-yeon-Jeon as apparently innocent young woman Eun-yi Li hired as a nanny in the household of a very wealthy South Korean family; Jung-jae Lee as the husband Hoon in the family who seduces the not unwilling girl; Yeo-jeong Yoon as dour, disillusioned, yet fundamentally caring head housekeeper; Woo Seo as Haera, doll-like wife of Hoon – she is pregnant with twins; Ji-Young Park as impossibly beautiful (how old is she?), ruthless, socially ambitious mother of Haera. Interesting, slow-moving, aesthetically oriented remake of 1960 Korean classic about the arrival of a pretty housekeeper who creates upheaval and confusion in a wealthy Korean household. She is seduced by Hoon, who arrives in her bedroom with a bottle of wine, and to our surprise she complies with his sexual overtures. The tension in the film is created by Eun-yi becoming pregnant, and since the baby poses a threat to the family, they give her an abortion medication that makes her bleed in a bathtub and lose the fetus (Impressive overhead shot of the spreading blood). Eun-yi is at first unsure about what to do, but she eventually returns to the mansion and hangs herself in front of the entire family from an elaborate chandelier in the main salon; the scene becomes momentarily grand guignol when her body somehow catches on fire, and the viewer watches it burn up as it swings back and forth. Both the beginning – a girl commits suicide in a commercial district in Seoul – and end of the film – where right after the suicide, the director presents a David Lynchque scene with the family celebrating the daughter’s birthday with champagne in luxury chairs outside in the snow – don’t seem to belong in the narrative. The long, middle part of the film focuses in part on the development of interesting characters – Eun-yi’s mixture of diffidence and calculating toughness (her acceptance of the overtures of her master, her refusal to have an abortion voluntarily); the evolution of the house head maid from dutiful loyalty and subservience to disgust (“RUNS”) and finally rebellion, when she quits her job without notice; the aggressiveness of the mother-in-law, who urges her daughter and son-in-law to get rid of Eun-yi and her baby before she can make more trouble. The film generates a palpable suspense from the viewer’s expectation that Eun-yi will at some time crack and do something horrifying (this is after all a Korean film), but the transition to her theatrical suicide needs more preparation, more build-up. The film has a static quality deriving from its focus on lovingly photographing beautiful people and on an impeccably and richly decorated western-style mansion; it is filled with modernist western furniture and all meals are consumed with knives and forks. The author’s mise-en-scene is aesthetically flawless. There is a hint of criticism of the uncaring arrogance of the wealthy, but the idea is not well developed. Interesting film that makes this viewer want to see the original “Housemaid”. (2010)

**How Green Was My Valley** 1941 John Ford (20c Fox) 3.0 AA-crowned multi-generational saga of a brave Welsh family working in the colliery. Donald Crisp as the stern, inflexible paterfamilias of the large, prosperous Welsh mining family – often irascible salt of the earth; Maureen O’Hara as charming daughter, who falls in love with the preacher but then marries the mine owner’s son; Roddy MacDowall sanctimonious, falsely eloquent as the boy Huy, the occasional narrator; Anna Lee as Bronwyn, who marries one of the sons; Walter Pidgeon (looking young) as the sensible preacher Gryffyth, earnest guy who stands for nobility and tolerance and says that prayer is good thinking; Sara Allgood as the irrepressible mother with an entertaining, biting sense of humor; Barry Fitzgerald his usual irritable, colorful Irish self spouting intolerant religious faith; Morton Lowry as sadistic schoolteacher. Beautifully photographed, although mushily sentimental treatment of the trials and tribulations of a Welsh mining family in the early 20th century. The close-knit family endures many hardships – division between the sons and the father over unionizing and going on strike, the sadness of the mother as her children drift away, the inexplicable decision of O’Hara to abandon her true-love Gryffyth and marry the coal mine owner’s son, the frequent disasters in the mine that take the lives of the miners; the film ends in another disaster in which the irrepressible Crisp is killed. But the miners start singing again and carry on bravely; it is unclear whether Huy will carry on in the pits or go to school and have a professional career as his father had wanted. Much is made of the Welsh language, of the penchant of the miners to break into multi-part song, of the importance of religion in their lives. Perhaps reflecting the ethnic identity of the director, the culture, characters, and accents often seem Irish rather than Welsh. The screenplay makes a clear distinction between the good religion represented by the preacher Gryffyth that preaches tolerance and the importance of Jesus’ love and the bad one fronted by Fitzgerald, who preaches fear, the condemnation of God, and the exclusion of sinners, especially the woman humiliated in front of the congregation for having a child out of wedlock. A variety of social insights are presented: through Gryffyth the film seems to concede that the men need a union to protect themselves against accidents and being fired; class divisions and bias are emphasized in the social distance between the married O’Hara and her family and in the schoolteacher’s sadistic treatment of Huy when he first attends the national school; since Welsh males consider fighting necessary to defend one’s dignity, Huy has to fight in the schoolyard and endure beatings from his teacher. Everybody is politically moderate, they refuse to call themselves socialists and all hearts are warmed when they are invited to sing before the queen. The mise-en-scene is incredibly beautiful and poetic; nary a scene that is not perfectly balanced or arranged to express the dominant emotion of the moment. For once the sentimental Ford humor is integrated enough with the narrative to work, e.g., the sharply worded arguments between Crisp and Allgood. The film is however very sentimental, even sanctimonious; it would have benefitted much from restraint in all areas but the visual. (2016)

**How to Marry a Millionaire** 1953 Jean Negulesco 3.0 Marilyn Monroe as glamorous but dim-witted New York model who runs into doors if she isn’t wearing her glasses – “congratulations, Honey. I think it is just creamy!”; Lauren Bacall as another model who hatches the scheme to rent a fancy apartment to trap millionaires but who can’t make up her mind; Betty Grable as third model – fresh, pretty and completely clueless (her second to last film); William Powell avuncular and elegant as Texas cattle man who decides it would be unfair to continue a relationship with the much younger Bacall – “That’s one of the few advantages of age; disappointments become a normal art of life”; Rory Calhoun as handsome young guy that Grable falls in love with; Fred Clark as big lug of a guy that Grable at first hooks up with; Cameron Mitchell as plain but good-looking guy who successfully woos Bacall. Materialistic glamorous romantic comedy (in 50s Cinemascope) about three penniless girls in New York determined to find millionaire husbands. The three babes set their hooks for rich men (if he’s married, it might be possible for him to get a divorce), but they are all good-hearted girls who fall in love with other, often not very rich, men in the process. All three women are dressed in a succession of expensive, glamorous gowns. Very nice location shots of New York City, snow scenes in Maine, driving down early New York freeways toward the City, crossing the George Washington Bridge. The three women find appropriate mates: Grable falls for a penniless but handsome forest ranger (Calhoun) when she goes off with Clark to his cabin in Maine; Monroe falls for a fellow pursued by the IRS when she gets on the wrong plane. In the witty final scene Bacall is about to marry the wealthy Powell, but he lets her off the

hook since he knows that she is really in love with her young man, Mitchell, who she thinks is a service station attendant; but in the last scene we find out that Mitchell is “loaded” and thus the most “material” of the material girls ends with up with as guy who is worth \$200 million. An amusing, mostly well written and well photographed trifle – three romantic comedies for the price of one. Even though all the girls are romantics at heart and want to marry the men they have fallen in love with, the film does jar with its materialistic values. (2007)

**Hud** 1962 Martin Ritt 4.0 Paul Newman as the no-good, selfish, self-indulgent, womanizing, alienated, but charismatic son of..., Melvyn Douglas as the ranch patriarch – he talks sense and morality but he is brittle and refuses to adapt to the 20<sup>th</sup> century world, Patricia Neal as the world-weary and worldly wise housekeeper who has to deal with the womanizing advances of Newman, Brandon DeWilde -- nine years after ‘Shane’ – is the moral center of the movie: 17 years old and originally attracted to Hud’s charisma, but he has too much moral sense to follow in his footsteps. Outstanding adaptation of Larry McMurtry novel. Beautiful black and white photography that captures the dust, the emptiness, the ramshackle, over-the-hill character of 20<sup>th</sup> century West Texas (more realistic, matter-of-fact and less expressionist and depressing than ‘The Last Picture Show’). All performances are excellent, particularly Newman, who really found his stride, and Neal and Douglas who won Academy Awards. Moving, realistic, credible drama with tragic overtones – not typical of Hollywood fare in this period. The march of civilization progresses, and putting your face against it (Douglas) produces suffering and tragedy; it doesn’t help when Fate (foot and mouth disease) lends its weight to the downward spiral; and the tragedy is abetted by the errors of the principal (Douglas), who foolishly brought the infected cattle up from Mexico. Hud is a real heel who is so self-centered and alienated that he doesn’t care about anything (so says his father, who it appears had mistreated him when he was a kid and must bear some of the responsibility for how he turned out); he is “lonesome” (a McMurtry adjective?) and seeks out a form of companionship in the married women he visits when their husbands are gone. He covers all this up with an easy cynicism, "Kid, there's so much crap in the world that you're going to get into it sooner or later." His womanizing takes a violent turn when he tries to rape Neal in one of his drunken stupors, but she and DeWilde manage to beat him off. In the end, the father dies – more from a broken heart and hounding from his son than from any physical ailment --, Neal packs her bag and takes a bus to an uncertain future (should we have hope for her?), and DeWilde, drawing on his inherent decency to realize the heel that Newman is, packs his small bag, abandons his part of the ranch, and walks off to do his apprenticeship elsewhere. Wonderful ending – Newman is alone, walks back into the kitchen, gets a beer out of the fridge, walks back to the screen door, looks out somewhat thoughtfully, and then with a dismissive gesture of his hand (the body language equivalent of “fuck it!”) closes the door and walks back into the house, which is empty and will probably remain that way. He has learned nothing, and probably will never change. This movie shows that post-studio Hollywood can get it right when it tries. (2006)

**Hugo** 2011 Martin Scorsese 3.0 Asa Butterfield with the bright blue eyes as orphan boy who has inherited from his uncle (an alcoholic Ray Winstone) the job of maintaining the clocks in the Gare Montparnasse (Paris); Chloë Grace Moretz a bit precious as a 12-year-old girl, his companion and the stepdaughter of...; Ben Kingsley overacting somewhat as the owner of a toy shop in the station and, it turns out, actually Georges Méliès; Sacha Baron Cohen usually very funny as threatening policeman with a bum leg – turns out to be a teddy bear; Emily Mortimer charming as the young flower seller with whom Cohen falls in love. Fantasy film set in the Gare Montparnasse in 1920s Paris about a ten-year-old orphan boy, who lives alone behind the scenes in the station and who winds and services the magnificent clocks. The film is part a fantasy, feel-good children’s film that enables Hugo to come to terms with the death of his father (in a fire early in the film) and find a substitute family in the care of the transformed Kingsley; it is also a sometimes moving tribute to the early French fantasy filmmaker, Georges Méliès. The basic narrative of the boy receiving a message from his father (through the intriguing and sometimes disquieting automaton) provides a feel-good foundation to the film. Perhaps the real star of the movie is the art direction and the special effects that deliver beautiful light-filled visions of Paris, particularly the Eiffel Tower, the spacious, historically accurate interior of the Gare Montparnasse, the trains approaching

and entering the station usually in the snow, the intricate, gleaming, metallic workings of the station's large clocks, etc. The children are charming and engaging, and the policeman Cohen, whom we early fear is ruthless and efficient, turns out to be amusing, good-hearted, and easily distracted. Halfway through the film Scorsese switches to a tribute to Méliès through flashbacks narrated by a film scholar that the children happen upon; Scorsese perhaps overstates his case when instead of describing Méliès as simply a film pioneer, he celebrates him as a great creative genius that taught humanity how to dream and escape their humdrum reality, thus providing the excuse to transform the grumpy Kingsley into a triumphant Méliès being fêted by film enthusiasts throughout the city. The film has numerous homages to classic filmmakers, including – several times – the famous shot of Méliès' rocket plunging into the eye of the man in the moon and the equally famous shot of Harold Lloyd hanging from the hands of the clock in 'Safety Last', a posture imitated by Hugo on the magnificent clock on the façade of the Gare Montparnasse. Scorsese tries in this film to meld a demonstration of his love for films with a heart-warming children's movie, an endeavor only partly successful since the different elements of the film don't work together seamlessly. The film could have been more successful if it had been cut by, say, 20 minutes. Nevertheless, a very enjoyable film with moments of enchantment. (2012)

**The Hunt** 2012 Thomas Vinterberg (Denmark) 2.5 Mads Mikkelsen in extraordinarily intense and expressive performance as Lucas, kindergarten aide in contemporary Denmark. Another drama by Vinterberg focused on child sexual molestation. From an offhand remark by one of his pupils (Annika Wedderkopp) the easy-going and friendly Mikkelsen is accused by the kindergarten head (Susse Wold) and then the rest of his small Danish town of being a child molester. The path from the initial accusation to full-blown hysteria is short and sharp: the parents of the little girl, who are his best friends, beat on him and berate him; unknown townspeople throw rocks through his window; he is refused service in the local supermarket and then beaten to a pulp when he insists on carrying off his groceries; his sensitive teenage son is teased by his schoolmates; he is accused by the authorities and brought to trial; he is cleared by the courts of the charge for lack of proof (the schoolchildren had painted a picture of lurid goings-on in his basement, the problem being that it does not exist). Almost the only focus of interest in the film is the acting, which is true and heartfelt throughout. The director hews close to his minimalist predilections (although not as extreme as in 'The Celebration'): with little attention to narrative imperatives, minimal camera movement and editing, the camera – and thus the viewer – seem to be waiting most of the time for someone to say something or something to happen. One yearns for a tighter script and more visual pizzazz. The director also includes some thematic and metaphorical material that seems separated from the plot: repeated references to male camaraderie (opening scene horseplay in a water hole, scenes of drunken revelry, etc.) and to rites of manhood such as hunting deer. Since the women lead the way in the condemnation of Lucas, it is hard to reconcile this idea with the narrative. The ending of the film is puzzling. When a year after Lucas is found innocent, he comes back together with the townsfolk to celebrate his son's passage to adulthood (receiving a rifle and going on his first hunt), he seems inexplicably accepted again by them; but when he begins to stalk deer, someone fires a rifle shot next to his head. Unclear who fired the shot and why they didn't fire to hit Lucas. The film then ends without explanation or clarification. (2014)

**Hunt for the Wilderpeople** 2016 Taika Waititi (New Zealand) 2.5 Mildly amusing Kiwi bush comedy about a smart-ass kid fleeing from authorities in the bush country of New Zealand. Sam Neill as grizzled old Hec, withdrawn backcountry guy right out of Appalachia; Julian Dennison, smarty-pants, intelligent, wiser-than-his-years portly 13-year-old Ricky placed in Hec's family when other potential foster parents refuse to take him; Tima Ti Wiata and Rachel House as amusing (seemingly) part-Maori formidable women; Rhys Darby as over-the-top hyper-grizzled, extremely eccentric backwoods guy. Nice views of the heavily vegetated Waitakere Ranges near Auckland in the North Island. Ricky in placed by Auckland Child Protective Services in the backwoods home of Neill and Wiata; the latter is affectionate and welcoming, but Neill is curmudgeonly and standoffish. When Wiata dies unexpectedly, CPS tries to take Ricky back, but he takes off with Neill into the mountainous bush – there ensue many semi-amusing adventures as they flee from the authorities; all of course ends well when, after Neill is arrested and Ricky is sent to a group home, the two are united as surrogate father and son striding through

the wilderness together. The relationship of the two has the curve of a romantic comedy – starting hostile and suspicious and finally melting into mutual affection under fire. Neill is steady as the straight man that Ricky plays against. Dennison is the star of the show: squat wisecracker that doesn't take shit from anyone; although presented as a juvenile delinquent, he is a nice kid that wouldn't harm a flea; obsessed by unexpected concerns such as having enough toilet paper (he is not charmed when Hec tells him to use a leaf) and given to pop psychology observations, such as commenting on Hec's "processing" of his situation. The film has a lot of corny humor at the expense of clueless people, such as the social worker and her police assistant that pursue Ricky, and the three (harmless) armed yokels that Ricky and Hec keep running into. A lot of slapstick comedy. The film reveals the bluff sense of humor of New Zealanders and their affection for rural yokels not yet spoiled by the commercial culture of civilization. Amusing if forgettable. (2016)

**The Hurt Locker** 2009 Kathryn Bigelow 4.0 Brian Geraghty as Specialist Owen, the rifleman who is a bundle of nerves and convinced he will be killed; Anthony Mackie as Sgt. Sanborn, a cool professional who would like to get out of Iraq alive; Jeremy Renner as Sgt. William James, a bomb specialist who takes a boyish, visceral pleasure in defusing all varieties of IEDs. Ralph Fiennes and Guy Pearce have cameo roles. Incredibly tense, action-packed, and (hyper-) realistic picture of three soldiers in an Army unit in Iraq (filmed in Jordan) whose job is to defuse bombs in the streets of Baghdad. The film takes us through a number of crisis set pieces in which the three men – primarily James – have to defuse bombs in different situations – bombs hidden under the street, bombs packed into the trunk of an abandoned car, a despairing man with bombs locked around him in a vest – he wants to get out, etc. The performances are extraordinarily good, especially Renner, who shows us his fearlessness, his coolness under pressure (the firefight in the desert), his relaxed sense of humor, his compulsive fascination with the technical niceties of the bombs (he keeps a bunch of trophies – mostly little circuits and switches – under his bed), his fatalistic conviction that he will die when his time comes (but in the meantime I am having a lot of fun!), his tenderness for Owen when he is panicked, his tender regard for the little Iraqi boy that sells CDs and who might have been carved up by the terrorists to place a bomb inside of his body (grisly scene). The film does not directly consider the moral or political aspect of the war, but it focuses exclusively on the experience of the participants, as it takes us from one exciting drama to another pitting James and his supporting team against the Iraqi insurgents who often blend into the mass of bystanders and then push an ignition button on their cell phones or slink away down dusty, trash-covered back alleys. The war is depicted as having no particular direction – the men don't have time to think why they are there or whether they are moving toward victory – just do your job immersed in the circumstances and hope that you will emerge intact. The film editing does not try to explain clearly the progress of the action; often we don't know much about what is happening – Was the dead kid the same as the one who sold the CDs? Was that man really the one who planted the bomb? Usually we don't find out and move on to the next episode. James' men live for the day they will go home, but when James returns to his wife, he is bored and removed (buying cereal at the px, cleaning out the gutters of his house, slicing carrots for his wife), and the last scene has him walking down the ramp of a transport helicopter and being welcomed by his new platoon commander – like a bee drawn back to honey. The film is action-packed, very intense in its violence and emotions, and ultimately moving. One cannot avoid a feeling of admiration for the men who do this job. (2010)

**I'm No Angel** 1933 Wesley Ruggles (wr. Mae West) Paramount 3.0 Mae West as Tira, Cary Grant as very rich third boyfriend who decides to marry her, Gregory Ratoff as lovable lawyer, Edward Arnold as the circus impresario. West has good bluesy voice that she uses to good avail in several songs. Mae West as sexy circus performer on the make. Her walk – strutting, sashaying, swaying and bouncing in a parody of sexiness; pudgy and not young; relishes men including by innuendo their physical charms; a gold-digger sick of her jealous, low-life boyfriend; says her life is ruled by her horoscope which she is constantly consulting; loves the high life and lots of money; mumbles a fair amount, talks out of the side of her mouth, when she delivers lines. 2) "Am I making myself clear, boys? (Suckers)" 3) Fortune teller "I see a man in your life." "What? Only one?" "I see a change of position." "Sitting or reclining?" 4) "Don't let one man worry your mind. Find 'em, fool 'em and forget 'em." "Don't worry. I only want to feel his muscles." Been married five times; "I suppose wedding bells

sound like an alarm clock.” Believe in marriage? “Only as a last resort.” 7) Arnold, “Tira, I’ve changed my mind.” “Does the new one work any better?” 9) Now performing as lion tamer (whip and revolver); puts head in lion’s mouth. “When I was born with this face, it was the same as striking oil.” 10) “We really enjoyed your performance.” “Coming from a woman, that’s a real compliment.” 11) Refer to man’s cane, “You mean you planted that stick?” Man “I’m not half bad.” “If you’re half the man I think you are, you’ll do.” She strikes it rich with Lawrence. West laughs it up with four black women. Beulah, “I don’t see how any man can help loving you.” “They don’t need any help. They can do it themselves.” “I’m getting the impression that you is a one-man woman.” “Yeah, one man at a time.” West doesn’t get along with any woman except for her maids, who are constantly giggling with her. 12) After throwing rival out of her stunning Art Deco apartment, “Beulah. Peel me a grape!” 13) Old boyfriend has sworn to stop pick pocketing, “Do you want me to swear?” “Never mind, I can do that for myself.” 14) Grant shows up. “Do you mind if I get personal?” “Go right ahead. I don’t mind if you got familiar.” Grant says goodbye: “Goodbye. You’ve been wonderful.” She holds on to his hand, “You’ve been kind of wonderful yourself.” To Grant, who is of course extremely good-looking, “You have started a new train of thought in my mind. I’ll think it over and let you know what I decide.” “You fascinate me. You better go.” 15) Grant, “You were wonderful tonight.” “I’m always wonderful at night.” “I mean you were especially wonderful.” “When I’m good, I’m very good. When I’m bad, I’m better.” Grant, “If I could only trust you.” “Oh, you can, hundreds have.” Now, Clayton and Tira plan to get married! But enemies break it up, and Mae sues Grant for breach of promise (she seems to want him back?). She interrogates own witnesses at trial; after Grant concedes, reporter’s questions, “Why did you admit to knowing so many men in your life?” “It’s not the men in your life (that count), but the life in your men.” 24) Juror #4 contacts her after her victory: She, “I want to thank you for those beautiful flowers. They were lovely. And don’t forget, why don’t you come up and see me sometime.” She tears up Grant’s check. He “I’m glad it wasn’t the money you wanted.” “There are a lot of other things it takes to make a woman happy.” As they think about their honeymoon, she pauses. He “What are you thinking about?” She “The same thing you are.” Last remark is essential to West – she openly desires sex as much as any man. Film interesting exclusively for persona of West and her infamous wisecracks. (2004)

**I am a Fugitive From a Chain Gang** 1932 Mervyn Leroy (Warner Brothers) 4.0 Paul Muni as very intense James Allen, Hamilton Hale as his sanctimonious preacher brother, Edward Ellis as Bomber, his prison camp buddy who dies at the end, Glenda Farrell as the floozy who forces Allen to marry her, Helen Vinson as Helen, the good woman who cannot however save him from the clutches of the law. Classic and gripping masterpiece about Allen’s experiences in the chain gang of a Southern state (quite vague, though, which one – there are a few Southern accents, but some other locals have Northern accents), and his double escape; he makes good after the first one becoming a prosperous manager engineer for a construction company, but returns to obtain pardon, before being betrayed by the prison commission. Quite eloquent in condemnation of chain gang system – prisoners are overworked and always exhausted, guards are brutal and even sadistic, prisoners must wear chains at all time and be attached during sleep and transportation, food is disgusting, etc. Debate rages between Illinois (new home state) that marvels at the possibility of returning Muni to “medieval torture,” and the prison state that insists the system inculcates character. The state authorities were particularly dishonorable in renegeing on their agreement to pardon Allen after his return. Supporting cast is excellent, especially Farrell who is entirely grasping and corrupt (sex, cigarettes, alcohol, running off for long periods of time, money hungry), but also cute with her slightly gaped teeth. Scenes mostly shot on sound stages, but film has gritty, veristic look. Both escape sequences are excellent – gripping and exciting: 1) Muni escaping from bloodhounds by hiding underwater and breathing through a reed, then stealing a man’s clothes off a clothesline and melting into the city; 2) chase down a dirt road in a dump truck and Muni blowing up a bridge before the lawmen in a convertible can cross it. Film shot in fairly matter-of-fact, economical way with directorial flourishes only occasionally – especially in the prostitute scene where Muni’s desire is eloquently depicted by cutting back and forth between his facial expressions and the woman’s body; also a sudden cut from condemning gavel pounding followed by the pounding of a chain gang hammer, and a shock edit from blow to face while black man was trying to loosen Muni’s leg irons. Although no nudity, Muni’s sexual interaction with women – the prostitute and Farrell – depicted quite directly. Last scene added at insistence of Zanuck – Muni on the lam calls out to Helen from shadows, skittish and scared, he runs when he hears a noise disappearing into the shadows; when Helen asks him “How



do you live?" he responds "I steal!" The movie is very hard hitting with its critique of the prison system; it represents a critical attitude toward established institutions in the depths of the Great Depression. (2005)

**I am a Sex Addict** 2005 Caveh Zahedi 3.0 Caveh Zahedi playing himself with a lot of unknown actors and actresses, most of whom do a great job. A relatively interesting semi-documentary on a man confessing that he is a sex addict and then telling you his life story, until he finally goes to "Sex Addicts Anonymous" and is cured in a fairly moving sequence. He is not necessarily good at diagnosing himself – he says that he is a great romantic always looking for the love of his life, but diving into sex addiction because he can't find her; every time he screws up things with one of his long-term girlfriends or wives, he blames it on his unsatisfying relationship with the girl. He becomes obsessed with having sex with prostitutes, and throughout most of the movie he runs out on his girlfriends and has pitiful oral sex in cars with prostitutes, always asking first "How much" in several languages and then perhaps yes, perhaps not, actually having a 15 minute buildup to orgasm with the prostitute in a car and screaming in silly fashion as he has his orgasm. On the one hand Caveh is endearing with his knee-jerk honesty with his girlfriends and his frankness and sincerity when he is talking to his audience on camera. On the other hand, his sexual addiction is repetitive and boring after a while – how many times do we have to listen to him wondering why his girlfriends are upset about his visiting prostitutes (when will he ever notice how self-indulgent and narcissistic he is?), and how many times do we have to watch him having his silly, meaningless orgasms, and since he is on camera virtually the whole movie, how much longer can we stand looking at his skinny neck and bulgy eyes? His film technique is refreshing: he appears as the filmmaker looking for actresses he can afford and upset that he was not able to go to Paris to film the scenes when he first encounters the (pretty) Parisian prostitute; and he also appears as the actor playing himself, usually staying inside his role as the long-suffering sex addict trying to maintain a stable relationship with one of his girlfriends or wives, but occasionally emerging to address the camera. His stepping outside the suspension of disbelief and reminding the viewer that this is just a movie that he is making is however effective, since the movie is after all about himself, and so the reference to the movie frame sharpens the focus on himself. The ending is fairly moving: against the wall of meaninglessness and misery, he goes to Sex Addicts Anonymous, and then at the end embarks on a new marriage in a scene in the church for the ceremony. Interesting and attention-getting, although tiresome in places. (2010)

**I Confess** 1953 Alfred Hitchcock 3.5 Montgomery Clift as existential, suffering parish priest in Quebec; Anne Baxter often glowing as woman in love with Clift even several years after he embraced the priesthood; Karl Malden persistent, rational, no-nonsense as police inspector determined to solve the murder case; Brian Aherne as the chief prosecuting attorney. Very serious, thematically rich Hitchcock 50s work. The only humorous moments are when a nerdy young priest in the rectory keeps allowing his bicycle to crash to the floor. For once, Hitchcock decides not to play it light: brooding shots of Quebec with Chateau Frontenac looming in background and dark clouds in the sky, dark shots at night (Clift in his cassock walking fast down the streets with long shadows projected on the walls of the narrow streets), dark, expressive close-ups revealing the inner life of the main characters. Hitchcock thinks movie would have been better with a little humor, like he usually does. Catholic Hitchcock focuses on the secret of the confessional: Clift cannot say anything to the police to clear himself from suspicion of murder of the evil lawyer that is blackmailing him for his semi-romance with Baxter; he is quite existential with pain and frustration apparent on his face. But his thoroughly bottled-up character keeps the viewer from full involvement in the film: instead of sealing himself off in stony silence, the script might have let Clift struggle actively with the need to reveal his secret in order to prevent his own condemnation for a crime he didn't commit and to bring a murderer to justice. The famous flashback, which fills in background of Clift's and Baxter's relationship, begins with hyper romantic descent of staircase to the accompaniment of sappy Tiomkin music with soprano voice; Hitchcock gives only Baxter's romantic woman's point of view without telling us why Clift decided to enter the priesthood after his service in the war. Baxter's actions are somewhat of a stretch: she falls in love with Fr. Logan as a young man (before he becomes a priest), is caught between her strong (although unrequited) affection for Clift and her long-suffering husband through most of the movie; and then in the middle of the hotel crisis she suddenly tells her husband "Let's

go home” – impelled by Joseph Breen’s Catholic censorship she has decided that Clift’s superior sacerdotal vocation must be respected and she can settle for loyalty over real passion. Film would probably have worked better with a less glamorous actress. Best scene is breakfast scene in the beginning when three priests are carrying on an innocuous conversation at the table, but camera focuses on telling the story of Alma’s face as she serves the meal; she is concerned about the murder (which she has found out about from her husband) – wonderful editing. Memorable scenes also include Malden’s single eye staring out the window at Clift’s meeting with Baxter, and all the expressive close-ups. Movie is generally well acted; Dolly Hass as the conscience-stricken Alma, wife of the murderer (and really wife of the New Yorker’s Hirschfeld) is remarkable and moving, particularly while serving dinner and in her death scene. Lacks the humor and visual and narrative pizzazz of the better Hitchcock films. Movie relies to some extent on two “hang-ups”/fears – fear of the police (GSC has almost none), and an understanding of the sacredness of the confessional secret (many audiences would have little). The chase through the Chateau Frontenac at the end of the film is exciting and topical (Forest Hills tennis, the cafeteria at the United Nations, the streets of San Francisco), although the ending would have been more tragic if Clift had been killed. The last shot shows the enormous dark tower of the hotel looming over the city like a judging God with portentous clouds moving by. A dark Catholic vision. (2005) (2016)

**I Daniel Blake** 2016 Ken Loach (Britain) 3.0 Emotional, deeply committed film about working-class Briton driven to the grave by an insensitive social service bureaucracy. Dave John as lonely middle-aged carpenter in Newcastle caught in the British state’s bureaucratic Neverland; Hayley Squires in deeply affecting performance as mother of two sinking ever deeper into poverty and despair ; Kima Sikazwe as kindly black kid, “China”, living next door to Daniel. Film presents bleak picture of working-class urban environment in Britain – littered, traffic-clogged streets, run-down faded brick buildings, cramped public housing, and indecipherable British accents (thanks to the subtitles). Recovering from a heart attack and rapidly running out of money, widowed John spends most of the film trying to navigate the labyrinth of the social services bureaucracy. Computer illiterate, he spends much energy and endures much frustration filling out online forms (for which he asks for help from teenagers sitting in the same room), scheduling appeals, etc. He is constantly given the run-around by well-meaning representatives who patiently explain the procedures to follow: in order to receive an allowance, they advise him to declare he is looking for work, although his doctor has told him not to, etc. John is intelligent and smartly cynical, but when he has difficulty adapting, he becomes stubborn and obstructionist. At one point in protest he spray paints his name and his demands on the wall of a public building – “I Daniel Blake” – to the applause of bystanders. His life path goes from bad to worse, until – cruel irony – he dies of a second heart attack when on the verge of winning an appeal. The viewer’s sympathy is even more engaged by his befriending a poor mother, whom he helps with household repairs and by watching her two children when she looks for work. Loach pulls out all the stops by having her deny herself food when feeding Daniel and her children, having her caught shoplifting, and then resorting to prostitution; perhaps most startling is the scene of her greedily gobbling beans out of a can at a food locker. The film ends simply with a clear authorial statement: at his “pauper’s funeral” the mom reads a declaration – “I’m a man, not a dog” – that John intended to read to his appeals board. The pace is slow, often repetitive social realism; Loach is direct in his outrage at the insensitive treatment of the poor in British society. (February 2018)

**I Know Where I’m Going** 1945 Michael Powell (Britain) 4.0 Wendy Hiller in immortal early role as determined, stubborn young woman determined to marry a wealthy industrialist who is renting a castle on the Island of Kiloran (fictitious name for Colonsay in the Inner Hebrides); Roger Livesey as good-looking laird of Kiloran, a naval officer who falls in love with Hiller and pursues her; Pamela Brown as force-of-life woman with wolfhounds who has apparently been a former lover of Livesey. Magical, mythic film about a stubborn, materialistic young woman (Hiller is irresistible), who however is seduced away by Livesey and the culture of rural Scotland. Film seems to be telling us to eschew the fast-paced, luxurious (swimming pool), and status-seeking life of the wealthy bourgeoisie and to embrace the quiet traditionalism of the Scottish Isles. Film spends a great deal of time on the landscape (ruined castles, bleak hills and the rugged coastline set against a stormy or broken sky), the weather

(constant storms, high winds, mist, etc.), the charming musical accents, the piquant characters (the Colonel who is training an eagle to hunt like a falcon; the group of charming, good-humored, and colorful Scotsmen in the bus who are out to hunt the eagle who they think is killing their sheep, the Pamela Brown character who storms into her house for the first time with flashing eyes and her wolfhounds bounding behind her, the quizzical, studious, bespectacled aristocratic girl played by Petula Clark), the culture (the kilts, the highland dancing, the pipers, etc.); and although we are conditioned to expect a powerful chemistry between the two principals to be the main influence, it is really Scotland that seduces and transforms Hiller. She resists mightily since she has always known her mind since she was a child (i.e., she is stubborn), and she has bought into the upper class lifestyle that her new husband is to provide her (since the action of the film takes place during the war (1944), the future husband is probably a war profiteer). The most dramatic example of her resistance is hiring a local boy to take them to Kiloran when the weather is threatening; a young woman who is afraid to lose her fiancé confronts Hiller, who however forges ahead like a bull, taking three people in the boat almost to their death in the celebrated crossing sequence (filmed mostly in a tank in the London studio) where they are nearly sucked into the mythic whirlpool next to Mull. The pure and devoted love of the young Scottish couple contrasts with the materialistic motivations of Hiller and her willingness to endanger people's lives to satisfy herself. Hiller is finally turned around by the experience of the boat trip. Livesey has to work out his own issues; and he overcomes his own fears about commitment by his visit to castle at the end when he realizes that he is free to reach out to Hiller. The ending is charming: Livesey reads the "curse" on the battlements of the castle, but it turns out that the curse outcome will be that the MacLean who enters the castle will spend the rest of his life as a "slave" to a woman (i.e., married); and then from the battlement he hears the pipers' tune, and he looks down to see Hiller walking tamely behind the three pipers toward the castle; she has accepted her conversion to Scotland and her laird. The two embrace, and for the second time the sweet soprano version of the Scottish ditty "I know where I'm going/ And I know who is going with me./ You're the one I love,/ And it's you I want to marry." (The first time had been in the train on the way to Scotland, when the song had been accompanied by the rhythm of the train's wheels.) Perhaps because of its romantic landscapes, its charming characters, its cult of Scottish culture, and its atmosphere of enchantment, the film has a powerful resonance; its strongly mythic character takes the viewer back to better days, whether it be personally in the womb or childhood, or whether in the history of the human species sometime before the founding of civilization. (2006)

**I Saw the Devil** 2010 Jee-woon Kim (Korea) 3.0 Min-sik Choi very convincing as incredibly vicious serial killer who rapes his victims (invariably young women) before murdering them in always grisly fashion; Byung-hun Lee as Korean secret agent (?) who pursues vengeance against Choi after the murder of his fiancée, turning himself into a killer almost as vicious as his target; San-ha Oh and Yoon-seo Kim as two pretty sisters, one of them married to Lee. Over-the-top grisly and explicit horror film about serial murder, what the perpetrator does to the bodies of his victims, and the vengeance that the husband of a murdered woman wreaks upon the murderer. The narrative follows Lee in his single-minded and ruthless pursuit of the killer; deciding to make him suffer, he refrains from killing him the first three times he encounters him, but he just bloodies, beats and maims him and then tracks him again for another torture session; he "makes the mistake" of letting his victim live too many times, and Choi "turns the tables" by tracking his sister-in-law and father-in-law and murdering them; in the conclusion Lee again captures and imprisons Choi and then arranges to have him beheaded by a sort of guillotine that is activated by Choi's family – thus perfect revenge achieved. The film, which is extremely well made (vivid cinematography, appropriate pacing, realistic make-up, good acting, etc.), excels in its horrifyingly vivid and grisly depictions of the effects of violence (often knives or blunt instruments on the head) on the human body. After being raped and murdered, the initial victim is cut into pieces and her visibly dismembered body is carted off somewhere; on one occasion Lee pierces the Achilles tendon of Choi to lame him, on another he drives a large nail-like instrument through his cheek into his mouth; after hitching a ride with two men in a cab, Choi attacks them in a series of lightning moves, stabbing them repeatedly to the accompaniment of squishy, slashing sound effects; the *coup de grace* is a partner-in-crime that Choi visits – he is seen eating vividly colored raw flesh, and when he runs out, he checks his refrigerator, and not finding what he wants, he drags another pretty girl out of the dungeon (but before he

can butcher her, she is saved by a Lee's lightning attack). The film invites us to reflect on gradations of evil – e.g., is the cannibal really worse than Choi (on the other hand Choi apparently rapes – “gives pleasure” – to his victims before he kills them)? And then is Lee in his relentless and sadistic pursuit of Choi really any better morally than the criminal? And isn't he awfully careless and irresponsible – how many further victims of Choi are possible because Lee doesn't either kill him or turn him into the police? The movie is also too long. It never becomes boring until the end (the final scene takes too long), but since much of the interest of the film is in its novelty, the maiming and killing just goes on too long. The viewer is not likely to forget this one. (2012)

**I See a Dark Stranger** 1946 Frank Launder (Sidney Gilliat writer) 3.5 Spy thriller taking place during World War II based pleasingly on the 30s Hitchcock masterpieces. Deborah Kerr looking pretty, fresh, and spunky as Bridie Quilty, Irish girl who can't stand the English and who falls innocently into pro-German espionage; Trevor Howard as British officer whom she connects with while spying in southern Britain; Raymond Huntley as German spy who recruits her; Garry Marsh and Tom Macaulay as clueless policemen, amusing imitations of Caldecott and Charters ('The Lady Vanishes'). Amusing well directed and well edited imitation of the 30s Hitchcock thrillers. After the opening scenes in which Bridie learns from her bull-shitting Irish relatives to despise the British, she ends up in a southern English town in the pay of Huntley (daft to hire such an impressionable young woman?); after the death of Huntley, she journeys across England to the Isle of Man, where she picks up information as instructed, shortly thereafter destroying it in a moment of remorse. (The Germans are looking for information regarding the Normandy invasion that would give the game away.) She and Howard then return to Ireland, where their double danger (she will be executed by the British as a spy and Howard will be cashiered for his assistance) is exorcised in flurries of farce. Happy ending as Howard and Bridie emerge as happy newly married couple after the war (how did they elude the arm of the law?); the film ends on a Hitchcockian note when the ever impulsive Bridie refuses to remain in the hotel – it is named “The Cromwell Arms”, an historical figure she detests. The film is perhaps off-putting for its anti-Irish attitude – they are a bunch of picturesque drunks prone to exaggerate everything (Bridie's father in the beginning), comically pusillanimous when confronted with danger, confused and slapstick when confronting the enemy. However, the strong sense of place (England, Ireland, the Isle of Man), the minor characters – especially the woman who plays the Dame May Whitty character on the train (Katie Johnson) –and particularly the clever and humorous screenplay save the film from perdition. Standing out are: Bridie disposing of the body of the German spy by wheeling him through the town in a wheelchair; the train sequence, whose characters and suspense – including pointless chatter and the display of newspaper headlines – draw heavily on the London-Edinburgh sequence in 'The 39 Steps'; the theater-trial (?) sequence where Bridie despite multiple interruptions extracts the secret brochure from the torn upholstery; the bumbling investigation by the comic police duo; the dance sequence where breaking on partners advances the plot ('Young and Innocent'). Train buffs will be pleased by the use of train travel. The film is almost ruined by the two last scenes: a horse-and-carriage chase situated in Ireland is way too farcical; the German agents are not to be taken seriously; the final scene that somehow saves our couple from arrest and perhaps execution is seriously confused. Almost anyone could have concocted a better conclusion, even if the Anglo-Irish issues are a bit gnarly. (August 2017)

**I'll Cry Tomorrow** 1955 Daniel Mann (MGM) 3.0 Susan Hayward in blockbusting role as alcoholic singer Lillian Roth; Richard Conte as one of her jerk alcoholic husbands; Jo Van Fleet as her usually dolled up, neurotic mother; Eddie Albert as the sweet guy who helps save her in AA and who falls in love with her. Rather typical Hollywood 50s biopic about a singer/performer who is forced into her career by her stage mother mom, who falls into life-threatening skid row alcoholism, suffers mightily at the hands of bad husbands that she doesn't love, and who finally recovers through the help of AA and finds the good man she has been looking for all her life. Filming in black and white helps bring the film down to reality with a minimum of glamorous posturing. The film rests entirely on the shoulders of Hayward, who convincingly runs the gamut of an alcoholic's intense and violent emotions: anger and blaming everyone around her for her life, self-disgust at her humiliation and her inability to stop drinking (how many times does she promise and break it?), stumbling bleary-eyed, hair disheveled, clothes torn

and stained into flea bag hotels; and yet making visible the light of her goodness under it all and preserving in the viewer the hope of recovery (surely abetted by our awareness of the Hollywood pattern). Hayward, whose renditions of Roth's songs were supposed to be dubbed by Roth herself, instead used her own strong, expressive, although rather untrained, voice in the musical numbers. 50s Hollywood is allowed to treat alcoholism fairly frankly, but without the sexual complications and with the assurance of a happy ending. The serious side of 50s filmmaking. (2008)

**I'm Your Man** 2005 Lian Lunson 3.0 Eclectic tribute to Leonard Cohen that includes: performance of many of his best songs by assorted artists at a tribute concert in the Sydney Opera House in 2005; off-concert interviews with Cohen, who tells interesting stories about himself – from Montreal to meditation with the Zen Buddhists on Mt. Baldy – and gives us priceless quotations (a good example being his interpretation of the 'Traitor'); and tributes from other admirers, the best being Edge and Bono from U2, who think he walks on water – in fact he came down from the Mount of Sinai with the tablets after he had conversed with God! And like the medieval Irish monks, he retired to his windowless cell to listen for the voice of God (wait for inspiration for his songs). Some of the song interpretations are wonderful – Antony's intense, shivering falsetto rendition of "If It Be Your Will" is unforgettable; Rufus Wainwright gives excellent rendition of "Everybody Knows", Cohen's apocalyptic song, and "Chelsea Hotel"; his interpretation of "Hallelujah" is somewhat less masterful since he has to endure the accompaniment of two female singers who don't seem to understand what they are singing; Teddy Thompson is driving relentlessly and unlike the master, making himself understood in "The Future" (actually not in the movie but included on the soundtrack), and then gives a beautifully nuanced and sensitive rendition of the little known country-inspired "Tonight Will be Fine". There are two versions of "The Tower of Song" – the first a little hard to take from Nick Cave, and the second featuring the return of Cohen's foggy baritone with the accompaniment of Bono and Edge. Cohen looks terrific at 70 – thin, dark, well tailored clothes, looking simultaneously chic and prophetic, and talking to us easily with self-deprecating humor. Wonderful tribute for people who admire Cohen and love his songs. The film would have benefited from more onscreen Cohen, who is a charming and informative interview subject. (2007)

**I Wake Up Screaming** 1941 H. Bruce Humberstone 3.0 Victor Mature looking young and thin as celebrity promoter (?) in large city; Carole Landis as self-centered "hash-slinger" who gets stars in her eyes when Mature offers to introduce her to the advertising and modeling world; Betty Grable cute as a button as Landis' "gee whiz", down-to-earth sister who eventually falls for Mature; Laird Cregar as bulky, creepy police inspector seen early prowling around Landis' workplace and obsessed with pinning the murder of Landis on Mature; Alan Mowbray bemused as one of the men bamboozled by Landis. Excellently made, entertaining Fox who-dun-it production restored to razor-sharp condition with typical Fox musical score (the mystery theme and "Somewhere over the Rainbow"). Mature is pursued inexorably by the obsessed Cregar collecting evidence to "send him to the chair"; he claims he has enough to send him up for life, but that isn't enough. Although the film has some *noir* elements – a sort of bad Girl (Landis, but she is murdered early), dark shadows in the apartments and police department, and even reflections of venetian blinds – it is essentially a who-dun-it, planting suspicions in our minds about most of the characters and wondering whether the sincere-acting protagonist – Mature – might actually have committed the murder since he appeared to be attached to Landis and she had decided to leave for LA for a Hollywood contract. After a scene in which Mature is actually arrested, Grable bangs Cregar on the head (no consequences!), the two kids escape, break into Cregar's apartment, where they see the walls covered with portraits and shrines of Landis – he had been sexually obsessed with her and murdered her when he thought that she was actually falling in love with Mature; hence his desire to pin the rap on the latter. Nice resolution. Film is notable for its four star restoration and its impeccable directorial taste – framing, mise-en-scene, lighting, camera movement. Grable is a fetching innocent girl protagonist doing all she can to find the real murderer of her sister, an especially difficult task since the perpetrator turns out to be the police inspector in charge of the case. Cregar effective as the lumbering, sinister heavy, whom we always suspect – the viewer always thinks that his eagerness to finger Mature may come from his desire to protect himself. Keeps the mind engaged. (2008)

**I Walked With a Zombie** 1943 Jacques Tourneur (RKO, Val Lewton) 4.0 Frances Dee as rather innocent, smart Canadian nurse hired by Tom Conway (Paul) to take care of his “mentally ill” wife, Jessica; Tom Conway (Paul) as the George Sanders–like (his brother) San Sebastian sugar planter who coolly falls in love with Betsy; James Ellison (Wesley) as more or less alcoholic brother who has had an affair with Paul’s wife and who has very difficult relationship with his brother (as one might imagine; he is however the weakest of the three principal actors); Edith Barrett as Paul’s mother who turns out responsible for Jessica being in her current state. Takes place on Caribbean sugar island where present relationships are blighted by a past experience of slavery (the figurehead of the arrow-pierced Saint Sebastian in the Hammonds’ yard is the symbol); voodoo survives as perhaps a manifestation of the blacks’ undercurrent rejection of white domination. Film takes voodoo seriously (many attractive black actors are shown practicing it, Jessica appears to be controlled by it, Paul’s mother is involved in it mixing Christianity with pagan practices), although it never tells us whether it is objectively valid. Story is psychologically acute and interesting, although the romantic attachment developing between Betsy and Paul seems pretty hokey – What actually happened at the beginning to explain Jessica’s state? What were the relative roles played in her ills by the two brothers? What is Betsy up to in trying to save Jessica for Paul by taking her to voodoo meeting at Homefort? What is Mrs. Rand (mother) up to, etc.? Paul is interesting character – betrayed by his wife (it turns out), he is very pessimistic and fatalistic in telling Betsy about the prevalence of death on the island, and yet it turns out he is relatively blameless. The viewer is never quite sure what happened; after all, the victim Jessica is either catatonic or a zombie “living dead” and cannot explain the past to Betsy. Singer Sir Lancelot sings intriguing calypso-like song about the tragedy of the Hammonds in the street of the nearby town. Film ends tragically, as Wesley ‘kills’ Jessica with an arrow from the figurehead, just as the zombie incantators spear a doll of her; then he walks into the surf where he is drowned. Film ends with a sort of Christian prayer (voiceover by Dee) commenting on the suffering of the people on the island and invoking forgiveness and future happiness. Film is a visual joy, perhaps its best characteristic. Photography is mostly crisp and detailed; soft but defined contrasts, with use of atmospheric shadows – lots of scenes with light casting shadows on characters, often Betsy sitting or sleeping – the slats of the shutters, or the slowly moving shadow of Carrefour as he stalks Jessica outside her window. Marvelous art direction: one is aware that we are on a set, but the light, the sky, the plants, the water are all presented with supreme taste and artistic appropriateness. The best scene is Betsy leading Jessica through the moonlit overgrown cane fields – the cane plants swaying and rustling in the wind with the ubiquitous tom-toms drumming in the distance, the women walking past voodoo talismans like a dead goat hung upside down and scary voodoo guards like Carrefour staring impassively and scarily as they walk past. Jacques Tourneur’s direction is elegant and flowing – tasteful editing, perfect continuity. Script has surprises, but is not very scary; arty and creepy is more like it. (2009)

**Ida** 2013 Pavel Pawlikowski (Poland) 3.0 Agata Trzebuchowska as Anna, a Catholic novice on the verge of taking her vows in 1961 Poland, when she goes out into the world to meet her aunt; Agata Kulesza as middle-aged Wanda, formerly a hanging judge for the Communist regime, atheist, cynical, severely alcoholic. Low-key film, shot in 3:2 dreamy black and white, about Anna’s search for her roots and what happens to her religious vocation when she encounters the secular world. She finds that her parents -- Jews -- were hidden then murdered by a Catholic family in order to get their farm. In an affecting, if understated scene, the guilty farmer takes Anna and Wanda to the place in the woods where the parent’s bodies are buried; the two women then wrap the bones in blankets and take them to an abandoned and overgrown cemetery in Lublinka to give them proper burial. The film focuses also on the character and predicament of Wanda, a nihilist existentialist close to despair -- she was very close to her deceased sister, Rosza (Anna’s mother), she seems to have no family or supportive relationships, and her past as a merciless judge that sent anti-Communist activists to their death weighs heavily on her conscience. She develops a certain affection for Anna despite herself, but the discovery of the fate of her sister and her inability to bridge the personal divide with Anna causes her to commit suicide by jumping out of the window of her apartment (very matter-of-factly after drinking a cup of tea, smoking a cigarette, and taking a hot bath). Meanwhile, Anna continues her initiation into the ways of the world by having a brief affair with a musician, who plays the alto sax in a small dance band performing at desultory

provincial celebrations. When however she looks at her potential future with the musician, she keeps repeating, “and then?”, “And then?”, calling its significance into question. Apparently disillusioned by the experiences with her aunt and her lover, the last scene has her returning to the picturesque, if dilapidated convent. The film cuts deeply into the cultural and historical situation of 1960s Poland – the continued vitality of the Catholic tradition (Anna helps restore a statue of the Sacred Heart at the beginning of the film and often falls on her knees to pray), the ethical vacuum at the heart of Communism, the isolation of individuals in modern society. The deliberate pace of the film makes this viewer sometimes impatient – many shots of the featureless plains of Poland and the blank, if attractive face of Anna. The finely modulated, low contrast cinematography is often very beautiful. (2014)

**An Ideal Husband** 1999 Oliver Parker (Britain) 3.5 Rupert Everett as idle young aristocrat, man about town, unattached, handsome, sensitive, and sincere; Jeremy Northam as good-looking, ambitious, principled young British politician locked in the “perfect” marriage with Cate Blanchett; Cate Blanchett as attractive, somewhat priggish wife of Northam – the perfection of her husband means everything to her; Minnie Driver as Northam’s extremely pretty (her smile!) sister, a repository of common sense with a repressed interest in Everett; Julianne Moore inexorable as a woman eternally on the lookout for money-making opportunities; Peter Vaughan as wonderfully expressive and droll butler; John Wood as quirky and critical but ultimately good-hearted father of Everett. Beautifully acted and filmed version of the Oscar Wilde play. Extremely complex plot with many intercepted written messages and misunderstandings that defy summary. The story hinges on the quintessential virtue of Northam (one of the reasons he will soon become a cabinet minister), who is adored by his wife Blanchett. When however Moore arrives from Vienna (seat of continental sleaze) with a blackmail scheme directed at Northam for a bit of corruption in his past, his rise to the top is compromised along with the affection of his wife, who finds that she has been in love with his ideal virtue rather than with the man himself. With the often bumbling and endearing help of his friend Everett, Northam is eventually able to work things out: Moore returns to Vienna but not without at first trying to destroy the couple’s relationship through a final message-loaded misunderstanding, Northam and Blanchett are reconciled when she admits almost gleefully to her husband that she has told a lie, thus admitting that she too is imperfect and she should therefore forgive her husband for his indiscretions; in the meantime, Driver carefully steers the tongue-tied Everett into a proposal of matrimony; the film ends with them kissing passionately at the altar. It seems that everyone will live happily ever after. The film is delightful throughout – vivid, interesting, and attractive characters projected by first-rate urbane British actors, wonderful dialogue with the expected wit (“the love of oneself is a love affair that begins early and endures the rest of one’s life”), gratifying immersion in the beauties and privileges of upper-class Victorian society. Costumes and decors are impeccable. The Blanchett character is something of a downer; perhaps a more light-hearted and satirical take on her character would have improved the film. (2013)

**The Ides of March** 2011 George Clooney 3.5 Ryan Gosling as seemingly idealistic press secretary for a political campaign; George Clooney as apparently moral and sincere Democratic candidate for president in an Ohio primary campaign; Philip Seymour Hoffman as intense, chain-smoking chief of the campaign organization; Paul Giamatti as equally Machiavellian head of the opposing candidate’s campaign; Evan Rachel Wood as pretty, blond, ambitious campaign intern who becomes involved with Gosling; Marisa Tomei as cynical reporter for the Times. First-rate political film giving a highly cynical view of American politics and playing like a thriller. The narrative is complex with cynical machinations and sudden twists: Gosling accepts a secret interview with Giamatti that he doesn’t share with his boss (a clue that he is more ambitious than he at first appeared); Hoffman then retaliates by framing Gosling for a story leak and then suddenly firing him; a seething, revenge-obsessed Gosling then storms over to Giamatti to offer to work for him, but Giamatti reveals that the original interview was intended by him to discredit Gosling and to make sure he didn’t work any longer for Clooney; Wood, who has been having an affair with Gosling, reveals that she also had sex with the supposedly straight arrow Clooney and that she is pregnant; she has an abortion with Gosling’s assistance, but then commits suicide; Gosling gets hold of her cell phone and then blackmails Clooney into firing Hoffman and hiring him as his campaign chief; the film ends cynically with Clooney making a behind-closed-doors deal with a nasty politician and

Gosling primping for a big-shot interview with a television channel. The film is extremely well-acted: all the principals are arresting; even Gosling's boyish good looks are effective in deceiving the audience about his character. The complex story line is never opaque, but well designed to keep the viewer involved, thinking, and guessing. The narrative has many twists arising out of the competition and the doubles crosses, but none is more startling than the unexpected revelation of the main characters: Clooney, who appears through most of the film as a benign, Obama-like politician, turns out to be a sometimes womanizer and a political cynic: after much resistance, he finally makes the deal with the machine politician that appears to assure Clooney the victory. The dewy-faced Gosling, who goes out of his way to assure us of his devotion to the cause of right, is suddenly revealed as an ill-tempered, ungrateful, and ambitious climber willing to sell himself out to the opposition and to stab his mentor in the back. The view of American politics is caustically cynical: even the honorable candidates chase the interns and are forced to make shameful deals in order to succeed. The film recalls 1973's 'The Candidate' minus the befuddled humor manifested by Robert Redford. An extremely enjoyable movie expertly directed by Clooney. (2012)

**If I Were You** 2012 Joan Carr-Wiggin (writer and director) 2.0 Marcia Gay Harden, a skilled actress doing her best to make her character come alive – a married woman in her 30s or 40s jilted by her husband after many years of marriage; Leonor Watling as cute, pretty, and ditsy young Spanish lover of Harden's husband; Joseph Kell as Harden's ill-tempered husband, who says that he loves her but spends most of the film yelling at her. Misfired marital sex farce about the wife and the mistress of the cad Kell becoming friends; when Kell breaks up with Watling, Harden keeps the latter from committing suicide, thus beginning a friendship that afflicts the viewer for close to two hours. Both women are confused, but Harden seems to want mainly revenge on her husband, and ditsy Watling wants her lover back. The meandering, seemingly never-ending plot centers on the friendship and collaboration between the two women, which however goes astray when Harden has sex with a guy in a funeral home where both of their mothers just died (!) and Watling gets Kell to move in with her. A subplot has Harden's extremely foolish boss falling in love with her and sending her flowers to her home, thus raising the suspicions of everyone that he is having an affair with Harden. Another, funnier one has the two women join the cast of an amateur production of 'King Lear', in which Harden gets the lead role (now Queen Lear lives in fear of her three daughters): the play provides a few good laughs (although the director is comically incompetent); the film ends with some moving scenes from 'Lear' played by Harden and cast followed by an enthusiastic standing ovation from the audience that includes both Harden's husband (now attached to Watling, I think) and her new lover. The viewer is left with the puzzle of how the play relates to the farce of which it is supposed to be a part. The film's narrative has no apparent direction or structure: the women seem to be repetitively enmeshed in the same situation, saying the same things throughout the play; when things get dull, the writer introduces new characters that only further try the patience of the viewer. There is probably a good marital farce lurking somewhere in this film that would have to be teased out by a good writer (it would be 90 minutes long instead of over two hours). (2013)

**Il y a longtemps que je t'aime** 2008 Philippe Claudel (France) 3.5 Kristin Scott Thomas in blockbuster performance as dour woman who returns to her sister's house after serving 15 years in prison for killing her son; Elsa Zylberstein as her well-adjusted yet very sensitive sister -- she teaches at the local university, is a fond wife and the mother of two adopted Vietnamese children; Serge Hazanavicius as Zylberstein's loving husband; Lise Segur as the cutest Vietnamese child you will ever see in a film. Heartfelt, effective, down-to-earth film about reconnecting with a close relative after a traumatic experience and a long separation. The film takes place in Nancy (Lorraine), although there is little indication of a specific place. The film charts the gradual reconnecting of the two sisters, as Thomas reintegrates herself back into a life outside of prison, where she was withdrawn and depressed. The screenplay and Thomas' acting do not reveal in the beginning what she is experiencing -- is she moving toward redemption? Is she a psychopath who will strike again? She seeks sex one time with a guy she picks up in a bar, she develops friendships with two sympathetic men (one of whom (Frederic Pierrot) is unhappy in his work, dreams of exploring the Orinoco River, and then commits suicide; the other is a lively fellow professor of Zylberstein in the Literature Department), she finds a job working as a secretary



in a hospital (she had originally studied medicine before she went to prison), and she gradually develops an affectionate relationship with her two nieces, especially Segur. Sylberstein must also go through a path of reconciliation: through emotional outbursts she shows the suffering she has experienced from being separated from her sister. The film climaxes in a highly emotional scene between the two women, when Thomas reveals that she killed her terminally ill son out of mercy to relieve him from further suffering; after much shouting, the narrative ends in a tearful embrace. The film projects a very affectionate view of the family that plays, teases, enjoys life. Its style is elegantly simple, charting the development of the story in the midst of everyday activities like reading to the children at night, taking them to school, cooking and eating dinner. An extraordinarily impressive first film. (2009)

**Illegal** 1955 Lewis Allen (Warners) 3.0 Sometimes hard-to-believe legal melodrama about conscientious prosecuting attorney, who becomes a defense attorney of questionable principles when he mistakenly sends a man to the electric chair. Edward G. Robinson dominates the film as energetic, charismatic lawyer, who doesn't hesitate to use flashy methods in the courtroom (slugging a prizefighter in front of the judge, drinking a bottle of poison and then having his stomach pumped); Nina Foch tall and blond as adopted daughter, for whom Robinson has potentially tender feelings; Hugh Marlowe as shifty lawyer in the D.A.'s office; Albert Dekker as mafia kingpin, who hires Robinson in the second half of the film; Jayne Mansfield slender, long blonde hair as Dekker's mistress -- she reads her lines ably enough in her first film. The film's narrative follows the morally ambiguous Robinson: after resigning as District Attorney, he goes through a drunken period, but then re-emerges as a defense attorney with few scruples about whom he works for and the legal maneuvers he uses in their behalf. With his hard-bitten energy he carries the film through its narrative improbabilities and its outrageous courtroom behavior (What judge would allow him to slug a guy in his courtroom and then dismiss the case in Robinson's favor. Why would judge and jury be convinced of a defendant's innocence just because his lawyer (Robinson) swallowed a small bottle of poison?). In a twisty finale, the new D.A becomes convinced that Foch is leaking confidential information from the prosecutor's office to the Dekker; but hard-charging Robinson has double reason -- his affection for Foch and the knowledge that her husband (!) Marlowe is the actual leaker -- to get Foch cleared; he does this by calling Mansfield to the witness stand to testify that she heard Marlowe on the telephone speaking about the affair with Dekker. By this time Robinson has turned sensible about his relationship with Foch -- from now on she will be treated strictly as a daughter, not a potential lifemate. The film's strong points are the aggressive acting of Robinson and the cynical picture of lawyers, many of whom are on the take, working for underworld organizations, or motivated primarily by personal ambition. (2016)

**L'illusioniste** 2010 Sylvain Chomet (France) 3.5 A charming animated tale with a slight narrative based on an unpublished script by Jacques Tati that the author obtained from his daughter. The title character, who looks and behaves exactly like Tati, is a prestidigitator having a hard time finding employment in late 1950s Paris in the dawning age of rock and roll; he takes a job in a tavern in rural Scotland, where he meets a slight teenage girl, who persuades him to take her to Edinburgh; there they set up a household as father and daughter in a hotel inhabited by showbiz types (acrobats, a melancholy suicidal clown, etc.); the Tati character takes on several jobs (always unsuccessfully, e.g., when he fails to take good care of a customer's 1957 Chevrolet two-door sedan) to support his ward; meanwhile, she spreads her wings, finds a boyfriend, and thanks to "dad" begins to dress in modish late 50s clothes -- pretty high-heel shoes and baby blue dress with white trim just below the knee; the film ends wistfully and sadly with Tati setting his beloved rabbit free in the hills, leaving a note behind for the girl ("There are no Illusionists"), and then takes the train for ... no one knows. The mood is light and wistful in its melancholy: the Tati character is alone (no friends, no relative, no spouse), quite lonely as he wanders around the town with a long face and performs clever magic tricks in front of sparse audiences who show little appreciation. His only companion is a beautifully animated fat white rabbit who bounces around his apartment; he causes Tati deep concern when the girl serves him rabbit stew in the Edinburgh apartment, until the rabbit peeks out -- alive! -- from under the sofa. The character of the girl seems a bit egotistical: she seems affectionate enough toward him in the beginning, but she gives very little back once she has shed her working girl's clothes and begun to adapt to the urban environment. The lack of narrative

interest is more than made up for by the exquisite animation: carefully drawn water color backgrounds, pale colors, very exact details, smooth movements (and quirky in the case of Tati's stiff legged, rather obsequious and hesitant walk with his rear end usually protruding), picturesque sound effects, all giving a lightly mysterious glow to every setting; Edinburgh is particularly charming with its dark buildings, changing skies, mountains in the background, accurate small cars moving through the streets. The film is virtually wordless: all characters speak in a kind of gobbledygook with English and French words occasionally emerging from the stew; the music is light-hearted and thin, seemingly very French. (2011)

**The Imitation Game** 2014 Morten Tyldum (Britain) 2.5 Benedict Camberbatch as misanthropic, irascible, and egotistical Alan Turing, the Cambridge mathematician primarily responsible for the cracking of the German Enigma code at the Bletchley compound (under the cover identity of a radio factory); Keira Knightley keeping her rictus under control as the young woman who befriends, supports, and almost marries Turing; Matthew Goode as mathematical colleague of Turing that starts off suspicious but eventually decides to support him. Third film in 15 years about Enigma; while generally entertaining and adding the dimension of his homosexuality, this one does not seem to be as good as the 2000 Michael Apted version. The film focuses on Turing and his work on the Enigma project: arriving in 1939, he has to overcome suspicions and rivalries to get on the team; while opposed by the Commander of the project (Charles Dance), he somehow gets the support of Prime Minister Churchill, who puts him in charge over the head of his superiors; after many ups and downs, his machine is finally successful – in a dramatic scene in which the team confronts the turning computer wheels, they finally break the code (their success was due in large part to their success in excluding random possibilities); after the success, however, Turing insists that they use their secret sparingly, since the Germans would immediately change their machine if they sensed the Brits had cracked the code. Aside from the thriller aspect, the film devotes a lot of attention to Turing's sexuality. The business at Bletchley is framed by scenes that focus on his homosexuality: a rather maudlin series in his public school (around 1930) in which he falls in love with a fellow student (who dies before graduation); and a long and distracting postscript in 1951 in which Turing is investigated for the possibility of being a Soviet spy and then is subjected to chemical castration for his homosexuality – the printed postscript tells us that he committed suicide about a year later. It is apparent that Turing was a homosexual during his Bletchley days, but since he was not “out” at this time, the script writers could not include it in the narrative without the perspective of the postwar period. The story of breaking the code is gripping – an effective reconstruction of the anti-Enigma machine with its rows of twirling disks – but the story of Turing's sexuality seems to belong in another film. The film has a Hollywood character – rising John Williams-style music (by Alexandre Desplats) and a couple of ah-ha moments when some of the grunt work of cracking the code is reduced to a sudden, game-changing insight in a pub or when Turing's imminent banishment is foiled by a colleague's unexpected support. (2015)

**Imitation of Life** 1934 John Stahl 3.0 Claudette Colbert, Louise Beavers, Warren William, Rochelle Hudson, Ned Sparks (in his typical cynical sour disposition and raspy voice). First version of movie. Very well directed with effective use of close-ups of faces; and a kind of thematic continuity of Rochelle's toy duck – picture of it floating in the bathtub at the beginning and then Mom reminding her of “quack, quack” at the end. Good 30s women's movie with top stars, good acting (especially Beavers despite her rather saccharine character), and a good print showing excellent cinematography. Film approaches the issue of racial lines in American society, but very gingerly: great pains taken to make Beavers character subservient (she doesn't want a cut of the profits of her pancake business, but would prefer to remain a servant in Colbert's house!); she lives downstairs in modest room in Colbert's mansion; she does not apparently attend parties given by Colbert for her business; and the film deals with the relatively safe subject of light-skinned blacks being accepted as whites – script seems to say that Beavers and Peola would be happy if the latter would just accept her Black identity and not be obsessed with passing as white. Bigger theme is mothers and daughters; it seems that these two oppressed mothers would do basically anything to make their daughters happy – Beavers cares only for the welfare of her daughter and is constantly soothing her with “Baby, baby;” Colbert says repeatedly that she lives only for the good of her daughter, and she even breaks off her plans to marry William to please

her daughter. Neither daughter is as obnoxious and destructive as Joan Crawford's daughter in 'Mildred Pierce.' Biggest scene is Beavers' enormous pompous funeral, the only real ambition of her life. Another example of studio Hollywood making women's picture about businesswoman and the dilemmas the business brings to her life (is she going to sell out her business when she gets married?). One tires a bit of Colbert's ubiquitous smile; she seems incapable of other emotions including anger, worry, etc. Subplot of Hudson falling in love with her mother's boyfriend is very lame, and deserves to be cut from the remake! (2005)

**Imitation of Life** 1959 Douglas Sirk (Universal) 3.5 Lana Turner heartfelt, ambitious, honest, a good girl who wants the best for her daughter and who stands up for decency about race; Juanita Moore earnest, smiling, and good hearted in the usual servant's role, ending her performance with an eternal pained expression on her face; John Gavin very handsome, preppy although rather dour – wants a traditional wife and wears a dark suit or a dickie; Susan Kohner ill-tempered and resentful as teenage daughter of Juanita overacting most of the time (hugging her mother's hearse shouting "I killed my mother!") and hung up about being "colored"; Sandra Dee as over-dressed, pretty, peppy, good-hearted daughter of Lana; Troy Donahue in cameo as Susan Kohner's violently racist boyfriend. Exemplary pumped up Sirk opera from 1959. Based on the 1934 original but heavily updated for the late 50s. Follows the friendship of Turner and Moore from their meeting on Coney Island, to raising their daughters together, Turner's romantic difficulties and stage triumphs, the two women's troubles with their teenage daughters, and finally the death of Moore. The Sirk style is pumped up, pleasingly exaggerated. Filmed in the brightest of 50s color palates with emphasis on brightly painted lips; swelling, obtrusive music punctuating and emphasizing the melodramatic goings on; Turner appearing in dozens of impossibly glamorous costumes in monumental bourgeois houses (after her success), and Dee not far behind; exploitation of women's emotions – hopeless love, maternal pain and despair at the lack of loyalty from children, more suffering caused by Dee's professed lover for mother's fiancé; deep grief at the death of a friend. Approaches a lot of 50s themes: wayward teenagers that are the despair of their mothers (Kohner); the either-or conflict between career and marriage – Turner chooses great success as a stage and film actress, although fought every inch of the way by Gavin, who insists that she not work when she marries him, and Dee, who reproaches her tearfully for not having spent more time with her when she was a child. And then there is race: Kohner is humiliated that she is black (although she – incredibly given Moore's appearance – has in her no visible traces of it), and her decision to run away and become a "dancer" comes from her refusal to be identified with being "colored"; Moore is decent, quiet and reassuring with no hint of anger or rebellion; Turner is equally decent with never a sign of racism in her treatment of Moore (except perhaps that she keeps her as a servant and not a social equal). Except in the brutal and shocking Donahue episode, overt racism is absent from the film. Film ends in reconciliation at Moore's famous funeral (Mahalia Jackson singing, hundreds of people present, four white horses pulling the hearse through the street to the accompaniment of a brass band) with the pious wish that everything will turn out with just love, patience and loyalty. In its picture of the disintegrating family and unresolved racial tensions the film is essentially pessimistic. Imagery and strong emotion make it unforgettable. (2007)

**The Importance of Being Earnest** 1952 Anthony Asquith (Britain) 3.5 Michael Redgrave looking a little old for 28 as Jack Worthing, who takes the name of Ernest when he is in London so that he can lead a free life; Michael Denison as Algernon, Jack's equally romantic and witty friend, who pretends that he has a sick relative, Bunbury, in the country, whose crises give him periodic excuse to be absent from the City; Edith Evans in percussive, crusty performance as Lady Bracknell, who affirms the strictures of English upper class society that the film satirizes; Joan Greenwood as the rather neutral Gwendolyn, who is madly in love with Jack; Dorothy Tutin as the teenage Cecily, an absurd pastiche of girlish glee who falls in love with Algernon; Margaret Rutherford as the immortal Prism; Miles Malleon as the pedantic, kind-hearted, and confused Dr. Chasuble. Famous, witty, perhaps overrated satire of the late Victorian upper classes filled with Wildesian bons mots that often have little to do with the characters or the development of the narrative. The attentive viewer looks in vain for a theme or center of the film other than good-hearted satire and a source of clever quotations. Courtship is treated in the traditional

way: the two pairs of lovers have to overcome the usual obstacles represented by the censures of Aunt Augusta, but they are paired satisfyingly at the end and poised to live happily ever after. No discernible reference to homosexuality (surely, Bunburying...?). The older woman is a forbidding battleaxe. The clergyman is well-educated, but dull-witted, lazy, and clueless. Jack and Algernon resemble one another closely despite their antagonism through much of the film. One is tempted to find some meaning in the dual identities adopted by both Jack and Algernon, but they hold onto them only because their girlfriends insist on it (they have fallen in love with a name rather than with a man – one does detect a ridiculing of romantic behavior), and they abandon their false identity when it is convenient. The famous last line in which Jack states that he learned the importance of being Ernest/earnest seems to be just a witty play on words rather than a satisfying summing up of a major theme. What might be the importance of earnestness? On the other hand, the film is wonderfully acted and beautifully produced with memorable late Victorian interiors and costumes that distract the eye. One must enjoy the play for what it is – a succession of Wildean *bons mots* and epigrams pungently delivered by the all-star British cast. Of all the characters perhaps Lady Bracknell's imperious, measured speechifying and Cecily's hilarious and absurd spoof of a foolish British maiden in love are most enjoyable. Many of the tropes of W.S Gilbert – the older woman, girlish glee, "topsy-turvy" plot contrivances such as the baby Jack being discovered in a bag in Victoria Station – can be detected. (2014)

**In a Lonely Place** 1950 Nicholas Ray (Columbia) 3.0 Humphrey Bogart as a mercurial, sometimes violent Hollywood writer who is suspected of murder and falls in love with Grahame; Gloria Grahame as girl-next-door, struggling would-be actress who wants to believe in Bogart; Frank Lovejoy as sympathetic police investigator; Art Smith as Bogart's long-suffering agent. Interesting psychological drama that takes place in credible Hollywood setting -- bars, apartment complex, a police station, on the road with unconvincing back screen projections. Bogart plays a conflicted character accused of a murder that he might have committed; the director gives us plenty of reason to think so as the camera looks into Bogart's tortured eyes (his eyes are spot lit in the creepy scene in which Bogart describes to Lovejoy and wife how he might have committed the murder if he had done it). The real drama is the development of his relationship with Grahame: they are both "lonely" people looking for a foothold in life; they seem to have found it, but the tension of the investigation brings out the anger and violence in Bogart (in one scene he beats up a motorist in a vicious bit of road rage), and in the end, Bogart is found not to be guilty, but his near-homicidal anger causes Grahame to walk out of the relationship. Some poetry in love lost, since both principals recite the following lines -- "I was born when you kissed me, I died when you left me, I lived a few weeks while you loved me." It is a small tragedy that they are not able to get together. A moving scene is in a restaurant men's room when Bogart expresses his remorse to his agent after he hit him with no reason while seated at dinner. Excellent lower level A movie in the film noir period, although despite some dark shadows this is not a fully qualified film noir (the femme is a good girl, the film is not narrated, the characters do not seem doomed, but the audience keeps hoping that they will solve their problems and get together). The viewer experiences some skepticism about the supposed violence of Bogart's character -- we need a bit more background to make us understand how a bad temper could cause such failure. (2006)

**In America** 2003 Jim Sheridan (Ireland) 3.5 Paddy Considine, Samantha Morton, Emma and Emma Bolger, Djimon Honsou. Autobiographical film about Sheridan's family going to NY for dad to look for acting job. Script written by Sheridan and his two daughters. Psychological/family drama as whole family tries to overcome the impact of the death of a young brother from cancer. Rather sentimental as film schemes to get us involved and to care. Outstanding acting from all characters, particularly SM as Sarah and the two girls, who have an unnatural genuineness and wisdom; Ariel fills screen with her joy of life; older sister moving when she finally speaks out at the end. Backdrop is struggling actors' life in NY, and the tenement where they lived filled with drug addicts and transvestites. Humor on adaptation to life in USA, attending parochial school, trick or treating in the slums, etc. Noble struggle of family to make it and to deal with the past. Father finally learns to cry at end as he looks at moon (shades of ET), and *then* he is able to get an acting job because he can feel. A simplicity of style

and genuineness of feeling that is rare. A peek at the nobility of which common people are capable. (2004)

**In the Bedroom** 2003 Todd Field and Andre Dubus 3.0 Tom Wilkinson, Sissy Spacek, Nick Stahl, Marisa Tomei. Very slow moving film about what lurks below the surface in middle class New England. Generally well acted, although I was a bit turned off by the fireworks syndrome when TW and SS reach their emotional meltdown. Movie focuses on the emotional impact of murder on the parents, and leads one to think we are seeing a movie about healing; and then what it becomes a movie about revenge with no resolution about its impact (will they be caught? does the murder have healing properties? did SS order her husband to do it? what kind of friend would help his friend to commit murder?). Way too many character and plot questions left unanswered. And the switch to the murder plot, while emotionally satisfying to the viewer, seems scarcely credible in view of the prior development of the parents. Sissy Spacek is very unlikable as a character – controlling, unforgiving, etc., and this makes it hard to get into the movie. Wonderful photography and evocation of atmosphere of Maine town. (2004)

**In Bruges** 2008 Martin McDonagh (Britain) 3.0 Colin Farrell a nervous young Irish hit man with a bad conscience; Brendan Gleeson as older equally Irish hit man who is more relaxed and avuncular; Ralph Fiennes appears in last part of film as their hyper intense, profane boss driven by a punctilious sense of honor; Clémence Poésy as pretty love interest smiling compulsively for Farrell. Interesting first feature by McDonagh replete with violence, the color red, and obsessive use of the ‘f’ word. Two men are sent from England to Bruges (Belgium) after a bungled hit job in a church – Farrell kills a priest, who is the intended victim, but he also kills a child by mistake. The acting is excellent: Farrell and Gleeson bicker but also develop a camaraderie that includes a lot of humor. Bruges, which Gleeson visits as an interested tourist but which Farrell consistently qualifies as a “shithole”, is the backdrop of the film – quaint, historical, medieval, provincial, dull: perhaps a statement about life, although it does not quite fit. Characters are quirky. All the gangsters have good traits more or less: Farrell, the dramatic center of the film, is consumed by remorse for the death of the child; Gleeson is easy-going, kind, polite, and he progressively develops a paternal affection for Farrell, whose life he tries to save in the last part of the film by throwing himself from the city bell tower; Fiennes is the only truly bad man of the three, but even he appears to love his wife and he has a deep affection for his own children and for all children (the murder of the child is what motivates him to order the execution of Farrell). Film specializes in improbability. Conversation is Tarantinesque in its apparent non sequiturs and surprising connections – e.g., the Amsterdam prostitute who says she came to Bruges in order to get a better price for her pussy. The narrative is full of twists, many of them improbable especially toward the end: Fiennes shoots Gleeson in the neck and yet he is able to crawl to the balcony of the tower and throw himself over as a warning to Farrell; driven by his sense of honor and his concern for an unborn child, Fiennes agrees not to shoot Farrell in the rooming house (the pretty pregnant owner refuses to get out of the way) but to have a chasing contest in the canal; Fiennes finally shoots Farrell several times through the body (always graphically portrayed), but he is carried to a hospital where he still hopes to survive (end of film). Good emotion evoked in the audience by Gleeson’s increasing identification with Farrell and his sacrifice of his life for him at the end; interesting although puzzling turn by Fiennes who pursues Farrell because he killed a child, and when at the end he thinks he has shot a child (it is actually the star dwarf of the film), he shoots himself in the mouth saying that you have to be true to your principles (!). Film is original and interesting; it is completely unpredictable; and it breaks many rules, including those of probable psychology and plotting. Several moments of feeling and humor. (2009)

**In Cold Blood** 1967 Richard Brooks (writer and Director) 3.0 Robert Blake as the complex and conflicted killer Perry, Scott Wilson as the more straightforwardly lowlife partner Dick Hickock, John Forsyth as the extremely straight arrow and rather dull KBI investigator pursuing the men. Sort of docudrama treatment of Truman Capote's famous reportage about the apparently senseless murder of the Clutter family in Holcomb Kansas (1959). Film traces the events leading up to the murder, and then blacks out as the two men enter the house; we don't learn what they did to the family of four until Perry

tells his story to Forsyth in the car driving through the rain, thus preserving a semblance of suspense. Film has deadpan, documentary-seeming approach, as we watch the men walking through the streets of Kansas City before they pull off a bad check scheme, driving down endless Kansas and California desert roads, sitting in their jail cells not doing very much. Section depicting the murders well filmed and edited, avoiding blood and gore and giving us insight into the boys' personalities – after Perry's objections to the plan and his repeated exclamations of how "stupid" the whole job is, we are surprised that he is the one who commits all the murders. After the murder flashback is finished, the rest of the film is an anticlimax, as the Capote figure (played by Paul Stewart) badmouths the death penalty (the film's social conscience); it ends with the detailed although not graphic hanging of the two men. Film focuses on the psychological background and upbringing of Perry: he had an unhappy family life (mother was an adventurous slut), he was small and sexually inadequate, he had lied about killing a man in Las Vegas and we are led to believe that he generated enough rage to commit the Clutter murders to prove to his sidekick that he was a real man. He had also just watched his friend have sex with a Mexican girl while he daydreamed about his father beating up his mother when he caught her with another man having sex in front of the children. The idea is that Perry got up the nerve to commit the murders only in his relationship with Hickock. Film is fairly long and drags somewhat (just like real life). A worthy attempt to make a "realist" American film. (2006)

**In the Company of Men** 1996 Neil LaBute 3.5 Aaron Eckhart as Chad, an incredibly bitter, misogynistic young computer worker who is even worse than he seems, Matt Malloy as his boss and hanger on who goes along somewhat reluctantly with his scheme, Stacy Edwards as pretty brunette deaf secretary who is the vulnerable, almost defenseless butt of their plot. Very cynical, even nihilistic take on men-women relations and corporate politics in contemporary America. The film takes place in a faceless corporation, where everyone is competitive and ambitious and eager to please their bosses for promotion; they are willing to do almost anything for success. Chad, reportedly dumped by his girlfriend Suzanne, concocts plot with his follower Howard (Malloy) to team seduce a vulnerable young woman and then abandon her in revenge for all the ills and humiliations they have suffered at the hands of women (i.e., they draw back from relationships with them); their mark turns out to be Christine (Edwards) – since she is deaf Chad is even more pleased at the pain he can wreak on her. Chad is a veritable monster, but he is handsome and often likable, and he has a way with words (obviously reflecting the wordsmithness of the playwright) that keep our attention and amuse the viewers who appreciate language. He is at his best in describing contemptuously the mechanics of Christine's speaking (little bits of spittle forming at the corners of her mouth, watching the mechanics of her forming her words until finally a voice emerges something like Flipper's). As his seduction of Christine progresses, we are nearly seduced too by his sweet nothings, his gifts of flowers, and other acts of apparent thoughtfulness, and we wonder if perhaps he is softening and falling in love with her; but we are brought around brutally in the end when he dumps her and leaves her sobbing on the bed. Meanwhile, Howard also pursues her, but much less resolutely, and he actually falls for her (although since the viewer is unsure of what is going on, we wonder if his thoughtfulness might be part of his technique to set her up also for a brutal fall), and thus ironically becomes vulnerable himself. Chad turns out worse than we thought. He specializes in humiliating people; for him life is a struggle and success goes to the most ruthless; he intends to push people around just as he had been pushed around. He is a misanthrope and not just a misogynist. He picks on men too: he forces a young (black) executive trainee to "show me your balls" (literally) to demonstrate that he has the boldness to deserve a promotion; he intentionally sabotages Howard's relations with his bosses back East and he gets him demoted; in a startling revelation he reveals to Howard that Chad's girlfriend had never left him in the beginning, thus demonstrating that the plot they had hatched together was really a trick on Howard; when Howard reveals at the end that he is suffering because of his rejection by Christine, Chad gleefully rubs it in and asks him "how does it feel." In the end, Howard sees Christine in the bank and shouts to her "Listen to me!!" We cut to Christine's point of view, and we see Howard's contorted face and mouth "shouting" in front of her but in total silence – communication is impossible, and perhaps she is so traumatized that she will never again have a relationship. All is reduced to nothingness! What a ride. (2006)

**In Harm's Way** 1965 Otto Preminger 3.0 John Wayne perhaps more relaxed than usual as dedicated, intrepid, aggressive and risk-taking ship commander; Kirk Douglas highly conflicted, alcoholic subordinate, who is however a competent officer; Patricia Neal sensible, assertive, but ultimately dull as John Wayne's love interest; Meredith Burgess good-humored, loyal, and competent as intelligence officer; Carroll O'Connor competent shipboard officer; Patrick O'Neal as scheming political officer that gets his comeuppance; Brandon DeWilde as sophomoric prig allied initially with O'Neal; Jill Haworth as pretty young nurse who is raped by Douglas and then commits suicide; Tom Tryon as competent, attractive junior officer; Ursula Andress as his happy wife, missing her husband; cameos from George Kennedy, Henry Fonda very charismatic as Admiral Nimitz, Dana Andrews as incompetent admiral. Intermittently interesting half World War II epic, half soap opera focused on the redemption of the John Wayne character between Pearl Harbor and about 1943. Wayne is unfairly relegated to a desk job following his loss of a ship in the Japanese attack, but he is resurrected by the influence of Burgess and promoted to admiral by Nimitz to command an attack on Japanese strongholds in the South Pacific. Although he loses most of his fleet and is severely wounded in the naval engagement with a vastly superior Japanese fleet (including the battleship Yamata), he pushes through to victory; at the end, Nimitz restores him to a command (even with a peg leg), and of course Patricia Neal is waiting patiently. The battle sequences are rousing, alternating between real shots of U.S. navy ships and sequences of large-scale models (apparently photographed in the Salton Sea) that look pretty good although stripped down and plain. The film effectively beats the patriotic drum, as the Americans take their revenge on their "Jap" opponents. The weaker part of the film is the heavy focus on personal relationships back home (the film seems to be trying to appeal to a female audience). Douglas is the troubled character: in the beginning his unfaithful wife is killed in an auto accident, he parties a lot and drinks too much, and he rapes Haworth in a little credible scene; partly out of guilt, he undertakes a virtual suicide mission in a B-25 and dies gallantly (redeemed) after reporting valuable reconnaissance back to Admiral Wayne. Another subplot has Wayne's long-lost son (DeWilde) reject his father and follow the lead of the useless, unprincipled O'Neal; but our hearts are warmed when he rejects O'Neal and dies gallantly in a PT boat engagement. The film might have been more compelling with a more consistent focus on the political and military events. (2015)

**In the Loop** 2009 Armando Iannucci (Britain) 3.0 Peter Capaldi as stratospherically foul-mouthed communications secretary for the British prime minister (one wonders why he wields so much power); Tom Hollander as mild-mannered, rather nerdy junior minister who seems over his head; James Gandolfini as blunt, combative Pentagon general who is opposed to the war being hatched by the British and American governments; Anna Chlumsky as sexy young aid to the under secretary of state; Mimi Kennedy as the Under Secretary who is leading the American charge against the war; David Rasche as the other Under-Secretary who is leading the charge for war; Chris Addison as often nonplussed junior aide to Hollander. Entertaining, sharp-tongued, highly satirical but ultimately sad comedy about the reactions of the middle ranks of British and American governments in their stampede toward war with an unnamed foreign power (obviously the lead-up to the war against Iraq). Capaldi and Rasche are partners in preparing public opinion for war and presenting the Anglo-American case to the United Nation; Hollander, Gandolfini, and Kennedy provide the main opposition; Chlumsky and Addison are the very young aides of the doves (very young-looking political aides in Washington is a running joke throughout the film) trying their best to keep abreast of events. Despite the humor, the environment is disturbing – almost all the principals are extremely foul-mouthed (Capaldi is the champion), aggressive (verbal donnybrooks between Gandolfini and Capaldi, vicious putdown of Capaldi by Rasche, etc.), and egotistical. There is very little sign of friendship or love or an idealistic concern for the well-being of the country (Hollander being perhaps an exception); everyone is busy promoting their own careers (the line is often repeated that 'your career is over!'), struggling to survive in the rough and tumble of politics. The film ends in farce/tragedy: the war proponents resort to forgery and manipulation to convince the Security Council to vote in favor of war (the U.S. refrains from imposing a tariff on Chinese imports to secure Chinese abstention in the vote); of the three who have promised one another to resign, only Kennedy follows through – Gandolfini says that now the war is here, his duty is to stay in office, and before Hollander is able to resign, he is fired by the prime minister over a petty dispute between him and one of

his Northamptonshire constituents; and the two nations march toward war. The viciousness and foul language in the first part of the film are entertaining, but the nihilistic nastiness gets a bit tiresome and repetitive as the film progresses. Based on British TV programs. (2009)

**In the Mood for Love** 2000 Kar Wai Wong (Hong Kong) 2.0 Seriously overrated lethargic film about lovers in 1962 Hong Kong who refrain from having an affair so as not to lower themselves to the level of their unfaithful spouses. Maggie Cheung as reserved middle-aged woman svelte, big-haired perfectly coiffed, dressed in high-collared floral silk dresses; Tony Leung equally formal, much younger, perfect slicked-back hair, always in a silk suit as an unlikely potential lover. Film suffers from extremely sluggish plot movement and there not being enough at stake to keep the attention of the viewer. The story takes place in 1962 Hong Kong – dilapidated apartments with very small rooms, scuffed walls, overcrowded with large numbers of middle-aged women. There are several scenes of Cheung walking up and down the stairs to the accompaniment of Nat King Cole crooning love songs in Spanish; interestingly when the principals are conducting conversations with their spouses in the beginning of the film, the faces of the latter are never shown. Practically all the shots are in medium range – two interlocutors, rarely close-ups and no long shots or establishing shots. The camera focuses almost exclusively on the two principals, who fall in love because of their proximity and the absence of their spouses. The scenario slowly follows their developing bond, one ah-ha moment being their conversation in a restaurant booth when by a casual conversation about neckties and handbags they discover that their (always absent) spouses are having an affair in various Asian cities. Despite their passionate (one surmises) tie, they decide not to have a sexual relationship, perhaps because, as one of the two says, that would put them on the same low level as their spouses. There ensues what appears to be reticent suffering, Leung with a pained expression on his face and Cheung seated disconsolately by herself in her bedroom with a tear rolling down her cheek. The conclusion falls dramatically flat: many years later Leung visits Angkor Wat, recalls his day of desire, and the screen goes to black. Despite a reasonably interesting portrait of petty bourgeois life in 60s Hong Kong and some stimulating camera movement (along corrugated and weathered walls), the film offers very little to hold the viewer’s attention. Criterion should have spent its money on a more worthy film. (November 2017)

**In the Name of My Daughter (L’homme qu’on aimait trop)** 2014 André Téchiné (France) 2.0 Catherine Deneuve glamorous in her old age as the owner of a Cote d’Azur casino determined to protect it from the mafia; Adèle Haenel as her charmless, masochistic daughter, Agnes Le Roux; Guillaume Canet as Deneuve’s lawyer, an equally unsympathetic and unattractive character that plots to enrich himself at the expense of mother and daughter. Dry, disorganized, oddly unbalanced film that begins as a character study of mother and daughter in conflict, and then veers into a would-be crime thriller, in which Canet plots with an Italian mafia big shot to subtract the casino from the Le Roux and to line his pockets in the process. The film is based on a true-crime adventure that occupied the French tabloids from the 1970s through the 1990s. Since Téchiné never manages to generate sympathy for any of the characters, the film does not engage the sympathy of the audience – just one thing after another. Canet is unattractive and deadpan, as if sleepwalking through the film. Haenel has an intriguing beginning – daughter revolting against her mother, refusing to have anything to do with the casino, and falling for her mother’s lawyer – but her supine attachment to Canet is hard to explain, her dealings with him are repetitious and masochistic, and the last third of the film has her weeping continuously and caving in to her lover’s most extreme demands (e.g., in a Swiss bank signing over her inheritance to Canet). The film picks up when Haenel disappears mysteriously (the viewer strongly suspects that the perp is Canet), but the director then blows his chance by skipping thirty years and focusing on a murder trial that ends inconclusively. Some lovely scenes of the French Riviera and of motorcycle rides through the Alps. A film that is hard to stick with. (2015)

**In the Valley of Elah** 2007 Paul Haggis 3.0 Police procedural that turns into a reflection on the dehumanizing impact of war as a distraught father seeks the murderer of his son, who has just returned from a tour of duty in Iraq. Tommy Lee Jones effective and often moving as abrupt, laconic ex-Army non-com barely able to contain his grief about the killing of Mike; Susan Sarandon in small role as



his distraught, emotional wife; Charlize Theron often less than convincing as local civilian police detective that helps Jones; Jason Patric as Military Police investigator – his job seems to be to protect the army rather than solve the crime; James Franco; Josh Brolin. Steeped realistically in army culture, the film is convincingly sited on and off an army base in barren New Mexico (the terrain often recalls Iraq). The murder mystery is set up in grisly fashion by the discovery of the son's charred and dismembered body on the outskirts of the base. The film is partly a plodding police procedural as Jones, a kind of outside gadfly, prods the reluctant military and civilian police to pursue the investigation: suspicion first falls on Mike's possible involvement in drug trafficking, but it is discovered that he was knifed to death by his army buddies, who then dismembered and burned his remains; afterwards, they went to a chicken restaurant for a late-night dinner. The film thus becomes a denunciation of the dehumanizing impact of gritty warfare on the soldiers participating: deprived of civilized restraint by struggling for their lives in a war zone, they turn upon one another in a fit of frustration. The film is well-made enough to capture the viewer's interest, but some aspects are frustrating. One wonders the meaning of the title – do we compare Jones with David descending into the Valley of Elah to confront the huge, unrighteous Goliath. Sarandon's and Theron's roles are emphasized to give the film gender balance, but Sarandon's character might have been better left out, and Theron's acting, while touching when she is with her little boy, fails to convince when she attempts to intimidate the military authorities or when she is winning the grudging respect of her sexist colleagues in the police department. The final, rather ham-fisted scene in which Jones gets a school attendant in Tennessee to hoist a U.S. flag upside down as a sign of the sickness of the country would have been better omitted. The theme of the film – the brutalizing of soldiers in wartime is real – but asserting that it could cause one soldier to stab his friend 42 times and then burn his body is excessive and defies credibility. The film commands respect primarily because of the weight of Jones' restrained performance. (2016)

**In Which We Serve** 1942 Noel Coward; David Lean (Britain) 3.0 Noel Coward as stiff-upper-lip, impeccably accented captain of a British destroyer in World War II; Celia Johnson very pretty but reserved and rather starchy as his upper class wife, eternally taking tea with her children in front of a picture window looking out on the gentle fields of England; Bernard Miles as loyal, commonsensical, and understatedly courageous lower class petty officer on board; John Mills as a simple seaman, also lower class; Kay Walsh as his pretty wife. Patriotic, morale-raising World War II creation of Noel Coward that enjoyed huge success on both sides of the Atlantic. Starts with the sinking of the *Torrin* by enemy aircraft (exciting sequences) and then flashbacks by survivors hanging on to a life raft as German planes continue to strafe them: includes especially scenes with the womenfolk left home, their worries, their courage and loyalty to their men and their country; also some previous battle sequences in which the *Torrin* does not usually do very well (once almost sunk by a torpedo) and their mission to rescue subdued BEF soldiers from Dunkirk. Film is a period piece that shows the united resolve of all Englishman – whatever their class or background – to make all necessary sacrifices to emerge victorious over Germany (no reference in the film to the help of the Americans). Upper and lower class folk express their determination to do their duty but with the British sense of understatement minus any patriotic fanfare, boasting or beating of one's chest. The film also unconsciously demonstrates the rigid class structure of the country and of the Royal Navy. Captain Coward is starchy and reserved giving impromptu pep talks to his men (“come a little closer”) and shaking the hands of all surviving crew members after the *Torrin* is sunk and they are given other assignments. He always seems to be stepping self-consciously out of his social and linguistic superiority – condescending and to cultivate a paternalistic closeness to his men (is his loyalty really to the king and the privileges that his class enjoys before the era of the Labor governments?). The scene in which Coward and Johnson meet Mills and Walsh in the railroad carriage is uncomfortable in its coded social distinctions. Nevertheless, one cannot help but admire the decency and dedication that got the British through. (2011)

**In a World...** 2013 Lake Bell 3.5 Entertaining, amusing, well-written Indie film about a young woman's campaign for personal success in the Hollywood voiceover profession. Lake Bell as cute, sometimes clueless, 30-year-old voice coach living with her dad; Fred Melamed, covered in hair from head to toe, as her arrogant, sexist, although-well-intentioned dad, who is the go-to trailer voiceover artist

in Hollywood; Michaela Watkins as Bell's sister, married to the unassuming, nice-guy Rob Corddry; Alexandra Holden as dad's trophy live-in girlfriend; Ken Marino as hunky protégé of Melamud, who expects to replace his mentor now that he is nearing retirement; Demetri Martin as awkward, nice-guy sound engineer pretty much destined to hook up with Bell in the rom com part of the film; Eva Longoria in a cameo trying to learn how to speak with a cockney accent; Geena Davis, hard to recognize as studio executive that gives the big voiceover role to Lake at the end. Starting off as a lowly coach of voice accents (a couple of big laughs from her mocking of Valley Girl accents), Bell goes up for jobs always held by men (cf. the immortal Don La Fontaine). When she is selected for a big network job, her highly competitive father, who had previously excluded himself from the running in favor of Marino, puts himself and Marino back in the competition; when Bell is chosen the second time, the dad has an amusing ego-driven meltdown, but with the help of his girlfriend he eventually accepts the presence of a woman (his daughter!) in the profession. In the meantime, the film delivers finely tuned comedy in a series of sit com-like plot lines. The main one is Bell's developing romance with the shy, tongue-tied Martin, who wins the audience's hearts by approaching Bell in a far more innocent manner than the macho Marino, with whom Bell has a momentary fling (Marino amuses us by biting Bell's nose when he kisses her). Less central is the tension that develops between Watkins and Corddry, when the former falls for a smooth-talking Irish guy she meets in the hotel where she is working as a concierge; a heart-warming moment when Corddry returns to his apartment and welcomes his wife by preparing a candlelight dinner for her. The central charm of the film is however the self-doubting, but cute and plucky Bell. We are all delighted when the cynical Davis awards her the part at the end. Bell is saying that women can, and should be able to, make their way into male bastions in Hollywood. Related to this is the real Bell's transformation of her screen image from the sex kitten of most of her previous movies into the fully rounded character of this film. (2015)

**Incendies** 2010 Denis Villeneuve (Canada) 3.5 Harrowing drama about Montreal twins' search for the truth about their family in (disguised) Civil War Lebanon; the film ends with revelations and confrontations resembling Greek tragedy. Rémy Girard as noble Montreal notaire, sort of guardian angel over the twins as they search for their brother and father; Melissa Désormeaux-Poulin as young French Canadian woman that searches for her family's roots in the Middle East; Maxim Gaudette as her less aggressive twin brother; Lubna Azabal in moving performance as their mother, victim of harrowing abuse and suffering before she moves to Canada. Most of the film is in French. It is structured like a thriller discovery: it begins with the kindly Girard reading Azabal's will to the twins with the commission from the mother to find their brother and their father, and then follows Melissa's assertive search, eventually seconded by her brother. The Canadians receive a lot of assistance from well-meaning locals, who are operating in a restored country, radically different from the numerous flashback scenes that emphasize the misery, violence, and suffering of Azabal (and every other inhabitant) during the (Lebanese) Civil War. An Arab Christian, Azabal makes the initial blunder of falling in love with a Muslim, with whom she has a son; he is murdered by her relatives in the initial scene of the film; shortly afterwards, she witnesses the slaughter of a busload of Muslims by the Phalangist militia (photos of the Virgin Mary attached to their rifles; her life is saved by the cross she wears around her neck); she then murders the head of the Christian organization in an exciting scene, after which she spends 15 years in a brutal prison, where, known as "the singing woman", she is beaten and brutally raped; she eventually gives birth to the twins, who are saved from drowning by a kindly nurse; somehow the three are eventually brought together and dispatched to Canada by a warlord (the relationship among the different political organizations can be murky). Through a meeting with a kindly (!) retired warlord, Gaudette learns the shocking final truth – their brother and their father are the same person: the baby born at the beginning of the film became a prison torture expert ("bourreau") and was thus the rapist and the father of the twins. Their father and the man who raped their mother was their brother – a double or triple shame they will have to live with for the rest of their lives. The scenes filmed in the Middle East (Jordan) are realistic, picturesque, and compelling – they look like the real thing of terror and violence. There is perhaps a bit too much grief and suffering for most viewers, and the inter-relationships of the actors, the matching of their ages, etc. sometimes strain credibility. Overall a powerful indictment of the suffering that humans inflict on one another. The film makes the curious point that notaires – the kindly, paternal

Girard and his conscientious, well-dressed Middle East colleagues that help in the search – are the agents of peace, truth, and civilization. A plea for peace. (2016)

**An Inconvenient Truth** 2006 Davis Guggenheim 3.0 A good, convincing documentary demonstrating that global warming is a reality and, slightly less obvious, that humans are playing a big role in causing it. Film is 80% a rehash of the slide show that Gore has been giving since 1989; the film was made to broaden the message he is preaching. Film is high quality -- Gore striding back and forth in front of lots of high-tech graphics that impart the scientific concepts pretty straightforwardly. Film does not add a lot of information and insight to someone who has been reading newspaper and magazine articles on the subject, but some parts are revealing to me -- the consequences of Greenland's icecap and the ice on Antarctica's western shelf breaking off into the sea, the graphics about the populated coastal areas being flooded by the ensuing 20-foot water rise, the study that shows the scientific community is unanimous on supporting the concept (928 of 928 articles published in refereed journals), but that about half of the newspaper articles on the subject indicate that the jury is still out. Gore is a fairly engaging lecturer -- earnest, clear, well-spoken, with moments of low-key humor (rescuing the frog who is boiling in the beaker, introducing himself as the man "who used to be the next President of the United States"), although his style would not keep undergraduates rapt. Some of the film is devoted to Gore's own journey -- growing up on a tobacco farm, not being able to tell the difference between work and play, the death of his sister from lung cancer due to smoking, his generally futile attempt to raise the consciousness of the Senate in the 1980s, a rehashing of the electoral loss in 2000. We are urged at the end to make a moral choice and take personal steps to help save the planet, which we have to believe is in grave danger after seeing this movie. Gore also emphasizes that the world is in need of political vision and courage on the subject, something that we apparently do not have right now. Since the material is quite familiar for aware citizens, the movie has perhaps less emotional impact than it might. (2006)

**L'inconnu du lac** 2013 Alain Guiraudie (France) 3.0 Thriller set by a lovely lake that doubles as a pornographically oriented analysis of gay society. Pierre Deladonchamps as Franck, sensible-seeming gay, who falls in love with...; Christophe Paou as Michel, handsome, seemingly dangerous cruiser; Patrick d'Assumcao as Henri, uncharacteristically flaccid man who develops a platonic friendship with Franck; Jerome Chappatte as nondescript police inspector who appears in the second half of the film to ask questions about the (apparent) murder. The film is photographed sensitively with extended shots of the sky, the multi-hued blue water of the lake, the grass and the trees surrounding it, often blowing in the wind. The film is very original. With no musical soundtrack, events take place to the accompaniment of the sound of the wind, the water, birds calling in the distance. The structure of the screenplay is dead pan: perhaps a dozen times the camera records the arrival of Franck's Peugeot in the informal parking lot, his walking on a path through the woods, and then sitting down to talk or flirt with someone else; after the sequence, evening arrives, Franck returns to the parking lot with little light, and the car departs to the familiar tinny sound of the diesel engine. More memorably, the lives of the gays on the lake beach are recorded with extreme frankness: guys lying around naked like slugs on a rock with their shaven genitalia in plain sight (they often seem positioned to show off their equipment); with the exception of Henri, no one talks; they just hook up and retire to the brush behind the beach, where they have sex: they seem to start with oral and hand sex, and then graduate to anal penetration; lots of gasping orgasms depicted in graphic completeness. Henri, who never takes off his pants, but just sits and looks at the water and carries on a conversation about his loneliness (he used to be obsessed with sex but now he is over it), is the exception. The thriller element is introduced about one-third through the film as Franck witnesses Michel drowning his lover in the lake; Franck then "falls in love" with Michel; when he meets him for sex, suspense ramps up as the viewer wonders if Michel will murder his lover. For reasons not entirely clear, Michel cuts Henri's throat toward the end (bloody mess for the first time in a mise-en-scene dominated by skin tones and light colors), and when Franck witnesses Michel murdering the police inspector, he runs away terrified. The film ends with Franck turning in circles in the dark, anxiously crying Michel's name. It is difficult to interpret this challenging film. With the plethora of sexual nudity, one wonders whether it might just be gay pornography. It is perhaps rather a critique of gay culture (coming from an openly gay man): the cultural domain (the beach) where the cruisers operate is clearly

removed from the heterosexual beach on the other side of the lake; most everyone rejects having a personal, intimate conversation with their partners and they don't generally want to continue their connections back in civilization; the sexual thrill is all that counts; it is in such a spiritually deprived environment that a serial killer can operate with impunity. (2017)

**The Incredibles** 2004 Brad Bird (Pixar) 3.5 Voices of Craig Nelson, Holly Hunter, Samuel L. Jackson as retired superhero who makes ice as a weapon (!), even Brad Bird as the "Darling!" clothes designer. Superior family film about superheroes that has a lot of adult subtexts and references/homages to other films. Most obviously is a satire of superhero films, since the protagonist, Mr. Incredible, marries Elastigirl and settles in suburbia in a kind of Witness Protection Plan (à la 'Goodfellas'), since society has reacted against them – lots of lawsuits on their heels. But Mr. Incredible soon responds to the need to save civilization, serve the public good, and he is soon on the tracks of a sort of villain, who just wants to eliminate all true superheroes (who have super powers) and replace them with his highly inventive but not superpowered self as the hero of society; he just wants to be loved. Things get really exciting and thrilling when the whole family joins in clad in matching suits concocted for them by the clothes designer. Mother and Dad have gotten seriously out of shape living the suburban dream – he with a pot belly that he has to work off with intensive exercise and her with very round hips that don't seem to get in her way. The children are pretty priceless: the teenage girl has the power to disappear (and thus to hide in embarrassment from her peers until she finally finds herself); Dash, it turns out, has the power to run *very* fast (in order not to be discovered his parents urge him not to run too fast in basketball and track competitions); and in the climactic battle, the little baby suddenly reveals his capacity to turn into a devil-like creature that defeats the bad guy. The island getaway and the big band jazz score are obviously taken from the Bond movies. Computer animation is excellent – spare and precise and yet exciting and eyebrow-raising. Basic idea is that society is leveling and opposed to anyone that stands out; the only way to survive is to conform to uniformity and pretend mediocrity (Mr. Incredible's absurdly boring job evaluating claims for an insurance company; Elastigirl's preoccupation with the status of her non-conforming children in their public school, etc.); the extraordinary, shinningly physical characters of course assert themselves, but one wonders at the end whether it will continue. Could this be a recrudescence of Nietzsche in American films? (2007)

**The Informant!** 2009 Steven Soderbergh 3.0 Matt Damon as Mark Whitacre, impulsive, habitually mendacious bipolar (?) executive for Midwestern agricultural firm ADM; Melanie Lynskey as his loyal, long-suffering wife; Scott Bakula as persistent, empathetic, sometimes paternal FBI Agent Brian Shepard. Somehow the protean Soderbergh turns this story of industrial whistle-blowing into a black comedy. For reasons gradually revealed as the plot unfolds, upper management Whitacre turns informant for the FBI against ADM's management, whom he accuses of price-fixing. His relationship with Bakula is rocky and frustrating, since Mark continually changes his story; when the narrative reveals that he was embezzling money from the company during the investigation, he continually increases his report of the money stolen – starting at \$2 million and ending up at \$11 million (some of the increase is due to interest!). In the second half of the film the focus shifts from the price-fixing to Mark's much more entertaining kickbacks from customers (even the ADM executives seem to get a kick out of his antics). The film ends with more or less justice done: the ADM executives pay huge fines to the feds and serve out three-year prison terms; Mark serves nine years (45 counts of fraud!), but in a postscript a still tells us that he landed on his feet with an executive job after his release. Although it is initially confusing, the humor is strong in the films. Damon wears a scraggly little mustache and a wig with flowing hair that he sometimes adjusts on screen and that he abandons revealing his bald head when in prison. The music score, which recalls TV sitcoms and caper films like 'Oceans 11', is completely at odds with a real drama; as soon as the viewer understands that the film is a comedy, the music becomes amusing. As Mark navigates his way through company politics in the beginning of the film, Soderbergh interjects his random thoughts and opinion on the soundtrack; in retrospect, the viewer understands that these thoughts are indications of his mental issues. His completely elastic relationship with the truth never fails to astound, e.g., his forged attestation of innocence from a psychiatrist is outrageously inaccurate and is instantly unmasked by his FBI handlers. Because of its genre *mélange*, the film is often perplexing, but

the humor is piquant. Soderbergh keeps the viewer involved by often shifting perspectives. Matt Damon does an excellent job portraying his quirky character. You have to hand it to Soderbergh to push the envelope a bit. (2015)

**Inglourious Basterds** 2009 Quentin Tarantino 3.5 Christoph Waltz as slimily polite and worldly SS Jew-hunting officer, who turns out to be opportunistic; Brad Pitt sometimes entertaining when he is spitting out his Tennessee drawl as chief of the Basterds; Melanie Laurent often forgettable as large-nosed Jewish woman who owns a movie theater in Paris; Diane Kruger as Bridget von Hammersmark, an Allied agent (or is she?) behind German lines; Daniel Brühl as innocently charming, often barely believable German war hero; Sylvester Groth entertaining as outrageous Joseph Goebbels parody; Martin Wuttke as extremely ugly, over-the-top Hitler; Mike Myers unrecognizable as British general; Rod Taylor even more unrecognizable as degenerate-looking Winston Churchill. Extremely entertaining film ostensibly about Jews taking revenge on Germans and Nazis in World War II France. Divided into five chapters that are narratively connected, but the film can be appreciated more as a series of exercises in filmmaking, parody of Hollywood conventions, spectacle, baroque, extreme violence (the viewer if treated to several graphic scalplings), over-the-top acting, etc. The intersecting assassination plots that dominate the second half of the film are pretty ludicrous (Laurent proposes to burn her own theater down with all Nazi dignitaries present; British agents with help from the Basterds plan to blow it up with explosives attached to their legs like terrorists), but they provide lots of opportunity for cliff-hanging suspense, and it is fun to see Hitler, Goebbels and Göring consumed in the final *Götterdämmerung*. The film plays with the revenge motif: the Basterds are sent into German-occupied territory not just to kill the Germans, but to maim them and make them suffer, just as the German treated the rest of Europe, in particular the Jews. The first scene is memorable: set in a pristine French countryside, we watch with increasing unease as the ever polite and worldly Waltz in his conversation with a wary French farmer gradually closes in his Jewish victims hidden below the house's floorboards. Another nicely executed Tarantinesque scene is the tavern scene, in which a threatening and veiled conversation with an SS officer (played with creepy persistence by August Diehl) has the audience squirming in its seats; the scene segues into a Mexican Standoff with three revolvers pointed at the testicles of two characters, and a final shootout in which the only survivor is Kruger. Conversations are always interesting, but they are sometimes long-winded and having a hard time getting to the point (we all know what Waltz is after; why do we have to wait so long?). The film is too long for the plot that carries it – a good war melodrama on the same subject should come in way under two hours; but we are never bored since there is so much entertaining stuff, interesting music (Morricone in the first scene), scandal, laughs, violence, etc. to keep us involved. The film has a tighter narrative thread than 'Pulp Fiction', but like its predecessor it may be appreciated more for its parts than for the whole. (2009)

**Inherent Vice** 2014 Paul Thomas Anderson 3.0 A pastiche of a Raymond Chandler-type LA private eye caper set in 1970 featuring an extremely confusing plot and a stable of bizarre characters. Joaquin as pi Doc Sportello, laid back, in a perpetual marijuana haze, but still able – somehow – to do his job; Katherine Waterston as Shasta, his ex-girlfriend and the woman that visits him in the beginning to get the ball moving – throughout the film he is obsessed about getting her back; Joanna Newsom as the sometimes narrator mouthing some of the choicest lines of novelist Thomas Pynchon; Josh Brolin as Lt. Det. Bigfoot Bjornsen hilarious as civil rights violator and in-your face combination boyhood friend and nemesis to Doc; Hong Chau head of a brothel specializing in oral sex; Owen Wilson one of the few characters that does not emerge from the woodwork as jazz musician yearning for reunion with his ex-druggie wife and toddler daughter; Martin Short hilariously mugging as sex-crazed dentist (repairs the teeth of ex-heroin addicts) somehow connected to a drug ring called the Golden Fang; Reese Witherspoon as Deputy DA inexplicably linked romantically to Doc; Martin Donovan as crooked Palos Verdes businessman, whose main goal is to get even with Short for seducing and exploiting his daughter. The long film (2:28) reminds the viewer of 'The Big Sleep' as Doc takes on jobs from several clients and plunges into the thicket. The narrative is inextricable: the viewer realizes that there is a drug cartel out there on that lovely sailing ship and in that bizarre dentist's office, but Doc's movement through the lower depths of counterculture, hippie LA seems aimless: once he takes on his clients (perhaps four of them in

total), there is scarcely another reference to them. The strong point of the film is the off-the-wall, Lebowsky-style hilarity – the people and situations that Doc encounters on his peregrinations. He stumbles into a brothel specializing in oral sex; Bigfoot bloviates and dominates the several scenes he has with Doc, while he dreams of starring on TV as a cop character; Martin Short manically grins as he sniffs cocaine and pursues his secretary in his underpants; Wilson’s wife shows her prominent, off-color false front teeth in her first interview with Doc; the buttoned down Donovan tells Doc what he will do to Short when he gets his hands on him; Doc’s understudy is not able to drive Doc’s car; the Golden Fang gang that reclaims the dope from Doc uses their children to shift the packages to their own station wagon. The film has strong social-political references – the California hippie and drug culture in the days right after the Manson murders, Nixon’s patriotic activities in Southern California (Donovan is one of the leaders of the organization). Enjoyment of the film is greatly enhanced by the score of Jonny Greenwood buttressed by an entertaining mix of 60s and 70s songs, including two by Neil Young. The film has moments of sensitivity and pathos: Doc’s affection for Shasta; his affection for Wilson, even sacrificing monetary gain in order to get him untangled from his informants webs; Wilson’s passion for returning to his family (the reunion is sensitively photographed by Anderson); and especially the touchingly sad revelation in a phone conversation that Bigfoot is violently henpecked by his wife – fuck, fucking, fuck! Edited and with perhaps a more expressive performance from Phoenix the film could have been another ‘Lebowsky’; perhaps it will still emerge as a cult film. (2015)

**Inherit the Wind** 1960 Stanley Kramer 4.0 Spencer Tracy, Fredric March, Gene Kelly, Claude Akins. Title is from Proverbs: “He that troubleth his own house will inherit the wind, and the fool shall be servant to the wise....” Fictionalized, dramatized account of the famous Scopes trial in Tennessee in 1925. Terrific, crisp black and white photography, camera moving when needed to record facial expressions, show events and reactions in courtroom, etc. A veritable slugfest of acting. Great example of liberal-oriented issues films made in the 1950s. The only false note is Kelly, who is mannered, overacting, and always looks as if he should break into dance. Spencer Tracy is grave and weighty and delivers big emotional, professional punch, although he sometimes looks like he is enjoying breaking the china a bit much; his powerful delivery is however usually effective, especially in scene when he breaks down Brady (Bryan) on the stand and when he is supposed to be the bully. March is even better as Brady, who has a big heart and who shows compassion in the beginning before he gets taken entirely with the joy of combat, is totally devoted to a literal belief in the Bible, has a terrific oratorical voice (even if the content is a bit smarmy), but who appears to be in bad health and whose performance is a bit over the hill; he loves to pose, and crack folksy witticisms at the expense of the opposition. Art direction is excellent and believable, especially in the courtroom scenes – we really believe we are there. The atmosphere is circus and carnival like, especially in the beginning, although the media frenzy is downplayed (radio is introduced by Jack Klugman in the last scene). Fundamentalist religion is handled roughly -- Claude Akins as fire and brimstone preacher who threatens people with hell and in the process alienates his own daughter. Townspeople are at first 100% against Drummond, but after his manipulations and the excesses of Brady, they sort of swing behind the teacher out of sympathy (and he is after all one of theirs). The script has the viewer choose moderation among the extremes of aggressive secular progress, and the obscurantism of Brady, and the nihilism/total cynicism of the Mencken figure played by Kelly; after being repeatedly characterized as Godless, Drummond says at the end that Brady reached too far to find his God (implying that Drummond believes in God who is around us at all times), and then condemns Mencken for his godless relationship-less cynicism. Harry Morgan is good and solid as judge who, although siding personally with Brady, strains to keep the proceedings fair, and then gives into political pressure and assesses a very small fine at the end of the trial. Conflicts are heightened by including fictional relationships – the preacher and his daughter are fighting over his intolerance and religious violence; she in love with the teacher, and she must in end choose her future husband over her father, whom she leaves. Think about including chapters 1, 10, 13, 15, 16 (29 minutes). (2006)

**Innocents aux mains sales** 1975 Claude Chabrol (France) 2.0 Rod Steiger pretty bloated and intense as “murdered” husband (it is very hard to imagine Romy Schneider moaning with pleasure when he makes love to her at the end of the film), Romy Schneider blank faced (with very large eye sockets) as

his wife who plots with her lover to do away with him, Jean Rochefort as piquant defense lawyer who jokes a lot with his client and keeps her from being imprisoned. So-so whodunit thriller that specializes in plot twists – the police begin with a missing persons investigation, but we are led to believe that boyfriend and Schneider have murdered Steiger; then Steiger appears perfectly alive indicating that he has turned the tables on the lover (since he had known about their plot well before they tried to carry it out, he was ready for them); and then even boyfriend reappears from behind a door with a revolver in his hand, explaining that Steiger was too much a pussy to kill him like he had intended to. Film makes a stab at character individualization – Steiger impotent and then rediscovering his love for his wife (hence the hot sex!), and Schneider liking a young lover in the beginning, but beset by conscience qualms and returns to her husband at the end (although their reunion is ruined by his fatal heart attack). Set in St. Tropez, although film takes little advantage of cool location. Interior shots of palatial home are inexplicably ugly and claustrophobic. Acting is not impressive: Steiger blusters and suffers too much (and he is hard to look at); Schneider has a nice nude scene in the very beginning, but she remains stony-faced, marmoreal, impassive throughout the film; Rochefort is quirky and amusing and his repartee with the examining magistrate is fun to watch, but the attempt at Hitchcock-style humor with the two police inspectors – they are always eating and drinking while talking over the case – falls pretty flat. Not vintage Chabrol – too much emphasis on whodunit plot, doesn't work well with English-speaking actors, not enough thematic depth. (2007)

**Inside Job** 2010 Charles Ferguson 4.0 Outstanding documentary on the causes of the 2008-09 financial meltdown and on the individuals responsible for it. The film begins with a brief consideration of what happened in Iceland in 2008, then moves to the causes of the US meltdown, its progress, measures taken to deal with it, and a look at where we are now (2010). The author insists that the basic story is not complicated; that assertion is a myth spread by the perpetrators of the fraud to keep ordinary people from trying to understand what happened. Ferguson asserts that beginning in the 1930s the US financial system worked fine because of the stabilizing influence of federal regulation. Beginning in the 1980s financial magnates found that with CDOs (derivative vehicles that were based largely on sub prime mortgages) and Credit Default Swaps (insurance policies that could be taken out by the companies selling CDOs against their own products) and favorable ratings from the (well-paid) rating agencies, financial services companies could squeeze more profit out of resold mortgages, where there was essentially no additional intrinsic value. With the fading of government regulation, there was no force to stop banks and other lending agencies from issuing irresponsible sub prime loans that held little prospect of being repaid or to put a limit to the explosive growth of executive compensation (often in the hundreds of millions of dollars) that further promoted the process. Financial institutions were interested only in short-term profits and increase in volume. When the investment banks peddling the securities ran out of credibility and thus cash (they couldn't sell any more products, see the film 'Margin Call'), they fell into bankruptcy. Then to keep the whole financial apparatus of the western world from collapsing, the federal government intervened investing at least a trillion dollars to bail out the institutions, thus ensuring that taxpayers would pay the bill for the sins committed by the financial high rollers. The author identifies the axis of evil as the enthusiastic deregulator Alan Greenspan, Larry Summers (under Clinton), who killed the possibility of imposing regulation on CDOs, and perhaps the most outrageous, Henry Paulsen, who as Secretary of the Treasury (!) forced Congress to allocate the funds to head off the collapse. Ferguson makes it clear that little is changed under Obama, who has kept on many of the key players in the fiasco; the financial community, spending hundreds of millions of dollars in lobbying, seems to have control over the American state. The author benefits from well-reasoned testimony from economists (including Dominique Strauss-Kahn and Christine Lagarde) who had been deeply critical of the trend while it was happening and who had predicted severe problems. He was not able to get the main players in the story to be interviewed, but some of guilty economists such as Glenn Hubbard and Mishkin of Columbia University and the chair of the Harvard University Economics Department embarrass themselves and their profession by their inchoate, bumbling attempts to defend themselves and their own greed; so morally clueless that they weren't even prepared to deal with hostile questions. One of Ferguson's main points is the shocking corruption of the top layers of the academic Economists, who earned tens of millions of dollars feeding rosy reports to the investment banks. He concludes with a plea to return to

sanity, presumably with the traditional regulatory safeguards that had been in place before the madness began. The film begins rather quietly but picks up in outrage as it progresses -- while interviewing his subjects Ferguson sometimes cannot contain himself and he flat out suggests that they are lying. One leaves the film with a deep sense of outrage -- greedy bastards and a financial system run amok almost brought our country to its knees. (2013)

**Inside Llewyn Davis** 2013 Coen Brothers 4.0 Oscar Isaac as sad, young folk singer in New York in 1961 who can't find his way through life; Carey Mulligan, also a folk singer, wife of one of his best friends -- since she is pregnant by Llewyn, she stands out in her vituperative venom against our hero; Justin Timberlake as Mulligan's unsuspecting husband; Ethan Philips avuncular and friendly as Columbia professor that will do anything for Llewyn (including forgiving him for his rudeness); Robin Bartlett picturesque and moving as Philips' earth mother wife shocked at Llewyn's obscene rudeness; F. Murray Abraham as uncomprehending Chicago producer, who even though he likes Llewyn's song, says he doesn't see any money in it; John Goodman in another Coen cameo as obese, monstrous (Polyphemus?), logorrheic passenger in car in which Llewyn hitches a ride to Chicago. Another outstanding Coen feature -- this time about a hapless Greenwich Village folk singer who can't get a break. Isaac is iconic as a pre-Dylan folk singer, who used to have some success paired with his friend Mikey (apparently the son of Philips), who however committed suicide jumping from the George Washington Bridge; stricken by his loss, he wanders around New York and all the way to Chicago performing an occasional gig and looking for a place in the folk music scene as a solo performer; the narrative however is circular and fruitless -- he ends up performing a lugubrious song in the same cafe in Greenwich Village where the film began and then getting (inexplicably) beaten up in the alley by a disgruntled folk music fan; the last scene plays out with the newly arrived Bob Dylan singing one of his ditties in the background -- the beginning of a new era. The cat, whose name the viewer learns at the end is Ulysses, appears in the first scene staring into Llewyn's face when he wakes up on Philips' couch; after he escapes as Llewyn exits the apartment, he is in and out of Llewyn's life throughout the film -- at one point Llewyn returns the wrong cat to the Philips, at another he appears to hit him with a car on the road back from Chicago, and he finally returns spontaneously to his home at the end of the film. Llewyn, whose wandering haplessness is played flawlessly by Isaac, is another Coen protagonist, who like Larry Gopnik in 'A Serious Man' appears to be the object of derision and Schadenfreude by a heartless deity: some of Llewyn's misfortune is random (his partner committing suicide, the cat escaping out the Philips' apartment door, his former girlfriend taking his abortion money and then without telling him returning to Akron Ohio to have her baby, not being able to go to work for the merchant marine since his sister throws away his maritime papers), most of it is due to his bad choices and his disagreeable character -- getting his best friend's wife pregnant, his refusal to sing in a group, cussing in front of his 10-year-old nephew, his obscenity-laden tirade that almost alienates the Philips, etc. In any case, the random peregrinations of Ulysses seem to represent the aimlessness and lack of direction in human life; our feelings toward Llewyn at the end are mixed -- he has brought much of his misfortune on himself, but at the same time it just doesn't seem fair; this quiet, serious musician deserves better. The pure and tuneful Greenwich Village folk music movingly fills the sound track; Llewyn's songs are lugubrious and moving, especially the ones he sings to Murray Abraham and his father, who sits senile and wordless in a nursing home. One of the Coens' best. (2014)

**Inside Man** 2006 Spike Lee 2.5 Mainstream-style Hollywood thriller, where an apparent well-executed bank heist film turns into something else. Denzel Washington assertive as well-dressed New York police inspector specializing in hostage negotiation; Clive Owen well organized, aggressive as heist leader and planner; Christopher Plummer as bank CEO that wants to hide documents in his safety deposit box that would incriminate him as Nazi war criminal; Jodie Foster crisp and decisive as (one supposes) an elite negotiator brought in by Plummer to meet with Owen; Willem Dafoe in low-key role as police captain not charmed by the presence of Washington; Chiwetel Ejiofor charmingly young as Dafoe's right-hand guy. Well-photographed, well-acted, well-choreographed film that loses its way because of script confusion. About the first half of the film is compelling because of the well-organized attack on the bank (e.g., the perpetrators have all the employees dress in exactly the same costume as the robbers), the building sense of crisis as the police congregate outside the building (will the film be a redux



of ‘Dog Day Afternoon’?), and the duel of wits between Washington and Owen. The confrontation intensifies until Washington senses there is more than meets the eye: the attackers don’t really want to escape, they do not intend to harm any of the hostages, and that rather than rushing to get out, they are really stalling for time (when the police finally enter the building at the end, they find that the rifles are made of plastic and the currency lying around in the bank vault has not been touched). It seems that Owen et al. are really after a precious ring and some stones in Plummer’s safe deposit box; hence Plummer’s anxiety to protect his Nazi past from the criminals, who might expose him to the public when they discover the incriminating documents. (Why would Plummer, who has been doing good ever since the war and wants to be admired for his philanthropy, not have destroyed the documents a long time ago?) The occupation of the bank ceases, the hostage stream out into the street, there are some confusing bits about Owen sneaking a precious stone into Washington’s pocket when the former is walking unmolested out of the bank (!), and Washington’s day ends well with his reunion with his attractive girlfriend and his promotion to detective first class. The film could have been greatly improved by some clarifying script rewrites, which way too often leaves the viewer scratching his head. Hitchcock would have never tolerated such ambiguities in the narrative. (2016)

**Inside Out** 2015 Pixar; Disney; Pete Docter 3.0 Knock-your-eyes-out animated feature about the emotions of 11-year-old Riley when she moves with her parents from Minnesota, the only home she has ever known, to San Francisco. The five main emotions are personified and work tirelessly behind the scenes for Riley’s happiness. Amy Poehler’s voice as perky, cute, energetic, irrepressible cheerleader Joy; Phyllis Smith as hyper-sincere blue Sadness; Bill Hader takes a back seat as light violet Fear; Lewis Black very amusing as red Anger, whose head spews fire upward when he gets mad; Mindy Kaling as green valley girl Disgust; Richard Kind as goofy pink elephant Bing-Bong; Kaitlyn Dias as the adorable Riley. The computer-animated film is beautiful: in the realistic facial expressions and convincing environments (e.g., the full narrow streets of San Francisco) of Riley’s family sequences; in the dominating fantasy sequences bright colors, amusing expressions on the faces of the five feelings and the elephant, convincing movement as the islands crumble and fall off the edge into the abyss of forgotten memories. The personality and character of Riley is convincing and affecting: the viewer gets attached to her snaggle teeth and big Keene eyes, feels for her homesickness for the happy days in the snow and ice of Minnesota, and is delighted when she finds happy core memories about being in San Francisco and is thus able to thrive (but on the verge of puberty, as we are reminded in the final scenes). At least two-thirds of the film charts the infighting, uncertainty, and good intentions of the five emotions, whose interactions determine her real-life personality. Very important in the films’ mental topography are the memories that are encased in hollow glass orbs (like big marbles); every now and then a special experience moves into a core memory, and if somehow it is lost into the (yawning) abyss of forgotten memories, the person can no longer function. When this happens to Riley, she becomes sullen, ill-tempered, and unpredictable; and most of the film concerns the ever perky Joy leading sadness on a campaign to restore the core memories of happiness. The struggles are long and trying for the first viewing – so many obstacles repetitively overcome; surely the film could have been improved with some cutting and rewriting to improve variety. This viewer spotted a couple amusing throwaway lines, e.g., one cop in frustration to another, “Forget it, Jake. It’s just Clowntown.” (‘Chinatown’) Perhaps the most amusing moments in the film are the vignettes played during the closing credits. (2016)

**Insomnia** 1997 Erik Skjoldbjaerg (Norway) 3.5 Stellan Skarsgard as Swedish police inspector with mixed record called to northern Norway to investigate the apparent sex murder of a high school girl; Sverre Ousdal as Erik Vik whom Stellan kills by mistake in early fog on the coast; Marie Bonnevie as local police inspector charged with investigating the murder of Vik – she senses that Stellan is hiding something. Dark, slow-paced psychological study in the form of a thriller about a policeman’s aberrant behavior and guilt. Key event is that Stellan decides not to accept blame for the death of his partner, but to blame it on the murderer they were seeking. The film is set in the season of the midnight sun above the Arctic Circle where light is always bright around you and it is difficult for Stellan to sleep mainly because of his guilt about the death of his friend; the sun is a metaphor for the eye of God and truth that makes it difficult for Stellan to be at peace with himself. The filmmaker also uses bleak

landscapes and abandoned waterfront factories to suggest moral decay and desolation. Stellan goes from bad to worse, as he sexually molests a teenage girl that was a friend of the murdered girl, attempts to rape the receptionist of the hotel he is staying in, and plants incriminating evidence in the room of the victim's former boyfriend. The film suggests that sexual frustration is at the root of his misdeeds. Most interesting twist is the growing collaboration between Stellan and the murderer: for a while the two cooperate to clear each other of their murder/accidental shooting and blame it on the boyfriend; the viewer learns more about the sexual maladjustment of the murderer, who had decided to pass from the fantasy of writing about sex and murder to actually doing it, and about the elastic morality of Stellan, who is willing to resort to almost anything to stay in the clear. The collaboration unravels in the end when the two have a confrontation in an abandoned seaside factory, and Stellan passively watches the murderer drown after he has fallen through rotten floorboards into the ocean. In the end Bonnevie uncovers evidence that Stellan killed Vik, but she decides not to turn him in, although she lets it be known that she is aware of his moral corruption. Stellan leaves the North with an apparent success, but he – and we – know that he is seriously compromised. Although slow moving, the film holds one's attention because of its psychological complexity. (2006)

**Insomnia** 2002 Christopher Nolan 3.5 Al Pacino gaunt and exhausted as LA detective in trouble with Internal Affairs called to a small town in Alaska to help solve the murder of a teenager; Robin Williams under control but wierd as the murderer/author of detective novels; Hilary Swank as naive, bright-eyed local Alaskan detective; Martin Donovan as hapless sidekick of Pacino accompanying him to Alaska. American remake of 1997 Norwegian film; this time the remake is as good as, or better than, the original. This film plays with the same subjects: Pacino is in trouble from manipulating evidence in his previous job; he is a tough character devoted to his job but rough around the edges – he is sexually attracted to teenage girls, he has a hair-trigger temper, and he can't sleep at night (hence his chronic look of exhaustion); Pacino strikes up a kind of relationship with Williams, the perp, although it is ambiguous in this version whether he is playing him along for the arrest or really attracted to a like-minded individual. The American version is more plot-driven and less bathed in existential Angst: Donovan is a friend of Pacino, which makes Pacino's anguished reaction at his death understandable; Pacino actually has a motive to kill Donovan, thus leaving the viewer in doubt as to what happened that fateful day in the fog; the US version adds an attractive young woman, who spends a good part of the film on camera with Pacino; Pacino's inability to sleep is more explicitly due to his bad conscience of having killed his partner rather than a negative existential bath; Pacino does not have sex with the teenage girl nor apparently with the hotel receptionist (?), but in professional style resists their interest in him and focuses on his job; the final confrontation between Pacino on the lake includes Swank, whose heroic actions add drama and excitement to the action; the film ends with Williams and Pacino shooting one another to death -- Williams falls in the water and we see him floating eerily face up in the transparent water, while Swank mourns over the body of Pacino. Whereas in the Norwegian film, the detective returns to Sweden chastened but with the challenges of his life continuing, the American one is brutally tragic and moving, even more so since the straight-arrow Swank forgives Pacino and offers to hide the evidence that he shot his partner. As this film was shot in the fog shrouded inlets and lakes of the Canadian Pacific coast, it is far more picturesque than the Norwegian film, although retaining the small-town, isolated feeling of the original. Pacino's performance is aggressive and dramatic – lean, face lined with fatigue, tortured by his inner demons, and yet conscientious and often empathetic; his death was beautifully and movingly played. Both films are good; and they illustrate nicely the differing tendencies of European and American films. (2010)

**Intermezzo** 1939 Gregory Ratoff 2.5 Ingrid Bergman radiantly beautiful as young music teacher who falls unwittingly in love with Howard; Leslie Howard as handsome though somewhat callow Swedish concert violinist who finds himself drawn to Bergman despite his marriage; Edna Best as dowdy, colorless, patient and forgiving wife of Howard; Ann Todd as overacting, too eager-to-please adorable daughter of Howard and Best (about 10 and being groomed as the successor to Shirley Temple?). Typical love story with Bergman and Howard running off to Italy in an adulterous liaison after much hand-wringing and hesitation; Bergman never seems to have much fun (perhaps not advisable for an adulterer

under the aegis of the new Code) and she is of course stricken with her bad conscience (she has broken up a marriage); when she and Howard return to Sweden, an unrelated tragedy almost strikes when his daughter is hit by a car, but she survives, and when Bergman cuts the tie, Howard is reunited with his waiting wife. The husband returns to his marriage in order to satisfy the Hays Code. Movie is quite conventional, set in an upscale middle-class home in Stockholm inhabited by the ideal American-looking couple. Howard is rather tepid as a lover; only Bergman lights up the screen with her glowing, sincere young face – she steals every scene she appears in, especially in her close-ups. Film is suffused with quiet symphonic music playing Scandinavian classics, especially Grieg. It has an impeccable finish (D.O. Selznick's specialty), and perhaps as a result it lacks vitality, vibrancy, and spontaneity; actors' lines often seem rehearsed and stilted. The film is interesting mainly to see Bergman's first appearance in an American film and to study the work of Hollywood's interior designers and set builders. (2010)

**Interstellar** 2014 Christopher Nolan 3.0 Matthew McConaughey emotional and intense as Cooper, former NASA test pilot recruited to pilot an exploratory mission to another galaxy using a wormhole as passage; Mackenzie Foy as cute daughter Murph very attached to her father; John Lithgow avuncular as McConaughey's dad on the farm – he dies halfway through film; William Devane as one of the NASA administrators; Michael Caine paternal as head scientist, who invented theory and technology for completion of the discovery mission; Anne Hathaway as Brand, daughter of Caine and crew member that is expert on general relativity; David Oyelowo as crew member Romilly, who ages 23 years when crew returns from surface of Black Hole dominated planet; Jessica Chastain as grown Murph, who works for Caine and seems to be a math whiz; Matt Damon as isolated, revived Dr. Mann, whose world is completely frozen, but who turns out to be dominated by the survival instinct – selfish and cowardly. Long, high octane science fiction film with extremely complicated plot. The first part of the film is affecting – the human race on earth is dying, it seems, from over-population and diminishing food supply (so why is there no police or armed forces?); Cooper's prairie state corn farm is beset by dust storms and other problems. Through Murph's "ghost" discovered in the library room, Cooper finds nearby a NASA station, whose mission it is to explore the universe to find an alternative place for the human race to survive. Using wormholes (predicted by Einstein by deduction from the general theory of relativity) his mission (Cooper, Brand, Romilly, and Doyle) makes it through the Black Hole where in the next galaxy they visit two of the sites of the prior missions. One is impossible because the planet is covered with water which is constantly disturbed by huge, destructive waves – an exciting danger sequence. On the second they find Dr. Mann, who becomes the source of much conflict and confusion because of his selfish fear of death; Cooper however is able to survive a life-or-death fight on the planet, then to salvage part of their (circular, rotating) space vehicle, Endurance, that Mann had almost destroyed. The film has a grandiloquent, confusing ending: Brand and Romilly are sent by Cooper to the third planet to implement Plan B (i.e., use human embryos to populate it with new human life), and Cooper discovers a new multi-dimensional reality in the middle of the Black Hole; at first he thinks it was constructed by the "spirits" to provide alternative lodging for humanity, but then realizes that it was actually done by himself, which was made possible by time dilation effects (discussed endlessly throughout the film), and that the "ghosts" of Murph were really her dad communicating secrets about gravity through Morse Code recorded on an old-fashioned wrist watch (!!!). With the new information figured out mathematically by the grown neo-Einstein Murph, humanity then saves itself by building Cooper Station orbiting Saturn, where Cooper, now 124 years old – lands after his stay in the Black Hole. He has tearful reunion with a now very old daughter. Mission accomplished – lots of people orbiting Saturn, and who knows how many on the Edmunds planet. The film begins well, but in this viewer's assessment gets bogged down in a typically Nolanesque complicated plot (with lots of surprise revelations and turnabouts, such as Caine admitting on his deathbed that he lied to everyone about his intentions) and in never-ending reflections about the relative effectiveness of scientific reason and knowledge and emotion – primarily love, especially for one's children; the two of them play a role in the denouement – love for Cooper to figure out how to contact his daughter and reason to overcome gravity and deposit the human race near Saturn. Lots of special effects to simulate space and other planet worlds, many of which resemble Kubrick's '2001'. Pumped-up music abounds, as does intense emoting, especially from McConaughey and Hathaway. A

great deal of the screenplay is devoted to explaining the many head-scratching arcane scientific theories to the viewer. Still, an entertaining and thought-provoking epic film. (2015)

**Into the Abyss** 2010 Werner Herzog 2.5 Long-winded, sincere, often rather sentimental documentary about a triple murder in Texas and its aftermath. Two men found guilty of the crime, only one of which given the death penalty; he is executed shortly after the interview. Film begins with running crime scene footage taken from the local police, and then proceeds to mostly interviews of the two guilty men, relatives of the personalities involved, and a former death row captain that was not involved in the execution. An awful lot of talking heads. In interviews Herzog lets the camera run in very long takes, which often become a bit repetitive. The man on death row proclaims his innocence and even “forgives” the family of the victims and the authorities for the outrage they perpetrate in executing him. The author is obviously opposed to the death penalty (he suggests to one interviewee that Jesus would not have approved), but he does not wear it on his sleeve. The interviews with the two condemned men are fairly banal. The daughter of the murdered woman (wearing bright lipstick) gets a lot of camera time expressing her sorrow; and talks how she was relieved by being present at execution, even though she seems to agree that Jesus wouldn’t have approved of capital punishment (there are some people who just don’t deserve to live). Herzog also dwells on the interview with silly, pretty, and sincere woman who describes how she fell in love with Jason (the one with the life imprisonment) when he was in prison; she knew instantly that she loved him because she saw a rainbow in the sky; she was convinced that Jason did not commit the murders. Insists that she is not a death-row groupie, that she is not using the relationship for publicity. At the time of the interview, she is pregnant; Jason apparently smuggled a sperm sample out of the prison and his wife became pregnant through artificial insemination. Perhaps the most moving interview is with a former captain on death row, who after being in charge of over 100 executions, decided he couldn’t continue and then resigned giving up his pension; very heartfelt and emotional, he doesn’t think anyone, including the state of Texas, has the right to take a life; he testifies that the most important thing is how are you going to “live your dash” (between the birth date and the death date on one’s tombstone); one of his priorities is to watch the birds. One of the most shocking aspects of the film is its portrait of the culture of criminal families – multi-generational, drug-addled, casually killing people they have nothing against, and spending most of their lives in prison. This is a sincere film inviting reflection, but it is perhaps too static to draw the viewer into the story. (2012)

**Into the Wild** 2007 Sean Penn 4.0 Compelling, moving drama about college graduate (Emory University) driven to live alone in the Alaska wilderness; Emile Hirsch as baby-faced, fanatically driven 22-year-old Chris; Catherine Keener as kind of substitute mother figure Emile meets on his travels; William Hurt affecting as initially grim then grief-stricken father; Marcia Gay Harden with abundant hair as Emile’s mother; Jena Malone as sympathetic sister Carine, who narrates much of the story; Zach Galifianakis in small role as Kevin; Vince Vaughn who hires Chris on his Dakota farm before he is arrested by the FBI; Kristen Stewart as thin teenage girl in trailer camp, who wants to get it on with Emile; Hal Holbrook as kind, emotional old man Ron that Emile meets by the Salton Sea. Story is unforgettable. It is edited together in complicated way: main narrative follows Hirsch from Atlanta to Alaska; but it starts with his providential discovery of a bus in the Alaska wilderness, and then his story there is intercut with flashbacks explaining his challenging relationship with his parents and with his loyal sister, and also his journey across much of the American West and the prairie states to Alaska, focusing on memorable shots of American scenery and his encounters with significant characters. Chris is fanatically contemptuous of the hypocrisy and artificiality of “society”; he is devoted to an extreme interpretation of “Walden Pond”; although his initial travels are on the fringes of society, once arrived in Alaska he must live absolutely alone in “freedom and simple beauty”, living off the land by picking berries (not successful despite his handbook) and by hunting small game with a .22 rifle (an attempt to preserve the meat of a killed moose is disastrous); he seems completely apolitical. The fewer people he sees and the less money he has, the happier he is. He quotes Thoreau, “Rather than love, than money, than faith, than fame, than fairness, give me truth.” The viewer constantly asks whether Chris is journeying toward a valid and beautiful destination or is he just reacting against his hypocritical and often violent parents. The film emphasizes their pain, to which he is completely indifferent. But he does seem

to connect with substitutes he encounters on his way: the naïve couple with as foreign accent (the girl does not cover her breasts), Keener and her husband, particularly the retired loner in the Palm Springs desert played with great feeling by Hal Holbrook, who develops a deep paternal feeling for Chris, even proposing to adopt him (Chris turns him down). The film has a memorable gut-wrenching ending. Perhaps because winter is approaching, he is no longer able to support himself: the only berries he can find are poisonous, and all his small game has disappeared; he becomes visibly emaciated, sleeps a lot, and then realizing that he must die, he bathes himself, dresses in his best clothes, imagines a tender reunion with his parents, and covers himself with blankets to await death; the camera back away from the window of the bus, and then retreats high in the sky with the view of the bus lost in the uncharted wilderness. (His body is later found by hunters, and his ashes are fetched by his sister.) Film style is very inventive – split screen, stop motion progressive; some slow motion; reflections; hyper close-ups of small animals; out of focus when subject is in distress. The movie has a very emotional impact right at the dividing point of wilderness and civilization: the romantic idea of solitary immersion in nature is compelling, but it is cruel and unforgiving when separated from human community; the naïve, idealistic romantic is destroyed by it. (2016)

**Intruder in the Dust** 1949 Clarence Brown (MGM; based on the Faulkner novel) 3.5 Low-key drama-murder mystery about overcoming racial prejudice in the South. Claude Jarman Jr. as the upright teenager Chick; Juano Hernandez as noble, “proud, stubborn, insufferable” black man, Lucas Beauchamp, a gentleman who doesn’t kowtow to whites; David Brian as Chick’s uncle, John Gavin Stevens, a lawyer, relatively free of prejudice – he serves as Lucas’ lawyer; Porter Hall as old man cracker guy, Gowry, whose son was murdered; Elizabeth Patterson as Mrs. Habersham, upright, feisty, fearless grandmother (?) of Chick – she takes the initiative in investigating the murder; Will Geer as the sheriff. The story takes place in the 1940s in the realistic, quaint town of Oxford Mississippi (actually filmed there in Faulkner’s home town). Lucas is accused of the murder of a white man; he is imprisoned as a lynch mob threatens to take him out of the jail and burn him. The narrative thread revolves around finding the true guilty party. An unlikely trio works together to bring justice to the innocent black man: Stevens is the lawyer and voice of prudence and reason that guides the investigation; Chick, an honorable teenager guided by his uncle, takes the initiative to exhume the body of the dead man to see if he was killed by Lucas’ pistol – he finds the grave empty (they later find it nearby buried deep in quicksand); Mrs. Habersham is the spirited grandma who sits in the jail vestibule with her knitting in her lap to deter the lynch mob from getting hold of their victim. The sheriff joins the trio to discover that the dead man’s brother pulled the trigger (motive not revealed). He is brought to the jail, and Lucas, once freed, goes to Steven’s law office to pay his debt; equal to equal, the black man demands a receipt after payment. The film has parallels with “To Kill a Mockingbird” and reflects Faulkner’s picture of dawning racial tolerance in the Deep South. Although blacks are clearly deferential and subordinate, the two races seem to get along decently well; none of the townspeople are willing to resort to violence but wait for the dead man’s family to take the initiative; the mystery is solved with the assistance of old man Gowry, who disarms and helps arrest his guilty son. The important thing, says the film’s conscience Stevens, is that there are at least a handful of right-thinking people in the community to recall the meaning of justice. As Stevens says at the end, “We (whites) were in trouble, not Lucas Beauchamp”; “We’re okay so long as at least one of us doesn’t run away (from racial injustice).” The film is short and compact with effective dialogue and it achieves a discreet eloquence in its subtle and quiet narrative flow. Interesting that MGM produces a civil rights movie before the Civil Rights Era. (2017)

**Investigation of a Citizen Above Suspicion (Indagine su un Cittadino al di Sopra di Ogni Sospetto)** 1970 Elio Petri (Italy) 3.5 Compelling policier about a senior police inspector who commits a murder and then incriminates himself to show that he is above the law. Gian Maria Volonte percussive, shouting, dominating chief of homicide (Rome); Florinda Bolkan as his sexy, manipulative, BDSM-oriented mistress, whom he murders; Aergio Tramonti as Antonio Pace, a left-wing radical who is also Bolkan’s lover; Orazio Orlando as Brigadiere Biglia, Volonte’s principal assistant. The film twists the thriller policier genre in the beginning so that the viewer takes perhaps half an hour to figure out where it is going. Volonte murders his lover with a razor blade during rough sex, and then leaves multiple clues

pointing directly to him. It becomes apparent that the arrogant Volonte expects that his subordinates will eventually get the idea, but that they will avoid accusing him – the police are addicted to power and always close ranks to protect one of their own. They are presented as the last barrier to protect civilization against the subversives. Volonte’s motives however are complex: the abusive sex he has with Bolkan soon turns into mutual hatred, which gives him an additional reason for killing her. Much screen time is also given to Volonte’s crusade against the shibboleth-shouting leftists (this is Italy’s Red Brigades in the early 1970s), whom he intimidates and abuses when interrogating them (their shouts of “fascist pigs”, “capitalist stooges”, etc. are extremely annoying). The film builds to a powerful inverted conclusion: Volonte increasingly loses control of himself trying to get his police buddies to recognize his guilt: he loses his temper with Pace when the latter refuses to identify him as a man leaving the murder site right after the murder; in the finale a large group of blue-suited police superiors show up at Volonte’s home, and when he tries to confess and prove to them that he is the murderer, they refuse to accept it, saying that the only confession they are interested in is a confession of innocence! He finally agrees with them. The pleasure of the film is enhanced greatly by the original, distinctive score of Ennio Morricone – odd-ball instruments (Jews Harp?), syncopated rhythms, bright, accented, and brassy. The film is a new experience for an American viewer not used to political denunciations of the arrogance and unfettered power of the police. Petri quotes Franz Kafka at the end: “...egli è un servo della legge, quindi appartiene alla legge e sfugge al guidizio humano”. (2017)

**The Invasion of the Body Snatchers** 1956 Don Siegel 4.0 Kevin McCarthy, Dana Wynter. Superior low budget, paranoid 50s sci fi about invasion of forces bent on replicating and replacing human beings. Big emphasis on the threat to our individuality, our emotions, our ability to be excited and enthusiastic, the experience of love, the enjoyment of beauty. The pod people who replace us look exactly like us but they are like robots/automatons. “They’re taking you over cell for cell, atom for atom. There is no pain. Suddenly, while you’re asleep, they’ll absorb your minds, your memories, and you’re reborn into an untroubled world.” They take over when you go to sleep and your guard is down. Under their regime, “There’s no need for love...Love, desire, ambition, faith. Without them, life is so simple, believe me.” There will be no emotion. Big question is – is this a critique of communism that turns us into political robots, subverting us from every side while our leaders bury their heads in the sand? Or are the authors addressing the forces of conformity in American society, and perhaps even criticizing the public’s craven acceptance of McCarthyism? Special effects play a minor role – only the major scene in the hothouse with the rapid development of the slimy pods into human replicas. Paranoid atmosphere; it takes place in a small town where everybody knows everybody and the town is cut off from the outside world; the atmosphere becomes especially intense in the latter scenes, when it is clear to our protagonist that everyone else in the town has already been transformed. Lots of chills and little shocks as the doctor and his girlfriend figure out what is going on, and then discover little by little that their friends and relatives have been turned into pod people. Ends with beloved Becky finally falling asleep (when the transformation takes place), and Doc has to flee, now entirely alone. Ends somewhat ambiguously with emergency room personnel in another town finally taking Doc seriously and calling the FBI and police, but not clear on whether the campaign to get them will be successful. The prologue and the ending were tacked on by the studio to play down the paranoia of the script; the film should have ended with the scene where Kevin McCarthy wanders in the freeway (dangerous!) shouting, “You’re next!” But this was apparently too downbeat for the studio. (2005)

**Invasion of the Body Snatchers** 1978 Philip Kaufman 3.5 Donald Sutherland as Matthew, a determined San Francisco health inspector that leads the counter-offensive against the invasion; Brooke Adams as Elizabeth, pretty, chagrined friend of Matthew; Jeff Goldblum as excitable frustrated writer, Jack Bellacic, who runs the key mud baths; Veronica Cartwright as Nancy, his wife, often in the baths pushing aggressively for a response to the threat; Leonard Nimoy as popular psychiatrist, who uses psychological categories to explain away the threat. Remake of the famous 1956 film with more emphasis on literal special effects showing the transformations caused by the alien pods. Kaufman’s film follows generally the original narrative – the threat of replacing real humans with soulless, loveless clones when the former are sleeping; gradual discovery of the situation by a group of friends, stepwise, shocking

conversion of the friends to the clones, even Elizabeth with whom Matthew has fallen in love (predictable from the beginning), until Matthew is left alone. It is different in several ways: instead of Siegel's political subtext, Kaufman presents the threat as a horrible infectious disease akin to the plague; the narrative is set in an intense urban area – San Francisco – instead of small-town Santa Mira, thus rendering more palpable the threat to a large population; the narrative makes clear at several points that the life forms have left a failed home far away (another planet?) and are seeking a new home with no competition from the native species; the story includes a skeptical character – Nimoy – who tries to calm everyone with pop psychology explanations (in one of the film's surprises, he is revealed as one of "them"); in the conclusion after Matthew mourns the loss of Elizabeth, he is revealed as one of the clones when right in front of City Hall he horrifyingly fingers Cartwright as yet unconverted; the conclusion is even more pessimistic than the original version, since there is no hope that anyone will remain uninfected. This film has two homages to the original – Kevin McCarthy sprawled across the hood of Matthew's taxi shrieking "They're coming!" and cabby Don Siegel asking suspicious questions as he drives Matthew and Elizabeth to the airport. Special effects are vivid and gruesome: the innocent-looking flower that grows and gives birth to the slimy substitute body covered in spidery webs; the Bellacic mud baths with the slimy curtained-off tubs; the whitish-greyish colored bodies squirming on the ground together waiting for their targets to fall asleep; Elizabeth's face decaying and disintegrating in front of Matthew's horrified gaze when her substitute is ready; the predator-looking expression on Matthew's face as he identifies Nancy as one of the untransformed. The narrative is densely paced with surprises, often when nice-guy characters are suddenly revealed as pod people, Nimoy, then Jack, then Elizabeth, then Matthew. The excellent sound track adds to the insecurity, suspense, and shock. Good show. One of Hollywood's best remakes. (2015)

**Invictus** 2009 Clint Eastwood 3.0 Morgan Freeman doing his best to be as friendly, courtly and relaxed as Nelson Mandela (but don't expect a convincing South African accent); Matt Damon essentially with little personality, dutiful, focused and beefy (he gained a lot of weight!) as François, the captain of the Springboks, South Africa's national almost all-white rugby team (his accent is more convincing); Marguerite Wheatley beautiful and sexy but with little to say as Damon's South African girlfriend. Well-made, Hollywood-style film about Nelson Mandela's successful attempt to use the 1995 Rugby World Rugby Cup as vehicle to unite white and black South Africans in a common patriotic endeavor. The famous 'Invictus' poem from Victorian England is used as an inspirational piece. Mandela's challenge was daunting, since white and black are pitted against one another in the wake of Mandela's election to the presidency in 1994: Damon's father is constantly making cynical, racist remarks even in the presence of his black maid (Eastwood cuts to her when the dad makes the observations) and the black ANC radicals are trying their best to abolish the Springboks name and colors. Mandela is presented as a secular saint, who despite his suffering 27 years in prison at the hands of the Apartheid government, holds no grudges and makes it clear that he will do all that he can to ensure the loyalty of both black and white South Africans, even to the point of standing up against his black supporters when they want revenge against whites. He is optimistic, conscientious, determined, courtly with the ladies (he always has a compliment to his female assistants), although he does not pursue them; he is chagrined that he is separated from his wife (the infamous Winnie Mandela) and alienated from some of his children. The film does a nice job of showing the tension between the two ethnic groups; the halting union of whites and blacks in the president's security detail show the difficulties but relative success of Mandela's program (the blacks end up getting excited about the Springboks' progress). The second half of the film is a 'Rocky'-style sports triumph. In the beginning the Springboks are an embarrassing team in international play, but thanks to a challenging coach, the inspirational leadership of their captain, François, and the unflagging support of the president, they rise to a mighty finals confrontation in Cape Town with an intimidating team from Samoa. A well presented 20 minute coverage of the game yields a close 15-12 win for the South Africans and plenty of opportunity for the mostly white audience to savor the victory of reconciliation. The film's point if of course facile: huge problems remain in South Africa to challenge the nation beyond the rugby victory. Well made Hollywood-style athletic triumph film with a political subtext. (2010)

**The Invisible Man** 1933 James Whale (Universal) 3.5 Claude Rains in Hollywood breakthrough role as once respectable scientist discovers a drug that makes him invisible; Gloria Stuart as Rains' (dull) love interest with the patented early 30s Hollywood fake British accent; Henry Travers as uninteresting former scientist colleague; Una O'Connor plays the fussy, hysterical, shrieking wife of the innkeeper with expert Cockney accent; William Harrigan featureless, cowardly, and hysterical British friend who is dragged into service by Rains. First-rate early talkie Universal horror picture combining drama, horror, and comedy with first-rate special effects. Smashing beginning – Covered man stumbles through driving snowstorm and then barges into happy pub imperiously demanding a room for the night. Rains has stumbled upon a formula that makes him invisible, although he preserves most of the characteristics of weighted bodies – volume, size, weight. The problem is that the formula also unhinges the recipient; and Rains thus goes the gamut between impish humor (mischievously cackling with delight as he leads the townspeople on a merry chase, chasing an old lady while wearing only a pair of pants stolen from a policeman, tweaking the nose of a bobbie, etc.), to megalomania and a professed desire to rule the world, to downright sadism, where he runs a train off the tracks (excellent use of miniatures), murders a policeman, ties up his ex-confederate Harrigan and runs him off the cliff in his car (another good scene using miniatures), and talks constantly about ruling the world and terrorizing the population (“We’ll be with a reign of terror. Maybe a few murders or two.”). Some initial sympathy for the Invisible Man soon dissipates under the weight of his power lust. Pursued by hundreds of policemen (who sometimes resemble the police in the ‘Pirates of Penzance’), he finally comes to an end when the police set fire to the barn where he is sleeping and then shoot him dead in the spot where they see his footprints progressively imprinting the snow. As he dies in the hospital bed, his body rematerializes on the pillow in front of his weeping girlfriend. Good studio-created British atmosphere with snow blowing on the outside; humorously timorous, skittish townsfolk making folksy remarks. The famous special effects are convincing: showing his invisible body as he takes off his clothes; the match and cigarette float in the air with Rains being completely invisible; pajamas move around with no head, hands, or feet; highly amusing sequence in which the invisible man disrupts a police meeting by slinging ink in the face of the chief and then throttling him, etc. The film can be moderately frightening, partly because of the grotesque effect of Rains’ bandage-wrapped head, perhaps mainly because of the actor’s voice that makes perhaps an even greater impact with no face; the film would probably be scarier if there weren’t so much effective humor. (2011)

**Io sono l'amore** 2009 Luca Guadagnino (Italy) 3.0 Tilda Swinton pulling out all the thespian stops as Russian-born matron of wealthy Milanese industrialist family; Flavio Parenti as her handsome, intelligent son; Antonia Biscaglia as gourmet cook in the family kitchen, good friend of Parenti, and eventually lover of Swinton; Pippo Delbono as Swinton's decent, competent, but apparently not romantic enough husband. Exquisitely photographed and acted 'Dynasty'-style soap opera set among the lives of a wealthy Milanese family. The narrative is steamy but often buried beneath thespian heroics of Swinton, who is a repressed powerhouse of emotions, and the aesthetically exquisite cinematography and editing. The film focuses on the declining fortunes of a traditional industrialist family (apparently exploited Jewish workers during the war) not able to resist the temptation to sell out to a seductive Mephistophelean American with a Taliban beard, who sings the praises of globalization and “moving to the next level.” More central is the focus on the outsider status of Swinton; it is always apparent, but it breaks into crisis when she finds out that her daughter is a lesbian and she falls for the family cook, who is going to open a restaurant in the San Remo hills with Swinton's son; the crisis atmosphere culminates with the accidental death of Parenti, the extreme and desperate grieving of Swinton, and then her sudden departure, apparently to live happily ever after with Biscaglia since they are pictured during the end credits in a cave. The film extends the 'amour fou' tradition of French films, whereby the lovers recklessly throw off the constraints and inhibitions of stuffy civilization, declare their lust for one another in the most inappropriate of circumstances (right after the death of Swinton's son), and exile themselves to somewhere outside the city; thrown in also is a bit of D.H. Lawrence, with Biscaglia as the earthy male stud who satisfies his woman ecstatically, and rhapsodic shots of blooming flowers and buzzing insects as the couple make love in the meadow. No doubt that the cinematography is usually strikingly beautiful -- from the romantic, rutting riot of the coastal mountains and meadows to the carefully controlled sepi-



toned and classically balanced shots of the interior of the cold, elegant palazzo, to the textbook demonstrations of the moving camera following a character down the steps, into the next room, and then back up the steps after a surreptitious kiss with his lover. The film has an episodic driving score from John Adams that includes 'The Chairman Dances'. The cinematography and editing are often self-conscious and thus distracting the viewer from an appreciation of the characters and the narrative. Many interesting things in the film popping out at the viewer, but they aren't brought into a satisfying dramatic whole. Guadagnino needs to take a lesson from Truffaut or Woody Allen -- just make the film and let the characters and the narrative speak for themselves. (2010)

**Iris** 2001 Richard Eyre (Britain) 2.5 Somewhat ponderous treatment of Iris Murdoch's decline at the hands of Alzheimer's. Cuts back and forth between present (rapid and tragic decline as she (Judy Dench) is deprived of her reason and use of language) and past (when young husband meets fast living, elusive Iris (Kate Winslet) in young days in college). We don't learn much about Iris as a novelist or artist. Focuses on her illness, and on the tragedy of her husband (Jim Broadbent), who was brought out of shy isolation by the young Iris, and then remained hopelessly fond of her and devoted until she died; this despite that he never got to possess and penetrate the inner artist Iris, the depths of her soul, but only her exterior self, sane while it lasted. He is lonely and brave man. Movie is good, a little too clever (cutting back and forth between two time periods); perhaps we miss seeing the middle when husband was devoted before she began to lose her mind. (2004)

**The Iron Lady** 2011 Phyllida Lloyd (Great Britain) 3.0 Meryl Streep in another moving, expert impersonation of Margaret Thatcher, prime minister of Britain from 1979 to 1990; Jim Broadbent amusing, pixie-like – imitating Charlie Chaplin – as the ghost of Thatcher's husband, who visits her in her bouts of dementia; Alexandra Roach charming and blond as Thatcher in her 20s and 30s; Nicholas Farrell as Margaret's kind patron, Airey Neave. Entertaining and sometimes moving portrayal of the life and career of Margaret Thatcher, perhaps marred by a flashback apparatus that distracts from who she was. The film's present is more or less 2011, where Margaret is living alone, somewhat senile, imagining that she is constantly visited by her husband who has been dead for many years. Just as in her best years, she is formal, irascible, distant even with her daughter (Olivia Colman) who comes around benevolently to help her, but cogent enough when she is hosting a dinner with her former colleagues. She is constantly accompanied by the spook of her husband who appears in the apartment with her to tease and encourage her. The film periodically flashes back to her history: first to her adolescent years and the Conservative activism of her father, who was a shopkeeper, then to her single-minded rise as a mp for the Conservative Party from her district, her entry into the House of Commons, where the novelty of the arrival of a woman is emphasized by the *mise-en-scène* (her stylish pumps photographed under the benches next to a sea of men's shoes); her campaign (successful) to become the party's leader in the crisis-rich late 70s, her voice lessons to learn how to speak definitively without "screeching" (the accusation of Opposition leader Roy Jenkins), and then a quick trip through her eleven years as prime minister – the furious demonstrations against her anti-union policies, her friendship with the Americans (an amusing, non-plussed Alexander Haig!), turning around her popularity with her populist-patriotic appeal during the Falklands War with Argentina, and then finally her overthrow by her own party because of her arrogant treatment of her colleagues and her apparently hardening-of-the-arteries caused inflexibility in policy decisions (her insistence on a poll tax). Overall, an effective sentimental appeal to her courage in challenging the male establishment and to her perseverance and gutsiness in pushing her way to the top and doing what she thought right to put the "Great" back in Great Britain". Throughout Steep seems almost more Thatcher than Thatcher herself; she takes the PM's mannerisms and pumps them up into an entertaining caricature – her slightly splayed front teeth, the "Oxford" voice inflections, her smugness when replying to Opposition attacks on her policies in the House. Setting the film in the present and constantly flashing back and forth between the sobering present and the hopeful and glorious past is perhaps not effective. It does make Thatcher more sympathetic to the viewer, but it perhaps also distracts us from her accomplishments. A straight chronological biopic that includes both her achievements and her faults and ends with her getting her comeuppance (with attention of course to her inferior adversaries) would perhaps have worked better. (2012)

**The Iron Mask** 1929 Alan Dwan 3.0 Nigel De Brulier glowering and weighty as Cardinal Richelieu whose first commitment is “to conserve the state”; Douglas Fairbanks as d’Artagnan – swashbuckling, strutting, always moving rapidly and running, possessed with momentum, leaping acrobatically over balustrades and onto his horse, smashing in doors with his feet and yet charming, usually smiling, a little pudgy compared to ‘Zorro’ (1920), with his three fellow musketeers, gay and insouciant, ready to fight sword duel at the slightest provocation, constantly at play, non-stop high jinks; the four sleep in the same bed; Fairbanks’ trademark stance – his feet apart, back and head arched backward, laughing merrily. Famous story about the fictitious twin brother of Louis XIV – he is substituted for the real king to benefit the villainous courtier, de Rochefort. Filmed expensively with large crowds of extras, sumptuous costumes, and large, decorative and accurate historical sets exterior and interior; even the ceremonial bows seem graceful and historically accurate. Black and white film shot on different color film stock for different situations – blue for night, green for day outside, brown for inside, etc. A second twin son is born to Louis XIII, and since he threatens the stability of the French crown, Richelieu has him spirited away and a lady-in-waiting, Constance sent to a convent in Mantes. In rushing to rescue his beloved Constance (how does he know her?), Fairbanks finds her murdered by the villainous Milady de Winter (Dorothy Revier). When Richelieu dies, he places the four-year-old prince in the care of d’Artagnan after forbidding him ever to see his three buddies again. 20 years later, the villain De Rochefort hatches a conspiracy to replace the real Louis XIV (good man under Fairbanks’ care) with his ill-tempered twin brother. To keep the real king from being discovered, the conspirators clap an iron mask on him in a dramatic nighttime scene in a dungeon. Massive swordplay as the four rescue the masked king from a castle; Porthos and Aramis sacrifice their lives to ensure the escape of the others – “for the glory of France”. After saving the king and the Queen Mother, d’Artagnan also dies from a knife in his back; he then rejoins his spirit companions in the sky, they laugh gaily at the spectacle before them, and then set off to greater adventures. Still an insouciant swashbuckler, but Fairbanks this time plays an older hero, and his death signals the end of the era. (2008)

**Irrational Man** 2015 Woody Allen 3.0 Joaquin Phoenix inscrutable as philosophy professor depressed, discouraged, aimless (pot belly) at the beginning of the film; Emma Stone as one of his gifted philosophy students, an undergraduate attracted to her professor; Parker Posey in unusual serious role as an alienated housewife that would like to run off with Phoenix to Spain; Jamie Blackley as Stone’s normal, preppy, sensible, cute boyfriend that would do anything for her. Another (seemingly) hastily executed Allen movie playing on his philosophical (existential) obsessions. The first part of the film drags seriously, as Phoenix arrives to teach summer school in a Rhode Island small college and he begins to get romantically involved with another faculty member (science professor [!] Posey) and eager student Stone. Phoenix is slack, impotent (demonstrated in failed nuit d’amour with Posey), and an alcoholic that drinks from a flask as he walks across campus with a student; citing Kant, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Simone de Beauvoir, and Dostoyevski, he repeats constantly the familiar Allen motif that life is empty, meaningless, ruled entirely by chance, and that he no longer has a reason to live; he illustrates this by playing an apparently real game of Russian roulette at a student party (he survives). The film picks up considerably when, upon hearing about an asshole judge, Phoenix takes a cue from Raskolnikov and decides to murder him in order to set himself above the common herd with a willed, heroic act. The rest of the film reads like a thriller, as Phoenix goes to great length to procure cyanide, and hatches a clever plot to get him to imbibe poisoned orange juice on a park bench (doesn’t a strong dose of cyanide have a distinctive taste?). Even though his new persona has restored his sexual potency, his relationship with his two girlfriends now becomes more distant, since he hides his crime from them. The narrative moves ahead with brio: an innocent man is arrested for the crime and is on the verge of being convicted; after a series of small twists and conjectures, Stone finds out about his action, and when she confronts Phoenix, he agrees to confess the crime to the police. In a final twist, he attempts to murder Stone by pushing her down an elevator shaft (!), but in the ensuing struggle, Phoenix slips and falls to his death. Credits roll. The viewer finishes the film with shock, surprise, and considerable confusion. The ending has a pair of possible interpretations: the universe is moral after all (cf. the issues raised by ‘Crimes and Misdemeanors’ and ‘Match Point’) and it punishes Phoenix for his transgressions; or Phoenix is right

about chance, and mother fortune just plays him a nasty trick – a very pessimistic version since it seems to consider humanistic happiness (the philosopher in ‘Crimes’) out of the question. This viewer would still prefer Allen to consider another theme instead of indulging his solipsistic pessimism once more. Impact of the film is diminished by Phoenix’s reserved, perhaps disoriented performance and by the author’s obsession with an existentialist point of view out of fashion since the 50s. (2016)

**Isle of the Dead** 1945 Mark Robson (Val Lewton) 2.5 Boris Karloff as fanatical, although surprisingly dignified and serene general in the Greek army fighting in 1912 – bushy eyebrows and curly hair; Marc Cramer as callow, friendly American reporter who seems to be a friend of Karloff; Jason Robards Sr. as the company’s host on the island – through terrible acting he prays to classical Greek gods; Alan Napier as distinguished British diplomat who dies early in the film; Ellen Drew as western-looking Greek young woman dressed in peasant garb; Katherine Emery as Napier’s wife who is deathly afraid of premature burial; Helen Thimig as local woman who speaks constantly of peasant superstitions; Ernst Deutsch as all-business military doctor who looks and speaks like a Nazi officer (but known for his role as the baron in ‘The Third Man’). Rather slow-moving and rather confusing Lewton entry. The implacable Karloff and his sunny sidekick Cramer take a trip to a small island where the general’s wife is buried (the island is obviously suggested by Böcklin’s famous painting; Lewton establishes his learned credentials also by several references to classical mythology); there they encounter the rest of the cast, most of whom are killed off by the end of the film, leaving only Cramer, Drew and Robards to face the new day. Part of the intrigue is built around whether Karloff is a good or bad man: it is early established that he can be cruel and unforgiving (he forces a senior officer under his command to commit suicide), but throughout the film he claims to be protecting the rest of the characters from the septicemic plague that is roaming the island and is responsible for the deaths of some of the characters. Lurking in the background is the suspicion that the deaths are not caused by the plague but by evil spirits of Greek superstition called ‘vorvolaka’: Thimig broaches the subject, but an obviously unhinged Karloff soon is convinced, as he unreasonably pursues Drew (always in those clean pseudo-peasant outfits) as a sorcerer. Perhaps the most tense aspect of the story is Emery’s conviction that she will suffer premature burial (nod to Poe), and it actually happens to her; she breaks out of the coffin and appears to stalk the island as a spirit, but it turns out that she is really just in a trance, and in guilt for having stabbed Karloff in the back as he was trying (apparently) to murder Drew (don’t ask to explain) she jumps off a wall into the sea like Tosca. Striking that so little tension is built despite several promising issues – the plague, premature burial, evil spirits – but the screenplay has little coherence. The sets on the mysterious isle call attention to themselves by their artificiality. Dialogue is often clunky: Cramer to friend Karloff, “If you do anything to threaten me or Thea, I will forget that we have been friends!” Perhaps the least of the Lewton films, although there are some effectively scary scenes toward the end. (2011)

**It** 1927 Clarence Badger 4.0 Clara Bow, Antonio Moreno, William Austin, Gary Cooper! Famous silent movie about shop girl Betty who sets her aim to get the young and charming owner of the department store. She takes initiative, is the aggressor, more or less throughout, and finally bags her man. Bow is schemer – uses all means to bamboozle and rope in the boss. Very flirtatious and vivacious; when she has no dress to wear to a fancy club, she and her friend cut up her work dress to create a sexy gown; bubbling over with energy, and even plays a miniature banjo when on the cruise! Smiles, cocks her head, jumps for joy, throws her hands in the air, smiles her broad, infectious smile that one cannot resist. Although she is flirtatious, Betty is a good girl who is insulted when guy tries to kiss her on the first date; she is quite calculating – she wants her man and will resort to most any stratagem to get him to marry her. The boss’ fiancé, a wealthy, up-tight socialite who speaks with an English accent and even uses French, does not have “It” and is no match for Betty. Betty is a good person, and helps out her friend who is living with her baby but with no husband; when her rival falls into the water, Clara jumps in and rescues her. All ends well with marriage in the works. Ambiance is the wealth of the boss and his comic relief sidekick, Monty, contrasted with poverty (Clara’s real background); but social mobility as the simple (but pretty) shop girl, being more genuine and of more spontaneous heart than the wealthy, marries into great wealth. “It” (from the ugly Elinor Glyn) is sex appeal, the ability to project personality and attract the opposite sex without being self-conscious; spontaneously. Basically same as

sex attraction but without saying it. Shows the popular basis of American movies, who appeal to common folk with harmless romantic comedy about a pretty, smart girl who makes out like a bandit! (2004)

**It Came From Beneath the Sea** 1954 Robert Gordon 3.0 Kenneth Tobey, Faith Domergue. Pretty good 50s sci-fi epic; black and white; pretty good budget. Rather realistic, documentary-style thriller. 'Safe' genre since we have feeling from beginning that main characters are not in danger and things will turn out for the best. Ray Harryhausen's wonderful special effects of huge octopus attacking and damaging Golden Gate Bridge and Ferry Building and Tower in San Francisco. Theme is again consequences of atomic age, with hydrogen bomb making huge deep sea octopus in need of new prey; hence going after humans. Good script with initial efforts to identify the threat of the unseen monster. Very public style thriller with many pictures of people running, navy warships and planning rooms in action, sights of San Francisco, etc. Double plot line: identify and defeat the terrible monster; the romantic triangle with Faith, Kenneth and another scientist. FD presented as sultry, sexy female scientist, who although she is a new woman with courage and professional ambitions, is also weak in moments of crisis and interested as much as ever in finding a good man and getting married (she was a protégé of Howard Hughes). (2006)

**It Came From Outer Space** 1953 Jack Arnold, Universal 3.5 Richard Carlson, Barbara Rush, Charles Drake as the Sheriff. Originally in 3-D. First-class 50s sci-fi about aliens that crash by mistake in the Arizona desert (another Southwest venue) and have to repair their ship; meanwhile they hold off suspicious humans; luckily they have the support of Richard Carlson (amateur astronomer and writer who lives in a middle class home in the desert and has a beautiful girlfriend), who even dukes it out with the sheriff and dynamites the entrance to the aliens' hide-out to keep them from being caught. Good near-A movie. Barbara Rush very classically beautiful as 50s girlfriend of Carlson; she is a bit of a scaredy cat, but she has good sense and is courageous. Carlson is the believer who is ignored and reviled by the military, police and the press; in last part of film he has to hold off the humans, who according to him "destroy anything you don't understand!" Aliens are ugly with a single bug eye, but they are definitely high-tech (they have worked 1000 years to build their space travel ship), and they have the power to transform selves into human appearance (while not harming the originals), except that they speak and move robotically, thus giving themselves away; they tell Carlson that the two races will meet, but at another time. Plot always keeps you guessing – what are they up to? Are they really benign creatures and just want humans "to give us time?" They say "we have souls and minds and are good," and "we understand war." Then we wonder if they are lying, and the suspense builds as to whether they will be able to escape in time. The basic issue is trust: you have to take a risk for good and understanding. In final big scene inside the mineshaft, both Carlson and the creatures decide to trust one another – they release the real humans, and Carlson is able to show the sheriff that they mean no harm. Followed by a spectacular take-off – obviously the repair was successful. Carlson's final pronouncement: "They are gone now. It wasn't the right time for us to meet. There will be other nights, other stars, for us to watch. They will be back." (2006)

**It Follows** 2014 David Robert Mitchell 3.5 Maika Monroe as typical teenager, focused on sex and pursued by a phantom throughout the film; Keir Gilchrist as the love-struck Paul, who would like to have sex with Jay and also to help her; Lilli Sepe as Jay's loyal sister Kelly. Interesting, scary, original take on teenage horror film, where the girls are punished for their sensual indulgences ('Friday the 13th', etc). When she has sex with her new boyfriend, Jay gets more than she expects: the guy ties her up and tells her that unless she passes on the curse by having sex with someone else, she will be pursued by a protean phantom until she is dead (the fate of the victim is previewed in the film's first sequence, in which a nameless girl in a nightie and high heels is gruesomely slaughtered by the phantom). Jay is then pursued by serial appearances of the specter – sometimes a nude girl, an old woman in a night shift, a naked man standing jauntily on the roof of her house, a girl on a beach, the sex-crazed (and sexy) mother of one of her friends, who kills the friend; they are all relentless – they walk only, take no transportation, but if you stay in one place, they will eventually get you. Jay's terror, well expressed by Monroe, is

shared by the viewer, whose eye continuously searches numerous wide-angle shots for a threatening presence – sometimes it is there and sometimes it is not. Although the camera sometimes rests too long on objects and faces, the technique yields big payoffs: atmospheric shots of trees rustling, squirrels scurrying with crickets chirping in the background, shots of the principals in the foreground that reveal a “follower” when they move, shooting through doorways or out windows waiting to see a phantom in either distance or up close. The eerie mood is enhanced by long drives through abandoned neighborhoods in Detroit. Jay is helped by her two sisters and her girlhood sweetheart, Paul, and in one sequence when the kids discover the identity of the original seducer, one gets the impression that the friends might help her escape.... The victims of the curse cannot resist shocking acts of betrayal – the original guy infects Jay with the curse, and Jay does the same with a friend, and then at the end has sex with Paul to test whether the specter is defeated. The ending is studied ambiguity: in the absurd swimming pool scene, in which household appliances are thrown by the phantom into the pool at Jay (why is she in the pool? And why not electrocuted?), a spreading red cloud in the water makes us wonder whether the spook is dead or become more threatening; and the final scene of Paul and Jay walking hand-in-hand down the neighborhood sidewalk with a teen following a block behind is also ambiguous. Some missteps at the end notwithstanding, the movie is creepy, scary with almost no gore; a kind-of return to the less-is-more horror filmmaking of Val Lewton. (2015)

**It Happened One Night** 1934 Frank Capra (5 AA) 4.0 Clark Gable looking young, fit and well-dressed as hard-drinking, seemingly cynical reporter who just lost his job again; Claudette Colbert cute, adorable, stylishly dressed and well coiffed as spoiled rich man’s daughter defying her father about marrying her aviator; Walter Connolly as Colbert’s gruff father, who sends police and private detectives looking for her, but then turns out to be a sweet power puff of a guy; Roscoe Karns as obnoxious though harmless bus passenger that hits on Colbert; Jameson Thomas as stuffed shirt would-be husband of Colbert, who comes to his second religious wedding in an auto gyro (winged helicopter). Famous, delightful, though a bit long, romantic comedy that has Gable and Colbert in the usual antagonistic relationship on the bus from Miami to New York; there is no slow thawing out, but a continuation of the friction followed by a sudden breakup of the ice when the father, who can’t stand the aviator, finally persuades his daughter to abandon her proposed (re) marriage to Thomas and to elope with Gable. Narrative is linear and episodic: basically a road movie with a lot of incidents: to keep it respectable Gable pouts up “the wall of Jericho” in the motel room by hanging a blanket on a string stretched between the twin beds; Karns makes himself a pest to Colbert and threatens to turn her into the police, but Gable scares him off by pretending he is a gangster; in the motel room Gable takes off his shirt (and so impresses America that the sale of undershirts reportedly plummeted), whereas Colbert refuses to Capra to disrobe and she just hangs her under things on top of the blanket; the hitchhiking scene where Gable is bragging about his expertise, but when he fails repeatedly to stop a car, Colbert stops the first one she tries on a dime by showing her leg (risqué!). Some of the episodes are not so special – e.g., the happy Americans in the bus singing ‘The Daring Young Man on the Flying Trapeze’. The final scene of the film is delightful: the couple, now married, is in a motel room in Michigan; the down home Americana couple outside are charmed by them and wondering what they wanted with a toy trumpet; a cut inside the room shows the blanket falling to the floor; return to outside, where we here the ceremonial blast of the trumpet, and then the lights in the windows go out; credits roll. Film has many Capra characteristics: the people that Gable and Colbert meet on the road are delightfully fresh and good-hearted; even the crooks and the fools are basically harmless; for a long time the rich in the guise of Colbert’s family are seen as authoritarian, spoiled, and snobbish (Colbert’s initial accent is pretentious East Coast-pseudo English); but the picture is softened when Connolly thaws and works to save his daughter from the aviator, and Gable’s boss, who has been ranting about him for hours, relents and implicitly agrees to give him his job back at the paper. Film has a lot of momentum despite its thin plot and episodic structure. We root for the couple to overcome their differences and get together, and just when we think it is not going to work, Capra activates his *deus ex machina* and they live happily ever after. Contrary to received opinion, it is not the first romantic comedy (there were many silent predecessors). A wonderful marriage of script, direction, and two charming actors. (2006)

**Italian Fascism in Colour** 2005 2.5 Informative two-part British television program on the evolution of Italian Fascism with of course emphasis on Mussolini. Includes color newsreel footage along with a fair number of reenacted scenes, particularly in the beginning of the program; the documentary is narrated with significant interviews with a half dozen British and American academics. In the beginning it emphasizes the impact of World War I on Italian society and politics and stresses the cult of violence within the new Fascist Party, particularly from the firebrand Roberto Farinacci, who was a lot more radical than Mussolini. Mussolini came to power gradually – from his constitutional appointment as prime minister in 1922 until the establishment of a dictatorship in 1926 after the murders of several prominent opposition politicians like Matteotti. The program returns time and again to the fate of the small Jewish community under Fascism: many of them were Fascists in the beginning (since they were middle class and frightened of Communism, and Fascism was not a racist ideology) and applauded Mussolini, but things got progressively worse for them from the mid-1930s, when Mussolini fell under the domination of Hitler; the film ends with a reenacted scene in which a wealthy Jewish family from Milan are murdered by the Gestapo in 1943. Mussolini was initially quite popular with his cult of efficiency and his extensive public works programs, and he even got kudos for his repression of opposition in Libya, his conquest of Ethiopia, and his successful military operations in Spain. But as soon as he fell under Hitler's spell, the magic was dispelled. The program quotes extensively from son-in-law Ciano's diary, who served as foreign minister until he was sacked in 1943. Mussolini's involvement in military hostilities in World War II was disastrous without exception: the Germans had to rescue the Italian fiasco in Greece; the Italian army made no progress against the French in 1940; the Italian contingent in Russia was utterly destroyed by the Russians; and the Italian army in North Africa and Sicily made a specialty of surrendering to the Allies with little resistance. Mussolini ended his career in ignominy: deposed by his own party, rescued by the Germans and set up as a puppet leader, forced by Hitler to execute his own son-in-law (filmed in color!), then captured by partisans, summarily executed, and strung up by his heels in a Milan square. Mussolini comes across as a charismatic and sometimes popular leader, who however set off on the impossible task of making Italy a great military power (recreate the glory of Rome); hence his utter reliance on Hitler and his ignominious failure. (2010)

**Italian for Beginners** Denmark 2000 Lone Sherfig 2.5 First romantic comedy made according to the realist-like Dogma 95 film technique (handheld camera, videotape, available lighting, no soundtrack, no studio shooting, etc.). Mostly light, amusing romantic comedy that pairs up the six characters and eventually brings them together in romantic bliss once they land on a class trip in Venice. Individuals are oppressed by Danish society and especially their elders who expect a lot from them and ridicule their interests. Everyone looking for romance, and they finally get it! Theme much the same as 'Room with a View,' down to the use of Puccini once the crew arrives in Italy. Comedy mixed with Bergmanesque drama – pastor isn't sure of his faith, hairdresser has to deal with painful death of her mother, hotel receptionist is impotent (temporarily, of course). Enjoyment of film is undermined somewhat by oppressive, TV-like film techniques. (2006)

**L'ivresse du pouvoir** 2006 Claude Chabrol (France) 2.5 Isabelle Huppert as chain-smoking, cool, obsessive, rather heartless investigating magistrate; François Berléand as Michel Humeau, a corrupt businessman pursued by Huppert – he is in ill health and has to be hospitalized; Robin Renucci as her unstable, long-suffering husband; Thomas Chabrol (Claude's son) as Huppert's much loved layabout nephew who would rather invent crossword puzzles than follow a profession; Patrick Bruel as Sibaud, one of her good-looking opponents; Philippe Duclos as suspect that Huppert plays cat and mouse with. Another disappointing late Chabrol. The film's style is dry, emotionally removed from what the characters are experiencing – fairly short scenes that seem to close prematurely with a sudden fade-out, long stretches with no musical score followed by an attack from the discordant (intentional?) music of Mathieu Chabrol, generally reserved, sometimes dead-pan delivery of lines. The most rewarding element in the film is the character projected by Huppert – she is fanatic, driven to achieve her end (which she proclaims to be justice, although one wonders how much is her need to win and dominate), ruthlessly hounding her suspects that she continually calls back to her office and even has them imprisoned, revealing to Berléand's wife that her husband has been leading a double life, very curt, even insulting,

with her husband whom she relegates to low priority in her life, perhaps carrying a resentment against men in general. The investigation into the corrupt dealings of businessmen and politicians (a famous affair of the 90s) is often confusing and elliptical; it is often difficult to keep their identities straight. It is apparent that Huppert is up against a coterie of powerful males who invoke all the tricks to keep her from pushing too hard – charming her by flirting with her and inviting her to lunch, sending thugs (unidentified) to run her off the road and deface her office with obscenities (“Die, bitch!”), putting pressure on the chief judge to have her transferred to a new office and paired with another judge; neither of the latter expedients works, since Huppert’s determination ignores the change of venue, and the new partner ends teaming with Huppert to try to thwart all the alpha males. The opposition finally bears fruit when the head judge takes Huppert off the case; and since Huppert’s husband (whom she left several weeks before) is in serious condition in the hospital after a suicide attempt, the film ends on a low note of perhaps defeat, or at least let-down. Rather unsatisfactory melodrama-thriller with a soupçon of feminism; the best moments are Huppert playing cat and mouse with her victims. (2009)

**J. Edgar** 2011 Clint Eastwood 3.0 Leonardo Dicaprio often caked in make-up and speaking pompously in stentorian and rhythmically scanned tones as the director of the FBI; Armie Hammer as Hoover’s handsome, faithful gay sidekick, Clyde Tolson, who is in love with the boss; Naomi Watts in rather dull role as Hoover’s faithful secretary; Judy Dench very wrinkled and expressive as Hoover’s dominating mother, who constantly pushes Hoover to be strong and great. Interesting, if somewhat scattered biopic of Hoover that focuses on his unconsummated relationship with Tolson and his contributions to the construction of the FBI. The present of the narrative is the 1960s, where Hoover is obsessed with alleged Communist conspirators in the SCLC (he conspires unsuccessfully to blackmail Martin Luther King into refusing the Nobel Peace Prize) and with the preservation of his reputation. In the course of the film he dictates his memoirs to several loyal subordinates, only to have the manuscript as well as the rest of his “secret files” shredded by Watts when he dies in office in the Nixon Administration. Several often confusing flashbacks take the viewer back to the early days of the FBI: the original campaign against the anarchists, Hoover’s initiatives to organize the fingerprint-based records of the FBI, his operations against hoodlums like Machine Gun Kelly in the early 30s, and a lot on the Lindbergh kidnaping case and the investigation that led to the arrest and conviction of Bruno Hauptman; nothing is said about Hoover’s role in fighting the mafia during Prohibition or in the 1950s and 1960s, nor about his fight against the Nazis in World War II. The film seems fairly “soft” on Hoover, eschewing the demonization of him by the Left, giving him credit for the sincerity of his patriotic feelings and for the founding of a highly efficient FBI based entirely on merit, and coming to moderate conclusions about his relationship with Tolson. The film believes that Tolson was a homosexual that wanted a consummated relationship with Hoover, but that Hoover was too inhibited sexually (did he ever have a sexual relationship with anyone?) and too loyal to his own straight-laced ideology ever to give in; but he showed genuine affection for Tolson, actually held hands with him once, and always remained loyal and trusting with him. Hoover is presented as authoritarian and abrupt with his subordinates, seemingly close-minded, devious in dealing with successive presidents (his biggest problem was how to preserve his post – by ingratiation or by blackmail – in every transition), but a man who was loyal to his friend and his subordinates and who could be charming and gracious when needed. Visually the mise-en-scène is drained of color and filled with shadows. Since the screenplay is rather scattered, it makes one wonder whether it might not have been a better idea to focus on a limited time period – perhaps the 20s and 30s – rather than take the whole thing in. Reminiscent of the ‘Iron Lady’, the biopic of Margaret Thatcher. One has the impression that Eastwood’s heart was not in the film; perhaps he took the screenplay “as is” and simply translated it on to the screen. Still, interesting with good performances. (2012)

**Jack Strong** 2014 Wladyslaw Pasikowski (Poland) 3.5 Marcin Dorocinski as Ryszard Kuklinski, Polish army officer, who decides to give Cold War secrets to the USA (‘Jack Strong’ is his contact name); Maja Ostaszewska excellent as his emotional wife; Patrick Wilson (‘Young Adult’, ‘The Conjuring’) in relatively small role as his American CIA contact; Oleg Maslennikov very intimidating as Soviet general planning to start a war in Europe; Dmitri Bilov as ruthless, relentless Russian counter-intelligence operative. Well-made Polish spy thriller. It takes place in the 1960s and 1970s when a

renegade Russian general plans a massive sneak attack against the West; he is eventually called off by an angry and determined Brezhnev – no war! The film focuses on Kuklinski who out of Polish patriotism (the film is strongly anti-Soviet) delivers secrets – free of charge – to the Americans. The great majority of the dialogue is in Polish, although some of the scenes take place in English in Washington, D.C. (Wilson is the only principal actor that is American). Most of the first half of the film is fairly routine in its detailing of Kuklinski's spy activities, but the suspense and tension picks up when the Russian counter-espionage people realize there is a leak in Poland and begin to close in on the protagonist. The drama of the family is compelling – Kuklinski is anguished by the danger he has put his wife (an effective Ostaszewska) and two sons into, and much of the final 40 minutes is devoted to their escape: despite the confusion among the counter-espionage people, they search Kuklinski's house when one of his sons unwittingly gives away the family; an overly long auto chase through the slushy streets of Warsaw (turns out the police are chasing the wrong car); the family getting nailed into crates under the protection of a US Embassy employee; and then a long wait at the East German border until the stern-looking guards finally get permission to let the escape truck pass. Most of the scenes could have been edited for crispness. The ending has a major surprise. The film's flashback frame has an older Kuklinski being interrogated (rather politely) about his career, but when the session is over, curtains are pulled back to reveal – the US Capitol! The whole time Kuklinski was being debriefed by the CIA, apparently with the help of Zbigniew Brzezinski (this was during the Carter administration). One of Kuklinski's sons is already dead; the other one is then killed in an obviously intentional freeway accident. The film ends with a keen feeling for the sacrifice made by Kuklinski to undermine the Soviets and free Poland from their domination. The film has a nice sense of Polish patriotism combined with an appreciation of the United States, its flag, values, etc. (2015)

**Jackie Brown** 1997 Quentin Tarantino 3.0 Pam Grier as sexy, brassy flight attendant who gets mixed up with smuggling illegal money to LA from Mexico; Samuel L. Jackson as chic, smart, vicious, ruthless illegal arms dealer trying to gather a big nest egg to retire; Robert Forster in excellent performance as bail bondsman interacting ambiguously with Grier; Robert DeNiro as clueless, virtually mute ex-con who goes to work for Jackson; Michael Keaton as cocky ATF detective wearing form-fitting t-shirts and trying to get the goods on Jackson through Grier; Bridget Fonda wearing hyper-sexy short shorts as Jackson's layabout, pot-smoking girlfriend whose big mouth finally gets her killed. Way overlong, but cool and interesting thriller made by Tarantino soon after his big hit, 'Pulp Fiction' – he seems to be trying to make a more mainstream type of film, but not entirely succeeding. The film is very twisty, continuously teasing the viewer as to who has the \$500,000 (or \$10,000 or \$50,000), and who has the upper hand and is cooperating with whom among the principals – Grier, who has ambiguous relations with all three male characters, Jackson constantly applying his slippery intelligence to try to outwit Grier, Keaton who thinks he is cooperating with Grier to get the goods on Jackson, and Forster, who has some sort of relationship with Grier, but we are not sure what. The film is seriously under edited – way too many shots of actors hanging out in LA shopping malls, walking down the street, driving in cars, or just sitting and waiting for someone to show up; Hitchcock would have vastly improved the film with his tight editing predilections. Film has a lot of Tarantinesque trademarks – hyper-cool clothes and hairstyle (Jackson with a ponytail and a skinny, pointed goatee), cool, black-wanna-be lingo, bits of humor thrown in to spice up grisly moments, e.g., DeNiro becomes so put out with Fonda's non-stop bitching and insults that he pulls out his gun and shoots her in the mall parking lot, once in the stomach and once in the chest, as he tells Jackson, who thinks he should have just hit her, but doesn't seem all that upset (although he later executes DeNiro in the car when he finds out that the bag that the latter has retrieved from the shopping mall contains only a fraction of the cash that is supposed to be there). The film finally solves the mystery about who has the upper hand: Foster is revealed as the character that Grier is working with, the two of them (rather improbably) arrange for Jackson to be shot by the police in an ambush, Grier ends up with the bulk of the money that she has mailed to herself, but when she invites confederate Keaton to accompany her to Barcelona, he ruefully turns her down to continue dutifully his work as a bail bondsman. Entertaining, well-made, clever film that is just too damn long. (2013)



**Jagged Edge** 1985 Richard Marquand (wr. Joe Esterhas) 3.0 Svelte and handsome Jeff Bridges as newspaper editor suspected of killing his wealthy wife; Glenn Close as corporate lawyer who reluctantly agrees to defend Bridges; Peter Coyote as unscrupulous D.A. with political ambitions; Robert Loggia as rather foul-mouthed though loyal investigator working for Close. Shocking, hard-hitting, often profane thriller and courtroom drama that has the audience guessing whether Bridges killed his wife or whether the D.A. is trying to put him away to enhance his reputation. Set in posh San Francisco setting with views of the Golden Gate Bridge, the ornate City Hall (are there really courtrooms in City Hall?), ravishing views of homes perched overlooking the coast. Characters are reasonably well drawn: Coyote is sleazily ambitious; Close doesn't really want to do criminal defense since she has a guilty conscience about a man she put away several years ago with repressed evidence; Bridges is an indecipherable mask, sometimes looking calculating, sometimes seeming friendly and sincere. The essence of the film is the twisty plot. With the help of very helpful anonymous notes Close works indefatigably to undermine the prosecution's weak case and the D.A. keeps adducing surprise witnesses at the last minute – shades of Perry Mason. The situation is complicated by Close falling in love with her client and (improbably!) having an affair with him before and during the trial! It turns out of course that there is a devilishly clever pattern behind it all: Bridges did murder his own wife; he had previously terrorized a woman in Santa Cruz with much the same m.o. to frame a tennis pro and he had been the one sending the anonymous notes to Close. We are not sure of Bridges' guilt until the last scene in which a hooded man with a knife appears in Close's apartment and prepares to butcher her; but she is ready, shoots him to death, and then a shocked Loggia unmasks him. Many improbabilities in the plot: Have sex with your own client? Bridges really capable of butchering the woman he appears to love? The D.A.'s case always so weak? But still a nice twisty, nasty thriller that keeps one's attention. (2007)

**Jane Eyre** 2011 Cary Fukunaga 4.0 Mia Wasikowska plain (hair pulled tight back against her head), serious, inner, reserved as governess Jane Eyre; Michael Fassbender charismatic, cautious, inner romantic Rochester, lord of a large estate; Sally Hawkins as the cruel auntie, Mrs. Reed, who has a kind of deathbed conversion; Judy Dench as sensible housekeeper in Rochester's house; Romy Setton Moore as adorable little French ward, Adele. Beautifully photographed, directed, acted, and somewhat updated version of the classic Charlotte Bronte novel. The film opens with Jane running desperately across the desolate moor, and as soon as she is settled by the kind clergyman, St. John Rivers, as the teacher in a village school, the flashbacks commence: Jane's mistreatment at the hands of her aunt, her abuse in the disciplinarian school she is sent to, and then to Rochester's estate, where she takes on the post of governess to little Adele; she and Rochester gradually fall in love and in a paroxysm of romantic enthusiasm they decide to wed; the discovery that Rochester is already married is what sends Jane across the moor; the manor house burns down and Jane is reunited with a now blind (?) Rochester in the garden. The acting of the two principals is excellent – the broad-mouthed attentiveness and intensity of Rochester, and the outspoken yet reserved Jane, who is obviously attracted to Rochester but dutifully awaits his declaration. The screenplay seems to have been updated from the 19th century novel, since the sexually inexperienced Jane is nevertheless very direct and outspoken with Rochester and the latter is delighted to be cultivating a romantic relationship with a woman who can be his "equal". The cinematography takes in the hazy skies, the bleak moors and rocks, the faintly colored gardens in the frigid winter climate, the manor house emerging abruptly from the barren surroundings, the dark, dusty interiors of Rochester's house; unforgettable is the sequence of Jane running and stumbling across the moor. Since the film makes much of the gothic goings-on in Rochester's house (the sounds and the moans outside Jane's door at night, the curtains catching inexplicably on fire, the references to something unknown in Rochester's past and a mysterious presence in the house), the film must be very entertaining to a viewer who has not read the novel. Those of us who have are transported by the powerful sense of place, the adult conversations between the two principals, the emergence of an amour fou that risks bigamy. As in 'Wuthering Heights', Jane and Rochester are connected by a force as deep and strong as the rugged forces of nature on the moor that will drive them to one another no matter what the obstacle: when the parson Rivers fervently offers marriage to her, Jane cannot respond, since she hears Rochester's voice calling to her from the rocks next to them; when things seem hopeless, the manor house burns down, freeing Rochester for marriage with Jane; fate conspires to force them together. The difference from Emily's

work is the happy ending, the two embracing and looking forward to a life together. A superior version of the much-adapted novel. (2012)

**Jar City** 2006 Baltasar Kormakur (Iceland) 3.5 Ingvar Eggert Sigurdsson as dyspeptic, but dogged police investigator with his own family problems; Björn Hlynur Haraldsson as Sigurdsson's more mainstream assistant; Agusta Eva Erlendsdóttir as Sigurdsson's rebellious druggie daughter; and a host of other actors with unspellable names. Fascinating and depressing murder mystery-police procedural set in contemporary Iceland. The environment is sometimes austere, almost frighteningly beautiful – treeless frozen ground with bare smooth rock mountains rising behind, lots of fog and clouds, often with a car speeding down a straight road or a group of people standing in a semi-abandoned churchyard with rolling grassy hills in the background; the buildings are generally seedy, frost-stained, cheap-looking modern European – their rectangular outline contrasted with the mountains behind; often disgusting and revolting – the bodies that are exhumed are always intentionally horrible, the stench of death cause violent revulsion in characters present; even the sheep's head that Sigurdsson eats for his usual rushed meal is repellent, especially when he picks the eye out and pops it into his mouth. The film deals only with misshapen and unhappy-looking people from the bottom reaches of society and from the ranks of criminals – not one's usual picture of Icelandic society. The plot is presented in a confusing way: the viewer is first shown the natural death of a little girl, the girl's apparent father working in genetics research institute, and the scene is immediately followed by the discovery of the body of a murdered ne'er do well in the basement of a slum (and his apartment stinks so bad!); the job of the viewer is to relate the two things, with the help of Sigurdsson of course, who slogs many confusing miles to figure it out. The pay-off is very interesting: the murdered man turns out to be a common criminal part of a gang of thugs controlled by a corrupt police sergeant in the country, but he and his buddies were involved in the rape of a woman (30 years ago?), who had later given birth to a girl with the same inherited brain disease that had caused the death of the present-day girl. Her father is tortured by the inherited disease that he carries himself, and in a lurid graveyard scene at the end of the film, he commits suicide while reburying the body of the original girl (not his daughter) – thus the destructive genetic line is ended. The genetics angle is fascinating, especially in a country where there are only about 300,000 inhabitants and everyone is somehow interrelated, and it ties in well with the issues of life and death, cadavers, etc. The cynical Sigurdsson is the perfect protagonist, determined to get to the bottom of the mystery, but not expecting the world, or his own family, to be any better because of it. The narrative structure of the film is too complex: a more careful use of flashbacks would have reduced some of the frustration felt by this viewer. Still, unusual, fascinating film. (2010)

**Jarhead** 2005 Sam Mendes 3.0 Jake Gyllenhaal as Anthony Swofford, somewhat reluctant Marine with a sad background – he alternates between raging macho dangerous and passive-aggressive rebellious; Scott McDonald as large-mouthed marine; Peter Sarsgaard as corporal Troy, Swofford's partner who quotes Hemingway; Jamie Foxx as Marine-Corps-loving staff sergeant who trains the scout snipers -- a bit less brutal than the drill instructor and who knows how to deal with the press; Chris Cooper as gung-ho colonel; Lucas Black as soldier Kruger; Brian Geraghty as soldier O'Donnell. A realistic portrayal through the reminiscences of Swofford of what it was like to be a marine in the Gulf War. The film doesn't really follow the Hollywood narrative curve: the men train, hang out in Saudi Arabia, see virtually no action, and return home, partially scarred and embittered. Much emphasis on Marine Corps culture: brutality, profanity; implied homosexual attraction; asserted gung-ho love of combat -- they watch the helicopter scenes from "Apocalypse Now" while cheering wildly; men's pastimes are brutal, e.g., scorpion fights; frequent masturbation; worry about what girlfriends are doing while guys are gone; at one point the whole platoon watches a revenge videotape of a soldier's wife fucking on tape; insult one another and get into pointless fights; some of the men are psychologically unstable; also a lot of horseplay. Much of the film focuses on the agony of inaction, of waiting to be sent into battle, of worrying about the impact of chemical weapons that Saddam was supposed to have. A few comic scenes, such as the one in which Foxx tells the men to play touch football for a reporter in their chemical warfare suits, but they eventually rebel and refuse while still in front of the cameras. One soldier reads 'The Stranger', which signifies the condition of the enlisted men: they are trained to do

battle (and hopefully survive) but they have little understanding of the context or the reasons they are there; they are sleep-walking in an unintelligible world. When they finally see action, they meet Arabs on camels, are attacked by US aircraft, take possession of the incinerated bodies of dead Iraqis. In this version of warfare the snipers are more or less irrelevant since fast-moving air warfare has taken over: toward the end Gyllenhaal has a perfect shot on an Iraqi officer, but permission to shoot is denied for fear of giving away the impending air attack. Much of the end part of the film is a true vision of hell – oil wells burning in the background in infernal orange-yellow light, with all the marines covered with oil, incinerated carcasses all around, a lone horse wandering in the ghostly light. A kind of pessimistic existential film – instead of gung-ho heroism, we have inaction, boredom, masturbation, much discomfort, and meaninglessness. (2011)

**Jesus Camp** 2006 Heidi Ewing, Rachel Grady 2.5 Documentary focusing on a child's evangelist (youth minister?), Becky Fisher, who runs a summer camp in North Dakota to indoctrinate 8-10 year-old children in a heavily evangelical Christian creed –anti-abortion, pray that Bush will appoint a Supreme Court Justice that will oppose abortion (Samuel Alito), organize yourselves into an army of God that will take the US government back from the enemies of Christian America. The program does not mention the beliefs of other Fundamentalist groups that await the Rapture, support Israel, or journey to Israel to await the second coming. The film focuses on the impact of evangelical Christian brain-washing on a few young children: most of the children at the camp are fairly passive, but three featured ones spout the Fundamentalist line like preachers, approach strangers in a bowling alley to tell them that God has a special plan for them, and pray loudly on their needs for the souls of aborted fetuses, etc. Most shocking is the appearance of the powerful Colorado Springs televangelist Ted Haggard, who earns a prize for leering, inappropriate jokes at the expense of the film makers as they televise him in front of his congregation (the following year he was outed as a meth user and a frequenter of Denver male prostitutes). Coverage of the camp is often broken by more mainstream Christian comments of a radio talk show host, who wonders repeatedly what has happened to the core Christian values of love, tolerance, peaceableness, helping your neighbor, etc. The film has the appearance of being objective, but the impact of it on most viewers will be horror at these adults' manipulation of children's minds. (2013)

**Jeux interdits** 1952 René Clément (France) 4.0 Brigitte Fossey as Paulette, a little 5-year old girl (apparently Jewish since she doesn't know Catholic prayers) orphaned by German bombing during the flight from Paris in May 1940, George Poujouly as Michel, about a 10-year-old boy in a peasant family that takes her in. Classic French film that depicts in deeply poetic way the psychological trauma of war as experienced by children. Fossey and Poujouly deal with the mystery of violent death by a morbid fascination with death rites – they bury everything they can find (moles, Fossey's dog, smaller animals, cockroaches, etc.) in an improvised graveyard in an old abandoned mill, and they make or steal from the village churchyard a lot of crosses to place on the grave with signs indicating the kind of animal buried. The point is rather mysterious, but it seems to be that children when traumatized by something as extreme as war and the death of both parents, cannot deal directly with the experience, but indirectly play games with it, approaching it slowly from the sides. Both Fossey and Poujouly are beautiful as children united by childhood friendship in their search for the meaning of death. Fossey's face in close-up is unforgettable – lit by the "Rembrandtesque" lighting of the cinematographer, placid, yet expressive, big tears running down her cheeks, big wide open eyes staring out at Georges, never quite dealing with grief (she shows that she does not understand that she will never again see her parents), her little body in the same short dress reminding the viewer of an adorable little angel. Meanwhile, the family that has taken Paulette in is locked in feuds with their neighbors in the most petty of ways – whose relative's grave is the cleanest, whose son is the more patriotic, etc. Both families are presented as petty and competitive with no interest in the war or in doing anything for their country; they reach bottom when a fight between the two paterfamiliae in the churchyard has them fall into a grave and fight it out in there. However the Dollés are kind to Paulette, even though the father is a ruffian who knocks around his sons and insults his daughter. Even with their unrealistic games, the little ones are more honest about subjects like death than the adults, who don't seem to mourn the passing of loved ones but use the event as a stick to beat their neighbors with. Several strong scenes: the first one with the family members running across the old

(Roman?) bridge, when the parents are hit by the machine gun fire from the German plane, the dog twitches for several minutes before he dies, the mean peasant woman seizes the dog's body clutched by Paulette and tosses it into the river. The final scene is unforgettable in its sadness: Paulette is in a train station tended by a nun taking her to an orphanage, when she hears the name 'Michel' pronounced; she of course cannot find him (the name was spoken to another Michel), and the camera cranes up recording her flight from the camera through the throng in the station shouting 'Michel', 'Michel!' Her loneliness will remain with her for a long time, and many viewers will not be able to forget the anguished little face calling out in the crowd of refugees. The movie is very unusual: it mixes sarcastic (?) comedy at the expense of the peasant families with the sad scenes of the children tending their little cemetery; Paulette's emotional reaction to the death of her parents seems strange – you would expect her to express more feeling.... Very lyrical and moving; one of a kind. (2006)

**Jezebel** 1938 William Wyler (WB) 3.5 Bette Davis, Henry Fonda, George Brent, Fay Bainter. Prelude to 'Gone with the Wind' by Warner Brothers, consolation to Davis for losing the big role, and opportunity to Wyler to direct his beloved. Quintessential Hollywood studio product, everything carried out to perfection by perfectionist Wyler. Set in New Orleans about 1850, everyone speaking with Southern drawl, upper classes dressed to the 't', the women in big flounced dresses, the Blacks loyal, happy, picturesque, mispronouncing words, and loving to sing, Fonda (Pres) playing a forward-looking banker, who recognizes that the mercantile and manufacturing accomplishments of the North are superior, Brent (Buck) representing charming defender of the old ways, and ready to challenge to a duel anyone who annoys him or doubts the superiority of the South (he is killed in a duel toward the end of the film). Fonda is rather glum, stubborn, and practical; Brent charming, but prideful and relentless in his pursuit of honor. Davis of course carries the day. Julie is beautiful and energetic, but outspoken, domineering, spoiled, willful, insensitive to the feelings of others, loves to defy society; she plays her cards too far, and in famous ballroom scene (where she wears a red dress instead of white – why didn't they do they film in color?) she alienates New Orleans and more importantly Pres, who leaves and marries another woman. Julie goes through a change, and apologizes to Pres and proclaims her devoted (and submissive?) love in famous scene, where she curtsies and bows deeply in the white dress that she should have worn to the ball – but she hasn't understood that Pres is married! She – rather unrealistically – metamorphoses into self-sacrificing lover, who sneaks through the bayous into New Orleans to nurse sick Pres during the terrible cholera epidemic (parallel to 'GWTW' Civil War), and then in tearful finale persuades his wife to allow her to accompany him to the Lazarit to almost certain death for them both. Lurid finale in New Orleans, with confusion in the streets, fires burning in barrels with lots of smoke, artillery cannons going off, and wagons carrying the sick (and nuns!) to quarantine site. More enjoyable than 'GWTW,' although I may be influenced by the latter's inordinate length. (2005)

**Jindabyne** 2006 Ray Lawrence (Australia) 2.0 Gabriel Byrne faking pretty good Aussie accent as tense, unhappy garage operator in small provincial town in the Snowy Mountains; Laura Linney talking American in humorless role as his anguished wife; the two have a son. Unsatisfying, sometimes amateurish film about – presumably – race relations in contemporary Australia. Four men decide excitedly to go on a fishing trip in the mountains outside Jindabyne; they discover the body of a murdered Aboriginal girl in the water, but instead of hiking back out immediately for help, they decide to leave the body in the (cool) river tethering her ankle to the shore with translucent fishing line. Despite the viewer's expectation that the narrative will focus on tracking down the perpetrator (we saw him kill the girl after tracking her in his disquieting, exhaust-spewing truck), it instead follows the implications of the guys not reporting the murder for two days. The already damaged relationship between Byrne and Linney goes from bad to worse as the two move into hateful looks and screamed insults; and Linney in particular is driven to do something to mend fences with the local Aboriginal community. Despite the hostility of the Aboriginal girl's family, she gets three of the white men to attend her funeral – it is held out in the open with chanting and much burning of fires. The film ends in a series of standoffs: the Aborigines still seem hostile (an elder spits just past Byrne); the perp comes to the funeral, but the last shot has him seated in his truck in exactly the same spot as at the beginning of the film, presumably waiting for another victim (but no way to be sure); Byrne tells the deeply alienated Linney that he wants her to come home, but it is unclear whether she will comply. The film has lovely shots of the mountainous landscape, but otherwise seems unconnected, unsure of what message it

wants to convey. The foster daughter (although she is white, she may be an Aborigine?) of one of the women does unstealing things – kills little animals and almost causes Linney's little boy to drown; her story is not tied in to the other narratives. The film often surveys the landscape to the accompaniment of mysterious music, but it is unclear what this is referring to. The eternal bickering and bitterness between Byrne and Linney is repetitive and does not go anywhere. The Aborigines are depicted as overweight innocents sitting around passively; if the director is trying to present them as noble or having unusual dignity, he failed. Interesting premise very poorly implemented. (2015)

**Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work** 2010 Ricki Stern, Anne Sundberg 3.0 Interesting, extremely well-made documentary that follows Joan Rivers through one year of her career (2008) and includes piquant television clips from her early years – mostly 1960s. The documentary has no narrator except for the voice-over from Rivers, who often recounts what is happening in the video (we are going to Wisconsin because I needed money so desperately) and expresses her feelings and her interpretations of what she is doing. Entertaining to see the clips of Johnny Carson, Phyllis Diller, Don Rickles (a good friend), Kathy Griffin, etc. (but why no Sarah Silverman?). Most of the film is set in New York, but also includes trips to Edinburg, London, Los Angeles, a city in Wisconsin, etc. Rivers comes across as brash, motor-mouth, outspoken, foul-mouthed, but also very honest about herself; the viewer always feels that he is getting her view straight from the heart, that she is not hiding anything, that she is completely open about herself, warts and all. Perhaps too honest, since she and her daughter Melissa (who has some uncomplimentary things to say about her mother) made a film about the death of Rivers' husband just a few years after he died. The film begins with shots of part of Rivers' naked face and continues with the application of the extensive make-up she wears; you never see her again without her make-up and perfect hair. Rivers cares a great deal about making enough money to support her lavish lifestyle (limos, drivers, an apartment that looks like Marie Antoinette's over-decorated boudoir) and the numerous people who work for her; she is willing to take virtually any gig so long as it pays her enough money, even the one in Wisconsin where she offends a member of the audience, and the roast of her where all the participants talk about her incessant plastic surgery and her age. She is a confirmed workaholic at the age of 75 and is determined to beat the age records of classics like George Burns and Phyllis Diller, who worked into their 90s; as she shows us her appointment book, she shares that her greatest nightmare is having dates (the little squares) with no appointment booked. Rivers sometimes shows what appears to be honest emotion: the death of her husband; particularly her resentment that critics will never take her seriously as an actress even though she has written and starred in comedies (they consider her just a stand-up comic); and for that reason she refused to take her successful London play to New York. Fun and informative documentary even if you don't particularly care for Joan Rivers. (2012)

**John Rabe** 2009 Florian Gallenberger (Germany) 3.0 Ulrich Tukur controlled, no-nonsense, fearless humanitarian as John Rabe, the head of the Siemens branch in China; Steve Buscemi "ugly" as always, a dedicated American doctor in charge of the local hospital – sometimes on automatic pilot as a cynical anti-Nazi; Dagmar Manzel sensitive and attractive as Rabe's devoted wife in first half of film; Anne Consigny plays as concerned head of the girls school who almost falls in love with Rabe (!); Daniel Brühl as well-intentioned young German diplomat who tries to help – it turns out he is a Jew; Fang Yu as very pretty Chinese student interested in photography. Traditional historical epic about the successful efforts of a well-placed German businessman to create a safety zone for civilians in Nanking – it saved the lives of about 200,000. Film emphasizes with graphic detail the overweening arrogance, viciousness, and cruelty of the Japanese: the beheading contests; dumping rotting bodies in front of the safety zone and forbidding them to be buried; the staff of the girls' school cuts the hair of all the girls to make them less attractive to the soldiers; only one attempted rape is shown. The dramatized color shots are expertly edited with black and white historic footage. The film's drama focuses on Rabe's development. He is completely dedicated to his mission of saving as many Chinese as possible. He is politically naïve and even writes to Hitler asking for help in the midst of the Japanese terror, but he soon turns against the Nazis – Rabe and Buscemi get drunk and sing a scandalous song about Hitler's and Goering's balls. The film emphasizes Rabe's love for his wife (it is a heart-warming moment when he finds out that she is alive) and by the danger of Rabe's dying from diabetes. Dramatic centerpiece of the film – two Japanese

soldiers try to rape Fang Yu and her little brother shoots them with a pistol that the officer left on a shelf; the soldiers chase the girl into the school dormitory where the girls have to strip and be have their bodies inspected by an officer to prove they are not soldiers. The film is quite sentimental – the viewer feels that with the aid of the soulful cellos it is pulling at your heart strings; Rabe plays beautiful romantic, touching music on the piano; Brühl and Yu fall in sweet love after she takes pictures of him in the street; in a melodramatic scene close to the end Rabe turns away the Japanese army from the security zone with an elaborate bluff. The film then ends with a terminally melodramatic scene of Chinese people cheering Rabe under a mourning cello as he is deported and he runs for a tearful reunion with his wife. Interesting, effective, but a bit too sentimental. (2011)

**Johnny Belinda** 1948 Jean Negulesco (AA) 3.5 Jane Wyman in AA role as deaf mute who learns to live; Lew Ayres as a local doctor who takes an interest in Wyman and leads her to realize her humanity; Charles Bickford affecting as Belinda's hard-working dirt farmer father; Agnes Moorehead as Wyman's aunt, who begins film as forbidding but also shows her humanity when she rallies to her niece; Jan Sterling as Wyman's rival, who plays a major role in the melodramatic conclusion; Stephen McNally dark and evil as the only truly bad character in the film. Well made, heartwarming, soap opera/drama set in Nova Scotia about a deaf mute girl who is taught to live by the kindly, Christ-like Ayres; she is raped by McNally, but the resulting child completes her humanity; she is finally rescued from the intolerant townspeople by the saintly doctor, who realizes that Wyman and Ayres love one another. The film is so well made that the soap opera subject matter is transmuted into real drama. All the characters are real and the performances are excellent with minor exceptions. All the main characters are good people whose initial ambiguity is transmuted by Wyman and Ayres: the father is gruff because of his poverty, but once Ayres shows Belinda's potential, he soon shows his love for his daughter; Moorehead is equally gruff, but when she is told that Belinda is pregnant, her heart softens and she takes responsibility for the girl and her baby; Sterling is originally jealous and vindictive toward Belinda, but even she cannot resist her charm when she is recruited to help take Belinda's baby from her; Ayres is convincing as the Christ-like figure who is unwavering in his determination to bring salvation to Belinda. Film is very critical of the narrow and intolerant morality of small-town America (the film does not seem to be about Canada), which it contrasts – perhaps with some contradiction – with the goodness of the individual characters. The film has a very melodramatic ending – Belinda kills McNally when he comes to take her baby, and the ensuing courtroom drama is resolved when Sterling dramatically reveals to the court – Perry Mason style – that McNally is the father of the baby and not Ayres. Hollywood soap at its best – lovely detailed and expressive cinematography, excellent performances, convincing characters, interesting issues. Marred slightly by a couple of sanctimonious scenes. (2008)

**Joueuse (Queen to Play)** 2009 Caroline Bottaro (France) 3.0 Sandrine Bonnaire as young-looking middle-aged woman working as housemaid and hotel maid in Corsica; Francis Renaud as her good-looking husband, who works in the shipyard and has simple tastes; Kevin Kline as eccentric bearded American with a mysterious background living in a distinguished-looking house outside of town; Jennifer Beals appears in the beginning as beautiful, dark-haired chess-playing American staying in a hotel in town with her lover-husband. Appealing, slow-moving woman's drama about a simple, straight-laced femme de ménage who is impelled by the sight of a glamorous couple playing chess on the balcony of a Corsican hotel to begin to make changes in her own life. The natural environment is very appealing – Bonnaire bicycling slowly through the gentle, sunlit summer morning, pale blue mountains and the sea glimmering quietly in the background. It is apparent that Bonnaire has a simple housewife's existence in the beginning – off to work to supplement the income of her working class husband, throwing dinner together quickly, no sexual, romantic tension with her husband, conflict with her know-it-all daughter. The view of the chess couple sets her thinking: she buys her husband an electronic chess set; since her husband is not in the least bit interested, she begins to play chess with Kline in his house, who agrees to teach her; she is a quick learner, and soon she is beating Kline; toward the end she enters a local chess tournament, and in a 'Rocky' like moment, she beats the local reigning popinjay; the end of the film has her boarding a boat to go to Paris for a higher level tournament. The film is at its best photographing the face of Bonnaire as she makes the almost imperceptible transition from the frumpy house cleaner to a much more stylish woman with 'mèches' and a tighter bodice – she smiles as she walks down the street.

The director gets comic mileage out of Bonnaire's obsessions with chess and even on several occasions has her walking over checkerboard floor patterns (which she doesn't seem to notice). The expectation that she might develop a romantic relationship with Kline is never consummated, although they engage in (perhaps) sexy interplay through rhythmic slapping of the timers on the chess clock and indulge a good good-bye kiss; and most importantly she earns the admiration of her family, the excited support of her formerly sullen teenage daughter and even of her husband, who doesn't want to be present in the tournament room for fearing of distracting her. The film is quietly feminist asserting that personal achievement makes a woman more feminine, attractive, and admirable instead of desexing her. Quiet, well-made film that keeps the viewer involved in large part because of the focused performances of Bonnaire and Kline and the quiet poetry of the cinematography. (2010)

**Le jour se lève** 1939 Marcel Carné (France) 3.5 Jean Gabin as decent working class hero living alone in sixth-floor walk-up apartment; Jacqueline Laurent as cute little flower girl (!) with whom Gabin falls in love, but she is attached to...; Jules Berry as playboy dog trainer who (inexplicably?) has a certain power over Laurent; Arletty very familiar as worldly wise ex-mistress of Berry – she is Gabin's down-to-earth lover as he decides what to do about Laurent. Tightly constructed renowned example of French poetic realism and the doomed romanticism of Renoir and Carné. Gabin kills Berry in the first scene, and a crowd gathers outside the building as the police mass for an assault on Gabin's apartment; through a series of flashbacks Gabin then reflects on the events that brought him – a decent ordinary working class guy working as a sand blaster – to murder; he is in love with Laurent, who however has a difficult time breaking with Berry; perhaps also Gabin feels guilty about his fling with Arletty; in any case, when Berry taunts Gabin in his apartment with his power over his beloved, Gabin grabs Berry's pistol and shoots him; back to the present, Gabin then commits suicide rather than be taken by the police. The mood of the film is bleak with little humor or satire. The motive-reason for Gabin's crime is difficult to uncover – Gabin's deep love for the girl, her exploitation by the slime ball Berry, and his aggressive taunting of Gabin; since somehow it all seems insufficient, one realizes that for no fault of his own Gabin's love for Laurent is doomed – no matter what he does, there will be a tragic ending. All of the performances are strong, with perhaps the exception of Laurent whose naïve and passive personality does not give much opening for fireworks; Gabin's histrionic shouting at the crowd from his window toward the end of the film is a bit overwrought. *Mise-en-scène* and editing are classic and graceful; the art direction is real and poetic at the same time – a little dreamy and yet completely French decors. The doomed trajectory of events of course reminds one of the trapped feeling of French intellectuals at the end of the 30s and of the rather passive response of the French nation to the German attack in 1940. This type of film should also be seen as a precursor and influence on American film noir: the shadowy cinematography, the prevalence of fate in the conduct of the narrative, the destruction of the main character at the end, and the use of the flashback structure. The film suffers a little from slow movement and a couple of flat scenes. (2010)

**Journal d'un curé de campagne** 1950 Robert Bresson (France) 3.0 Claude Laydu as the priest assigned to a small village parish in the Nord; he tries to establish himself, but is ignored and condemned by the parish and ends up dying of stomach cancer. A film about spiritual anguish. It doesn't seem to be about Catholicism, but about whether an intensely spiritual person who wants to do good in the world and to be fulfilled can succeed. Laydu, memorable with his soulful eyes and his hair sticking up and his ragged "pelerine" cape, is memorable as the new curé who for reasons we never understand is ignored and maligned by his parishioners (particularly the 12-year-old girl who mocks him for his "beaux yeux" and the count who is having an affair with his daughter's governess). Laydu the priest is intensely alone – aside from a senior curé from a neighboring parish, he does not seem to have any friends, relations, family, and not a person from the village is close to him; when he says mass, there is usually no one in the congregation. When we look at him (often through a window from the outside), he is alone in his dilapidated rectory doing something very domestic that would normally be performed by a wife and thus reminding us that he lives without wife and children. The daughter of the chatelaine, who is a rebel and doubter about Catholic doctrine, talks to him the most often, but she seems full of suspicion and resentment when she is with him. He makes a sort of a friend with a free-thinking doctor in the village,

but he commits suicide, apparently out of despair for being alone without God in the world. He gets advice from an older priest in a nearby parish, but he mainly tells him to be more assertive and the parishioners will come to him. Laydu's main accomplishment is to persuade the wife of the chatelain to forgive herself and the rest of the world for the tragic death of her son when he was a little boy, but the (moving) spiritual experience between her and the curé so upsets her that she dies that night from heart failure – an occurrence the village holds against the priest. In the end, Laydu find out that he has stomach cancer; after visiting a seminary friend, who appears to be a drug addict, he dies seemingly as alone as he was in life. The film is eloquent on the spiritual malaise of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, and presumably on the deep alienation of people who do not have an abiding faith in God, and on the inexplicable cruelty of some human beings toward others. God acts in mysterious ways; it is impossible to understand why some people appear to be treated so cruelly by Him, even those who struggle valiantly to find Him. A great deal of voice-over as the curé quotes from his diary; the film suffers from longueurs and is often difficult to follow. (2007)

**Journal d'une femme de chambre** 1964 Luis Buñuel (wr. Jean-Claude Carrière) (France) 3.5  
Jeanne Moreau as the chambermaid Celestine who arrives at a French manor house for service, Michel Piccoli as the ineffective, weak husband who pursues servant girls but who has so little to offer that he can't sometimes go hunting since he has no money for ammunition, Françoise Lugagne as shrewish, seemingly evil wife who cares primarily about her material possessions (constantly telling Celestine not to break the china, the lamp, etc.), Jean Ozenne as the father with a serious foot fetish. An uncompromisingly bleak look at early 20<sup>th</sup> century French life in a small town. Virtually everyone is wicked and bizarre – the foot fetish father who dies in bed with Celestine's dress boots lying next to him; the servant Joseph who murders the little girl after raping her; the feuds between neighbors over petty issues; the wife who is obsessed with the vases and statuettes in the house and who has some secret sexual practice (she has a laboratory in which she brews some sort of mysterious chemical (sexual?)), and she confides in her priest friend that she masturbates (?) her husband to keep him happy [he is so 'vigorous' and she can't satisfy his needs; the priest seems to accept her practice, but insists that she must derive no pleasure from it]; a lot of extreme rightwing politics on the part of Joseph and his friends, who rant how the "métèques" are ruining France and how the more Jews we kill the better. A visual highlight is the two snails crawling over the leg of the dead girl who has just been murdered by Joseph. The film is shot in beautiful widescreen black and white that is crystal clear with perfect framing and camera movement to tell the story; the scenario is straightforward, clearly written in classical French, always moving the story forward, concentrating on the story of the murder of the little girl and Celestine's efforts to prove that Joseph was responsible for it. Moreau draws us into the story – beautiful if not pretty, always a bit mysterious (what did she do in Paris before she came, why does she semi-encourage the sexual advances of the father and Piccoli, what does she want out of her stay in the country?), good-hearted, since she goes to bed with Joseph to find out whether he murdered the little girl; she ends up well, marrying the prosperous retired officer living next door; but we aren't sure what she is plotting at the end.... The film ends abruptly with Joseph being cleared of the murder (what happened to the piece of evidence planted by Celestine?), and his having set up shop running a rightwing café in Cherbourg with another woman – then the parade passing in front of the cafe disappears in snapshot like shots, and the film ends with a cartoon depiction of thunder and lightning! Film is less surrealistic and more narrative than Buñuel's other films, but he still manages to pack in a lot of bizarre behavior. (2006)

**The Judge** 2014 David Dobkin 2.5 High Hollywood drama mixing reconciliation of generations with courtroom shenanigans involving a hit and run. Robert Downey Jr. as smartass take-no-prisoners Boston lawyer who returns to his small town Indiana origins when his mother dies; Robert Duvall looking old as Downey's father, but his usual percussive self as crusty but fair judge in the town; Billy Bob Thornton as prosecutor who tries to put Duvall in prison; Vincent d'Onofrio as Downey's overweight, disillusioned (and dull) older brother; Jeremy Strong as the younger brother destined to become a great baseball player but turned by an auto accident into a cute brain-damaged kid; Vera Farmiga as Downey's old flame. Film suffers from excessive length (2:20) with a surfeit of emotional speeches, a meandering screenplay, a superabundance of side plots, and overly eager sentimentality. The



main part of the film treats the overcoming of the bad blood between Downey and his father (origin unclear); Strong collects Super 8 films of the family's blissful past, which contrasts with the painful, conflicted present; Duvall is suffering from Stage 4 colon cancer and Downey's compassion is raised in the midst of a nighttime crisis that includes Duvall's diarrhea on the floor; Downey is obviously deep down a more sensitive guy than his surface suggests, and witnessing the suffering of his father seems to activate his better nature. About halfway through the film, the thriller element takes over: although his bad memory obscures the case, it becomes increasingly obvious that Duvall has run down with his car a man against whom he has a grudge: Downey (of course) takes over his defense, and is able to circumvent a charge of Murder 2 pursued by Thornton; Duvall however is sent to prison for manslaughter; when he is released because of his bad health, he and Downey are reconciled, and Duvall dies in the boat during a fishing trip. Nice picture of idyllic Indiana town; all-star cast that is underutilized; film should be cut by 20-30 minutes (at least eliminate the budding re-romance with Farmiga and most of the Super 8 footage). (August 2017)

**Judgment at Nuremberg** 1961 Stanley Kramer 3.0 Spencer Tracy as back country, aw shucks judge chosen to provide over a war crimes trial of four German judges who served more or less willingly under the Nazis, Richard Widmark as dedicated and hard-hitting prosecutor who is determined to put the defendants away, Burt Lancaster as Ernst Janning, the decent German scholar who decides to serve the Nazi state, Judy Garland in cameo role as poor German woman accused by the Nazis of being the lover of a Jew, Maximilian Schell as bombastic, rhetorical defense counsel pulling out all the stops to get Janning off the hook, Marlene Dietrich as bitter widow of high ranking German SS officer executed by the Americans, Montgomery Clift in jaw-trembling portrayal of a low IQ German testifying about being forcibly sterilized by the Nazi state, William Shatner in small role as the clerk of the tribunal court. Interesting, earnest, well acted, but somewhat static and overlong film about one's responsibility when as a judge (or civil servant) one is faced with unjust, inhuman laws and policies. Takes place in Nuremberg in 1948 during the beginning of the Berlin Crisis; all of which dramatizes the arguments, often made, that the United States needs to go easy on the Germans (verdict of not guilty) so as to enlist German public opinion in the fight against the Communists; in any case, most of them were just taking orders and doing their duty when they condemned men to be sterilized or sent a woman accused of having an affair with a Jew to a concentration camp. Most of film takes place in courtroom with long statements or speeches; the camera has some trouble deciding what to do – results in a lot of slow camera movement around a witness testifying, and then it frames two actors just as the witness mentions another person in the courtroom. Highlight of the film is Burt Lancaster coming to life two thirds through the film, when with great passion, credibility, and eloquence he avows the shame of his role in going along with the Nazi state and opines that Germany will never again find its soul until it has come to terms with the horror of its past. All the judges on trial are found guilty and condemned to life imprisonment. Tracy has top billing, but his character is quiet and unassuming (he is inexperienced and admits that he was “not the first choice” for the job) and he keeps his own counsel until the final session of the court when he deplors the actions of the accused and sentences them. (2006)

**Julie and Julia** 2009 Nora Ephron 3.0 Meryl Streep warbling just like Julia in one of her better-than-an-impersonation inhabiting of the joy and energy of Julia Child; Amy Adams utterly charming as ever as the Queens girl 50 years later who decides to cook her way through Child's cookbook in a year and write a blog about it; Stanley Tucci as the impeccably neat and romantic diplomat consort of Child – he encourages her indefatigably throughout the exercise; Chris Messina engaging dark-haired husband of Julie – he is also supportive except for the time he loses his temper and walks out for a while. Interesting, food-laden, invariably upbeat double story of Julia Child and one of her acolytes many years later; even though Child is about 90 when Julie does her trick, they never meet. The screenplay labors to find the parallels between the two women: the focus is on their love of delicious food (Is there anything more divine than butter? Isn't it a great achievement to end the day by boning a duck, then wrapping it dough and serving it piping hot to your admiring guests?), their upbeat attitudes, the unvarying support of their doting husbands (and there are no children to get in the way), their hard, focuses labor, and their ambition that pushes through to completion and fulfillment for both (Child finally hears from Knopf that they will publish her book, and Julie's blog becomes famous and she starts to work on her own book). The film focuses on the ability of women to find their

dream and to push through to its realization; in both cases it was done with the full support of their men rather than in the teeth of and despite the male world. The film is set colorfully in the Paris of the late 40s and early 50s where Tucci is on a diplomatic assignment and – less colorfully – in New York after the turn of the millennium. It embraces the French idea that good food is the content and the symbol of the pleasures of life and a life well lived. The part of the story following Child is far more interesting and evocative than the travails of Julie in her run-down apartment over the Queens pizza parlor. One wonders whether a film focusing exclusively on Child’s story might have had more dramatic focus and excitement. Streep’s performance is very entertaining, and Adams is her usual amiable self. Pleasant movie. (2010)

**Julieta** 2016 Pedro Almodovar (Spain) 2.5 Soap opera about a middle-aged woman’s regrets about her relationship with her daughter dressed up with the Almodovar treatment. Emma Suarez eternally chagrined as the middle-aged Julieta, spending most of the film writing a letter to her daughter; Adriana Ugarte as the young Julieta, a 20-something in the flashback – with bright red lips and bleach-blond punk hair, she is a classics professor (!) teaching the Odyssey to a bunch of captivated college students; Daniel Grao as Xoan, the fisherman (living in a cool house with a lovely view of the harbor), who meets Julieta on a train, screws her all night, and then fathers a daughter with her; Dario Grandinetti as Lorenzo, the Italian (?) author that puts up with the older Julieta’s depressed behavior; Rossy de Palma, the Almodovar stalwart, who acts as a distraction in the younger Julieta story. After jilting her faithful partner, Lorenzo, Julieta writes a long flashback about her relationship with her daughter, Antia. She meets her lover on a train after a man sitting across from her commits suicide; she raises Antia in the picturesque fisherman’s seaside abode, but when she and Xoan have a fight about his affair with a sculptor, Ava, he impulsively sets off to sea in the midst of a storm and is drowned; a little later, the teenage Antia takes off for a mountain retreat (very picturesque place) and subsequently cuts off all relations with her mother – she has found “a life of faith”, although there is no further indication of what that means; Julieta endures a life of suffering – about 15 years – but when she finally reconciles with the good guy Lorenzo, she receives a letter from her daughter out of the blue; the last scene has her and Lorenzo driving through a (naturally) picturesque Swiss landscape to join up with Antia, who we learn has had three children, one of whom drowned, just like her dad; we have forgotten to mention the deaths also of Julieta’s mother, ignored by her father in his infatuation with her nurse, and of Xoan’s ex-lover, Ava. The film focuses relentlessly on the regrets of women and their feelings of guilt, particularly Julieta who recounts in flashback the whole sorry history of her relationship with Antia. The film reads as a typical Latin soap opera – the suffering of women, who comprise the majority of the film’s characters, the tragic history of Julieta’s relationship with Xoan, her unrequited love for her daughter, the sudden random deaths of many of the characters, and a ray of hope at the end. Antia’s harsh behavior toward her mother is never elucidated and the devoted Julieta is ready to forgive all. The film is dressed up with a low-key rendition of Almodovar trademarks: rapidly delivered, matter-of-fact, distanced dialogue, intense primary colors in the mise-en-scene, bright, picturesque landscapes, bold art works in the background. Pretty dull film if you aren’t a soap opera – or Almodovar – aficionado. (2017)

**Junebug** 2005 Phil Morrison 3.0 Embeth Davidtz as Madeleine, who as owner of avant garde art gallery in Chicago visits her husband’s North Carolina family and cultivating a visionary artist in the vicinity; Amy Adams lights up the screen with her portrayal of sweet and loving expectant mother in North Carolina family; Alessandro Nivola as rather under-written husband of Madeleine, George, who seems always to sleeping while visiting his parents’ home; Ben McKenzie as Johnny, most unhappy and alienated husband of Adams – he works in kitchen equipment mail order store; Celia Watson as Nivola’s and McKenzie’s generous-sized mom who takes an instant dislike to Madeleine – “she can say more with a glance than most actors can say in a soliloquy”; Scott Wilson as her extremely taciturn, perhaps depressed husband. Engaging, sometimes hollow-seeming story about a homecoming to a family in North Carolina. The culture of a Southern family is carefully drawn – green lawns, no sidewalks, talking about Jesus and his blessings, church-going and hymn-singing, ladies at the baby shower with carefully coiffed hair. Much of the film is about the contrast between the big city, Chicago sophisticates – Madeleine pulls out all the stops to secure a contract with the local visionary artist that paints his Confederate characters with very large, erect penises – and the Southern, Bible-toting people who have plenty of feelings but keep them hidden and rarely talk openly. Madeleine belies her cold, business-

oriented style by throwing her self into an intimate relationship with Adams, who enthusiastically and naively worships her sophisticated urban sister-in-law; she severely disappoints her husband when in a time of crisis she chooses her professional goals over his commitment to family loyalty. Adams' husband Johnny is beset by severe alienation – he doesn't appear to want the child his wife is carrying and he resents the limits that she places on his juvenile life style (he seems most happy when he is farting around with his fellow employees at work); he mistakes Madeleine's somewhat exaggerated attempts to comfort him for sexual interest, since he can't believe that brother George is stud enough to keep his wife satisfied. Film focuses a lot on the two parents: Mom shows wit in her put-downs of her hapless son Johnny and she still worships George as the favored son; the father lurks in the background and remains loyally attached to his wife. It is always a pleasure to return to Adams, whose naïve and enthusiastic personality entertains and gives us hope that her marriage with Johnny will somehow turn out. Despite Adams' still-born child (she was going to name him Junebug), the film ends on a modified hopeful note: the two parents remain attached, Adams is upbeat even after losing her child and talking to her hapless husband, and George forgives Madeleine for her breach of family solidarity as they return to Chicago. Observant and honest Indie film that offers nothing particularly dramatic or exciting, but just a little honest truth. (2009)

**Juno** 2007 Jason Reitman (wr. Diablo Cody) 4.0 Ellen Page small, thin, peppy, smart mouthed, savvy much beyond her age, good-hearted and sincere as 16-year-old high school student who discovers she is pregnant after an impulsive fling (her idea) with her sort of boyfriend; Michael Cera understated and equally sincere as the boyfriend who complies with Juno's wishes and then stands aside until the end; Allison Janney (who has a memorable meltdown with the ultrasound technician when Juno is having an examination) and J.K. Simmons as refreshingly supportive and good-humored parents of Juno, although they are often bewildered by her; Jennifer Garner as the more-or-less control freak yuppie-style woman that Juno chooses to adopt her gestating baby; Jason Bateman as her husband, who has a lot of growing up to do; Olivia as her kind of flaky but supportive girl friend. Heart-warming, humorous, insightful little film about non-conformist Juno: she gets pregnant, but is thoroughly turned off by the abortion industry (her decision to have the baby is aided by a humorous appeal by one of her schoolmates); she decides to have the baby, and seems to find the perfect couple to adopt it. However, things don't turn out exactly the way she expected; although the viewer is at first skeptical about the effusive Garner, it is her husband who becomes the wrench in the monkey works; Garner proves herself a dedicated would-be mom, despite her annoying yuppie ways, and Bateman, who develops a bond with Juno based on a predilection for grunge rock and bloody slasher movies, ends making a play for Juno (!) and deciding to leave Garner. Juno however is also growing up and her good sense enables her to recognize Bateman's childishness and Garner's maturity (in a lovely scene where she observes her behavior in a shopping mall) and gladly hands the newborn child over to her. Confronted with her problem and the spectacle of the adoptive couple, Juno also goes through a small transformation wherein she recognizes that she is trying to act way too grown up. The film ends with her giving up the baby and relapsing into an age-appropriate boy-girl relationship with Cera; the film ends with the two of them sitting on the front doorstep and singing one of Kimya Dawson delightful lyrics-rich, naïve patter songs as the gaggle of cross-country runners go running by, this time without Cera who is spending time with his girlfriend. Script is outstanding with its fully realized characters, clever, pungent and memorable dialogue (its zappy one-liners are perhaps a bit precious in places), its many heart-warming moments, its gentle satire, and its love and respect for all the characters. The reaction of the audience – happy to be drawn into this delightful experience – oscillates between recognition, laughter, and happy tears. The movie is buoyed by outstanding performances from every actor, all of whom remain fresh and appealing in the viewer's mind days after seeing the film. (2008)

**Kaidan** 2007 Hideo Nakata (Japan) 3.0 Takaaki Enoki as pretty, effeminate young man with samurai haircut who falls in love with a succession of pretty women; four pretty Japanese women (Reona Hirota, Tae Kimura, Hitomi Kuroki all wearing different shades of Japanese kimonos so that they are very difficult to distinguish one from the other) who successively fall in love with Takaaki and usually meet a sad fate. Japanese combination soap opera and ghost story that lacks some suspense but has outstanding

décor and cinematography. The attractive Takaaki falls in love with the older Hirota without realizing that their relationship is cursed by the fact that his father (a samurai) killed her father (a debt collector); Takaaki is accidentally responsible for the death of Hirota, but before she dies the insanely jealous mistress vows that she will haunt him if he marries another; the first woman he bonds with, a pretty teenager, is killed with a cycle slash in the back (Kool-Aid looking blood pouring from her mouth) by the vengeful Hirota appearing in CGI sequence; when Takaaki marries a third woman, their baby now carries the curse and seems to drive him mad with her passive-aggressive stare; in a final samurai-like sequence Takaaki is pursued by implacable villagers (most of whom seem to die in the outrageous action sequence) and is then pulled by ghostly white-grey hands into the lake where his father's victim's body was buried. The film moves slowly and is only mildly scary: the tell-tale livid scars on the face of the women and the baby, the intimations of Hirota peering down at Takaaki from the gaps in the bamboo ceiling, Hirota's body suddenly descending upside down right next to Takaaki, the flies emerging lazily from the mouth of the impassive baby, the three (?) grey-white hands that pull his body into the fatal pond, the final picture of Hirota holding the severed but living head of Takaaki in her arms as she stands on the surface of the pond. The camera work is fluid and elegant, moving and turning in modest increments to keep the principals in focus. The art direction is usually excellent: the camera gliding along the matte-colored streets of a small town, the cool, spare interiors of the home dwellings, the lush vegetation of the exteriors, the rain coming down in sheets as the characters walk through the streets with parasol hats attached to their heads, the soaked, gleaming vegetation in the woods, the dark-colored water of the fatal pond with steam rising from it. Graceful film that lacks shock value. (2009)

**Kansas City Confidential** 1952 Phil Karlson 3.0 John Payne effective as existentially distressed protagonist who is trying to find the real perpetrators of a bank heist for which he was arrested; Colleen Gray as rather too sunny token female, whose job it is to provide some redemption for Payne; Jack Elam, Lee Van Cleef, and Neville Brand as three classic tough guys who participated in the holdup and who are looking for their cut of the dough; Preston Foster as the mastermind of the heist – he happens also to be the father of Gray. Good gritty, realistic, sometimes rather documentary-style approach to a story of a bank robbery and its aftermath. Most of the movie takes place in a fishing resort in Mexico, where the participants are waiting to get their money from Foster, who turns out to be the father of a law student and a devoted fisherman. Events in Mexico revolve on who will double-cross who, who will get the money, and whether Payne will fulfill his dreams – which might include getting a cut of the money him, or getting the reward, or getting the girl, who rides with him from the airport to the resort. Script is rather complex – it is hard to identify the characters (they all wore masks during the holdup and thus don't recognize one another), and it is hard to know what the different characters are up to. A nice twist is that Foster has apparently no intention of splitting up and spending the money (too hard since all of it is marked), but – at least toward the end of the film – he plans to give it back, blame it on the other three men (there were only three participating in physical robbery) and then collecting the reward money. Film ends with all the bank robbers dead; and as he dies, Foster endorses Payne's relationship with his daughter and recommends to the police that he be given the reward money (about \$300,000). Photography tends to be dark and shadowed; some nice double shots of one face in the foreground and another – perhaps slightly out of focus – in the background. Enjoyable film for the performances (especially the three hoods) and for the story of complications; it suffers however from lack of clarity in the plot. (2007)

**Kate and Leopold** 2001 James Mangold 2.0 Meg Ryan cute as a button with straight hair working as an executive in an advertising firm in New York and looking for Mr. Right; Hugh Jackman handsome and a bit ruffled as English nobleman ne'er-do-well who is brought back from 1876 through a time warp to the present, where of course he meets Meg; Liev Schreiber as marmot-resembling ex-boyfriend of Meg and the inventor who figured out how to use the time warp (dive off the Brooklyn Bridge a certain time of the month); Breckin Meyer pretty cute as Ryan's brother who aspires to be an actor; Bradley Whitford as the bad boss who hits on Ryan and of course is rejected (inexplicably, after she rejects him, he still promotes her to a higher position). Cookie cutter romantic comedy that depends on the cute charms of the two principals. Very genre driven so that the attentive viewer (not myself) can predict the ending within the first ten minutes of the film. The time travel business is pretty hackneyed, but one supposes that the *Cosmo*

girls watching the film know little about the subject. The plot intrigue depends a lot on photographs taken by Schreiber in 1876, which have Ryan in them (somehow this doesn't make much sense). Jackman and Ryan do not seem to have chemistry: when they are together, they appear to be going through the motions – are you comfortable with me snuggling you in this position? Some scenes are extremely clichéd: e.g., the romantic dinner with a gypsy violinist and candles that Jackman organizes for his new-found beloved on the rooftop of Ryan's apartment (did he also cook that gourmet dinner?). Ryan is always harried and never seems comfortable or competent in her job and even after she is promoted she willingly abandons her whole life in New York to follow Jackman back to his stuffy aristocratic environment in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to live, one supposes, happily ever after. The excellent Sting song "Until" is not used until the final credits! (2009)

**Kennel Murder Case** 1933 Michael Curtiz 3.0 William Powell, Mary Astor (small role), Eugene Palette, etc. Considered the best in Philo Vance series. Warners. Powell as Philo Vance playing his wise-cracking, quick thinking Nick and Nora role without Nora or the cocktails; he does have dog but with much less prominent role (he does discover one injured dog behind closed door). Takes place in upper class atmosphere – wealthy set in bow ties and smart suits that is interested in dogs and dog shows. Ably directed by Curtiz, who adds some interesting shots – prying camera, wipe dissolves, shots behind bookshelf and behind suits hanging in closet, mirror shot, etc. Said to be origin of standard parlor murder mystery: mysterious murder (turns out to be two), and we develop list of suspects, including Chinese cook interested in Chinese antiquities, the mistress who is about to run off with another man, and the niece who hates the stingy uncle who refuses to let her have her inheritance – all had reason to hate Archer, the victim; script follows investigation of Vance, who has been welcomed by the not-so-bright police sergeant and district attorney; climactic finale, where Vance reconstructs the crimes through flashbacks, and then not being sure who the guilty party is, sets a trap with a dog inducing the real guilty one to reach for the telltale poker (not very credible ending!). (2005)

**Key Largo** 1948 John Huston 3.0 Humphrey Bogart in low-key role as World War II veteran Frank McCloud who goes to hotel on Key Largo to meet the family of his war buddy; Lauren Bacall looking young and lanky and without a lot to do as widow of the war buddy; Lionel Barrymore as Temple, the noble hotel owner and father-in-law of Bacall; Edward G. Robinson as brutal, scowling, unattractive crime boss who has essentially taken over the hotel and is willing to kill anyone who gets in his way; Claire Trevor in AA role as Robinson's boozy, classily dressed girlfriend. Stage-bound film adaptation of Maxwell Anderson Broadway play that features intense interchanges and good acting among the main characters and an extremely bloody finale on a small boat heading toward Cuba. Although almost the entire film is shot on a Warner Brothers soundstage, the Florida Keys atmosphere is fairly convincing – frame hotel with storm shutters, dock on the outside with sea rippling in the background, fake-sounding thunder claps when the hurricane hits in the middle of the film. Huston directs with his usual finesse – e.g., one of the final shots with Bacall walking toward Bogart who she has just discovered is alive is elegant: the camera tracks backward keeping focused on Bacall's worried face. Huston seems to have tried to put some of himself in the rewrite of the script – e.g., McCloud is put in the Italian campaign at Monte Cassino and he is in an Hustonian existentialist situation having to choose whether to take dangerous action to rescue the Temple family from the brutal Robinson. However the theater script dominates: interchange among the characters continues a very long time (Robinson isn't even seen for about 20 minutes) before action kicks in toward the end; Bogart's character is often silent and indecipherable, and it is difficult to decode his motivations. Film is viciously violent in the last third: the sheriff allows himself to be tricked into killing two local Indians (depicted as noble and mistreated by whites) and once Bogart gets hold of a gun, he uses it with ruthless efficiency, killing five Mafiosi on the fog-bound small boat heading toward Cuba. Because of the focus on the mafia and the possible return of Prohibition, the setting of the film seems a bit anachronistic for 1948. Film wonderfully restored with sharp, artfully composed images. Good performances from Robinson and Trevor, but the film fails to get a grip on this viewer. (2011)

**Kicking and Screaming** 1995 Noah Baumbach 4.0 Josh Hamilton as Grover, who begins the film separating from his girlfriend Jane, who (for no particular reason) is going to Prague; Olivia d'Abo

as Jane, Grover's girlfriend often taking her dental retainer out of her mouth when talking; Eric Stoltz as Chet, the eternal student working as a bartender; Chris Eigeman as Max; Parker Posey as high-strung, neurotic Miami, apparently "off her Prozac"; Jason Wiles as loudmouth, horny guy Skippy, who has the misfortune of dating Miami; Carlos Jacott as Otis, uncertain of himself, living with his mother, and having a hard time getting a job at an uppity video store; Cara Buono as mouthy working class girl that works in the cafeteria and strikes up a good relationship with Max; Elliot Gould as Grover's dad, who wants to share the uncertainties of his sex life with Grover. Wonderful narrowly focused film about the uncertainties of moving on after college life. Four slackers remain together in college town after graduation; hanging together purely out of idleness, desperation, fear, boredom, they even continue to refer to their spring break, fall semester, etc. Most of the characters are pleasantly aimless, making do with small, unfocused pleasures. Some of them have active girlfriends; some just sleep with college freshmen out of boredom; they drink and smoke tobacco a lot, but no one seems to smoke marijuana or take drugs. The dialogue is academically oriented, clever, and amusing – e.g., "If Plato is a fine red wine, Aristotle is a dry martini", "There's a certain laughability to Kant"; Skippy signs up for a class in Scandinavian literature. The guys also play trivia contests, e.g., name six empiricist philosophers or all the titles of the 'Friday the 13th' franchise. Amusing episodes include the confrontation provoked by an expertly foul-mouthed Buono when a guy with a "I would rather be bow hunting" license plate pulls into a parking space she is coveting; the low-self-esteem Otis' interview for a job in the video store that has its movie tapes catalogued under bizarre categories and asks him "what his influences" are before hiring him as a clerk; the disoriented Grover has trouble having sex with freshmen because he doesn't have a condom (he has lost his wallet). The heart of the film is however the enduring romantic connection between Grover and Jane. They meet in a college writing class where Jane has uncomplimentary things to say about Grover's writing – Why do his characters talk about such unimportant things; it's a waste to put all that energy into Saturday morning cartoons! Throughout the film Jane calls Grover leaving messages that the latter is afraid to listen to; the events of the film are interspersed with flashbacks of Jane – sometimes photos, sometimes videos about the beginning of the relationship. The film ends on a moving romantic note. In an airport Grover gives the sales clerk a run-on speech about his life focused on his desire to go to Prague to see Jane. Cut then to a flashback scene of Grover and Jane emerging from a bar, walking down the street, and Grover saying he wishes their relationship was "old" so he could kiss her without fear of rebuff; cut to close-up of her face as she smiles and fools with her retainer (ready to take it out for a kiss). End of film. (2013)

**The Kids Are All Right** 2010 Lisa Cholodenko 3.0 Annette Bening as up-tight, often foul-mouthed (!) 50-or-so doctor in Los Angeles living with her gay spouse raising two children; Julianne Moore as somewhat flaky and "hippie" spouse; Josh Hutcherson as their wise-before-his age son with a good sense of humor; Mia Wasikowska in strong performance as their daughter on the verge of womanhood; Mark Ruffalo often annoying as the hip, confused, uncertain sperm donor, who becomes involved with the family; Yaya DaCosta as Ruffalo's beautiful, but unattachable girlfriend. Family drama with comic overtones about passages in life – the two women have to survive a mid-life crisis, Mia has to start to grow up and move toward greater independence, and Ruffalo has to recognize that his unattached life is not satisfying. In the beginning Mia summons Ruffalo into the family without asking her "Moms" and he turns out to be a disruptive influence: the kids hang out with him and Mia becomes more surly toward her moms; Hutcherson is influenced to drop his worthless guy friend (when he unzips his zipper to pee on a stray dog!); and when Moore starts a wild sexual affair with Ruffalo, her relationship with her spouse and her children goes rapidly downhill. All is ok in the end as Mia goes off to college, the two parents reconcile, and Ruffalo shuffles off to parts unknown, presumably to find a woman to marry and have children with. The film has a genuine, non-Hollywood feel: the characters are real and varied (Moore and Bening have a great time playing their parts in very distinct ways), there is no romantic salvation (in the end Ruffalo is still in the cold, and the two women reunite with little romantic passion). Dialogue is generally authentic, although the script sometimes goes out of its way to be cute and approving about lesbians being parents and forming a family; the film's political correctness-"cool" extends to having Ruffalo run an organic foods garden on Los Angeles and to having characters bragging about juicing and loving to eat local. The subplot of Hutcherson's friendship with the flaky kid goes

nowhere; it was obviously there to give some element of “passage” to his character, but it would have worked better to leave it out. Bening expresses her emotional condition at a dinner table by singing (badly) a song from an early Joni Mitchell album, whereas Moore delivers a small speech toward the end of the film explaining (somewhat pessimistically) why she and Bening are staying together. A much more effective scene is the last one when Mia is left alone in her new college dorm room; you can see the hesitation and potential loneliness in her face, and then she runs out to her parents’ car where she gives them and her brother a moving hug – in film the visual works the best. (2011)

**Kill Bill, Vol I** 2003 Quentin Tarantino 3.0 Uma Thurman, Daryl Hannah, Lucy Liu. QT’s tribute to his beloved Hong Kong kung fu movies. Enormous quantities of martial arts violence – often comical with UT defeating impossible numbers of attackers and neat fountains of blood spurting up from severed heads and limbs. No sex. No dialogue. No believable characters. No real story, no real plot. No male characters: murderers and action heroes are now mostly women. Revenge drama, but we never know why the wedding party was killed in first place. Editing pace quite slow, especially in endless scene with sword maker (with really bad comedy), and the interminable confrontation with Lucy Liu and cohorts. Pure action and Hong Kong genre. Very imaginative, but all for shock/impressive effect – some sequences in black and white, one longish (good) sequence is animated, Japanese style. Terrific mise-en-scene, e.g., the final battle with LL in snow garden; but again it has no dramatic impact – just a typical scene from the genre. Movie is so obviously truncated – ends suddenly with a question, and we are invited to tune in; Vol 1 has no independent dramatic integrity. (2004)

**Kill Me Again** 1989 John Dahl 3.0 Michael Madsen as shockingly brutal, psychotic, slow-thinking, inexorable mob-connected guy in love with Whalley; Joanne Whalley-Kilmer as tricky, faithless, mendacious, murderous, and beautiful femme fatale, a gambling addict that survives by manipulating guys (Kilmer: “I think you are a greedy, two-faced bitch.”); Val Kilmer a bit baby-faced as marginal Reno detective who is pursued by loan sharks and then falls into Whalley’s clutches. Very twisty neo-noir with the usual consummate Dahl femme fatale. Recalling Don Siegel’s ‘Charley Varrick’, the film is set up and down the state of Nevada. It colorfully depicts the flat desert landscapes, the barren mountains, the flat urban stretches of Reno and Las Vegas; beginning with a heist of mob money in Winnemucca, it visits the dingy private detective office of Kilmer in Reno, then proceeds to sumptuous Las Vegas casinos and the desolate mountains and shorelines in the vicinity of Lake Mead. Characters are moderately interesting: Whalley-Kilmer knows how to turn on the heat and pull surprises on her male companions and the audience, although when anguished she becomes whiney. Kilmer is a bit flat and pleasant, but Madsen is riveting and scary when he threatens, brutalizes, and murders characters in the film. The film is fascinatingly twisty and perverse: in the beginning the viewer must come to terms with the ruthless treacherousness of Whalley; in the Reno scenes she wins the trust of Kilmer when she hires him to help her fake her death, but then double crosses him and runs off with all the money; when the scene switches to Las Vegas, the situation becomes particularly complex, since Kilmer is searching for Whalley (always easy to find at the craps table), but he is pursued by the raging Madsen, and all of them are hunted by the mob, who want their money back. Whalley and Kilmer then come to an agreement to fake their death in a boat accident on the lake, but the plan is busted when Madsen shows up; in a shootout Whalley appears to kill Madsen, but Kilmer is as surprised as the audience when Madsen later emerges from behind a boulder alive and well (Madsen and Whalley are in cahoots?). The two think they kill Kilmer, but the tables are again reversed: the fleeing couple discovers that the suitcase supposedly containing the money is empty and they are killed while being pursued by the police; meanwhile, Kilmer survives his shooting and the film ends as he drives across the Arizona border with the money on the front seat beside him. Somehow Kilmer has learned the art of survival. The film relies perhaps too much on plot reversals, but the vivid characters including Dahl’s first over-the-top femme fatale and the serial surprises make it an entertaining experience. (2011)

**Kill the Messenger** 2014 Michael Cuesta 2.5 Adequate docudrama about Gary Webb, the San Jose Mercury reporter who tracks down and publishes the scoop on the CIA’s alleged role in the marketing of crack cocaine in South Central Los Angeles in the 1980s to raise funds for the anti-Contra

campaign in Nicaragua. Jeremy Renner intense, aggressive, excitable, and unpredictable as Webb; Rosemarie DeWitt as his long suffering wife, Sue, with whom he is in love but whom he neglects; Mary Elizabeth Winstead as Webb's overly youthful boss; Lucas Hedges breaks some china as Webb's sometimes disillusioned teenage son; Paz Vega makes a sexy impression as the manipulative siren that gets Webb started on his quest. The film begins as 'All the President's Men' clone headed toward a triumphant revelation of the shocking truth at the end. However, the Mercury prints the multi-part story in the middle of the film, the rest of it being devoted to the efforts of the CIA (covering its behind), the FBI (helping their stealthy buddies by indirectly threatening Webb's family), and even the Los Angeles Times and The New York Times (both shocked that a small-town newspaper like the Mercury got the scoop), to criticize Webb's alleged sloppiness and to minimize the import of the story. His newspaper defends him in the beginning of the controversy, but then gets nervous and exiles him to Cupertino (!) to keep him out of further controversy. The screenplay leaves the impression that the story is essentially accurate, although Webb might have relied too much on Central American drug dealers (Andy Garcia in nice cameo role) and he might not have phrased his assertions carefully enough. The story ends in middle-of-the-road bittersweet fashion when Webb collects a prize as the Northern California reporter of the year but then delivers a prepared letter of resignation to his editor as he leaves the room. Suspension: the film ends with the on-screen texts that he never worked again as a reporter and that he died from gunshot wounds to his head in the early 2000s (most sources agree that he committed suicide). Renner is a good lead as the reporter who will not give up. (September 2017)

**The Killer is Loose** 1956 Budd Boetticher 2.5 Wendell Corey as mild-mannered, quietly psychotic bank robber, who vows to get even with the cop that killed his wife while arresting him; Joseph Cotten as earnest police detective that spends most of his time plotting ways to protect his wife from Corey; Rhonda Fleming glamorous and hollow as decorative 50s (pregnant) housewife, who wants Cotten to quit the force so the two can live happily ever after. Matter-of-fact 50s cop thriller about a harmless-looking but ruthless killer that escapes from prison – committing several murders in the process – to take revenge on Cotton for having accidentally killed his wife; after some hesitation, the viewer learns that Corey is going to kill Fleming. The film is shot realistically on location in high-key lighting in the suburbs of Los Angeles and the ag fields nearby; dialogue is clipped and correctly colloquial, recalling “Just the fact, m’am” of *Dragnet*; the script seems to strain mightily to ratchet up the suspense, following Corey as he off-handedly murders people he runs into, and after Cotton maneuvers his wife out of their apartment with lies to lay a trap for the killer, Fleming (after telling Cotton that they are getting a divorce) shows up at the apartment followed by Corey only a few steps behind (can't she see him?), and in a final flurry of gunfire, the perp is shot down by the police ambush as Fleming expertly dives to the ground for cover. A long way from the chiaroscuro doom and deceit of real film noir. Generally good performances from especially the disturbed Corey; Boetticher uses a lot of long takes with some tracking, perhaps to avoid some expense in the cutting room. Good B-movie fare in the early days of television. (2014)

**The Killers** 1946 Robert Siodmark 4.0 Burt Lancaster looking strong, reflective and existential as an ex-boxer who gets himself in big trouble when he tries to steal from his crime associates; Edmond O'Brien as an unusually tough and aggressive insurance investigator who carries a gun; Rita Hayworth incredibly beautiful, dark-haired, glamorous and dangerous as Lancaster's sometime girlfriend; William Conrad in smaller but convincing role as sarcastic and vicious hit man; Albert Dekker as Big Jim Colfax; Sam Levene as police lieutenant friend of Lancaster; Virginia Christine as sometime girlfriend of Lancaster – she later becomes Levene's wife. Extremely compelling film noir based in part on the famous Hemingway short story (published in 1927); only the first ten minutes or so of is based on the well-known incident where Conrad and a partner show up in a diner in New Jersey and bully the three men there – “bright boy” – and then kill Lancaster. When O'Brien comes on the scene to investigate the murder for an insurance company (shades of *Double Indemnity* although O'Brien is a much tougher investigator than Edward G. Robinson), there ensues a series of flashbacks – a la 'Citizen Kane' with contributions from several characters giving different points of view – that reveal to the viewer Lancaster's character and background and deliver a fascinating, extremely twisty background story. Lancaster was a boxer who had to quit because of a smashed hand; he later gets involved with mobsters



and is one of the principal participants in a payroll robbery; he tries to double-cross his buddies and take all the money for himself, but he makes the mistake of trusting *femme fatale* Ava Gardner, who absconds with the money from their hotel room in Atlantic City and moves in and marries Dekker; Dekker is the one who has Lancaster murdered. Dynamite ending with the murder of Dekker and another man apparently by Gardner, and intense close-up of Gardner's (beautiful!) face as she pleads desperately with her dying husband to clear her of wrong-doing before he dies! Gardner is extremely effective as *femme fatale* – dark, beautiful, lurking in the background, completely ruthless and ready to double-cross anyone or commit murder to get her way. Lancaster is the classic doomed man, a victim of the manipulations of Gardner and waiting passively as a doomed service station attendant for his former partners to catch up with him. As often in the immediate postwar film noir, the plot is labyrinthine (think of 'The Big Sleep'), but it makes little difference if the viewer can't stay abreast, since he is focused on theme, the woman, and the camera. Very stylishly shot in the studio by German veteran Siodmark: a lot of standardly lit interior shots that are handled gracefully and economically; also some fabulous noir scenes – the arrival of the hit men in the beginning with long shadows and brightly contrasted lighting; a burial scene with dark lighting, dimly lit figures standing by the grave with clouds lowering in the background – could be something out of 'Great Expectations' or 'Wuthering Heights'. Picture perfect film noir with all ingredients present, interesting characters, and the supremely glamorous fatal woman. (2009)

**The Killing** 1956 Stanley Kubrick 4.0 Sterling Hayden good-looking with his usual stoical, dry, dead pan delivery as the guy who meticulously organizes a \$2 million heist at a race track; Elisha Cook Jr. as insignificant racetrack cashier with a money-grubbing wife as a problem; Marie Windsor acting strongly as the low-life wife who has contempt for Cook and betrays the plot to her boyfriend; Vince Edwards, Jay C. Flippen, Ted de Corsia, Joe Sawyer, Joseph Turkel as various of the small-time accomplices who all have personal problems that create a need for money and open up the possibility of failures in the plan. A very engrossing crime caper film shot in very sharp, perfectly framed black and white; the lighting is mostly high key and newsreel-like. Film is a heist film that appears to be modeled on 'The Asphalt Jungle' with an endearing last-act reference to "The Treasure of the Sierra Madre" (Hayden's stolen money breaks out of the worn suitcase on the airport tarmac and it is blown all over the runway). Precision is the key term. Hayden organizes the heist very meticulously, planning and timing everything down to the last minute, making sure all the participants know their roles, calculating the time it will take him to get to the racetrack and the time to go from the racetrack to the motel, etc. The film is also made precisely. There is a strong-voiced, dead pan narrator who leads us through the preparations; he mentions the exact times at which certain functions are performed; he reveals the details and execution of the plan in several successive layers – we don't know how the different parts of the plan will mesh until the last part of the film. Not a single frame is wasted in this tightly edited and planned film. There are several *noir* elements. Since the script emphasizes the problems of the participants (the cop needs money to pay off his gambling debts to the mob, the bartender needs money to pay the medical bills of his sick wife, etc.), the viewer is tipped off in the beginning that things are probably going to go wrong. The real fly in the ointment is Marie Windsor, who is bored with her husband, wheedles the plan out of him, and then plots with her studly boyfriend to take not only Cook's share but the whole take! And although the mechanics of the heist mesh well, the sharpshooter who is hired to kill the horse is shot and killed, and Windsor's men die in a bloody shootout with gang members, when the former arrives at a meeting point to take the money. Hayden tries to escape at the airport with the cash in the suitcase, but he stoically awaits arrest at the exit door (he can't get a taxi to stop for him) after his money is spread all over the runway. It is obvious that crime does not pay: personal problems (Windsor), bad luck (the cop shows up when the rifleman is trying to escape), and bad decisions (buying a beat-up old suitcase with locks that don't work) all play a role in the debacle. A realist film with *noir* elements. (2007)

**Kind Hearts and Coronets** 1949 Robert Hamer (Ealing Studios:Britain) 4.0 Dennis Price (surname Mazzini) as priceless snobby, superior, dry-witted cadet offspring of noble family d'Ascoyne who decides to do away with all eight members of the family standing between him and the dukedom; Valerie Hobson as straight upper class woman married to one of the men murdered by Price and who decides to marry Price; Joan Greenwood as sexy, languorous (but middle class) girlfriend of Price who

marries a dolt because she thinks Price has limited prospects but who has long affair with Price for consolation and then turns out to be almost as ruthless as Price himself; Alec Guinness plays eight members of the d'Ascoyne family – from young and callow photographer (Henry) to suffragette, old Duke, the doddering old country parson, the kind and thoughtful banker –, almost all of whom are murdered by Price. Delightful dry, ironic, understated black comedy about socially mobile Price, who is also motivated by desire to revenge his mother's snub by her extremely snobby family; he murders his way to social prominence, only to be captured and condemned for an irrelevant crime of which he was not guilty. Price is priceless as detached, ironic, snobby narrator (he hates the snobbishness of his family, and is yet snobbish himself), who tells the story in his memoirs written the night before his execution with an extremely amusing detachment – sayings like "vice is not so unless it is noticed by others," or in Italy they say "revenge is a dish that people of taste prefer to eat cold," or he quotes Tennyson in pointing out that kind hearts are superior to coronets (thus an attack on the nobility); in the end when he emerges supposedly freed from his penalty he quotes the "Threepenny Opera" in saying that he could be happy with either of the women awaiting him if only one of them would do away with the other. The narrative voiceover is priceless literary, wry and detached in its persistent irony. Inspired combination of delicious acting, literary screenplay, rollicking black humor, and biting satire of the English upper crust. It would be very difficult to find a more entertaining film. (2008)

**King of the Hill** 1993 Steven Soderbergh 3.0 Jesse Bradford as Aaron, a good-looking, resourceful, even precocious 14-year-old living in a tenement-style hotel in Depression St. Louis; Jeroen Krabbé as his (German) father, perhaps a bit neglectful and having a tough time making a living in hard times; Lisa Eichhorn as his quiet, devoted mother (close-ups reveal a bit much of her teeth); Karen Allen cute as usual as Aaron's attentive school teacher; Spalding Gray as decayed, distinguished-looking hotel tenant living with a pretty, though cynical, prostitute played by Elizabeth McGovern; Adrien Brody as a supportive older buddy of Aaron. Honest, fairly engrossing coming-of-age film about a boy struggling with adversity in Depression America. The family is very poor, living in a seedy hotel rather than the apartment they had to leave; Aaron's situation is made much worse by the departure of his adorable little brother Sullivan to live with a relative, his mother's stay in a sanitarium to treat her consumption, and his father's departure on a selling tour in Oklahoma et al., leaving Aaron alone in the apartment to fend for himself. The social and cultural environment is realistic and captivating – the eighth-grade class of well-behaved children taught by Karen Allen, the social structure of the community that treats Aaron as an orphan to be pitied (Aaron is pursued by teenage Katherine Heigl but she drops him when she realizes how irregular his situation is), the shabby, although decent, hotel, where down-and-out tenants are mistreated by the seedy bellhop (played with some delectation by the tooth-stained Joe Chrest, who enjoys padlocking out of their rooms guests who do not pay their bill). By depicting the police – particularly the corner patrolman – as officious and oppressive, by having the police evict the tenants of the local Hooverville at the end, the film clearly favors the unfortunates at the expense of the landlords, and particularly the banks, who don't scruple to throw a family out in the streets. The film is good-humored and sensitive to the plight of the characters – sensitive depiction of Krabbé's campaign to support his family, Spalding Gray's suicide, and Aaron's support of an artist who is thrown out of the hotel and living in the streets. It is also quite colorful and episodic; the brunt of the story is that Aaron is a resourceful and courageous boy who for weeks at a time has nothing more to eat than dinner rolls, and he is rewarded in the end when he is rejoined by his brother, his dad unexpectedly returns with a job as a clerk in the WPA in hand, and they fetch their healed mom from the sanitarium to move back into their old apartment. The film shows that it's not just the French who can make moving coming-of-age films. (2010)

**The King of Marvin Gardens** 1972 Bob Rafelson (BBS) 2.5 Jack Nicholson as David, introverted Philadelphia radio personality that delivers monologues on the air and lives with his aged grandfather in a disheveled apartment; Bruce Dern as Jason, extroverted, cliché spouting real estate dreamer, who summons David to Atlantic City to be a part of his latest Get-Rich-Quick scheme developing a (fictitious) small island in Hawaii; Ellen Burstyn as Sally, hot-tempered ex-beauty queen and Jason's girlfriend; Julia Ann Robinson as Sally's stepdaughter (we learn 2/3s through the film) and

also girlfriend to Jason; Scatman Crothers in flat role as black mafia guy that supposedly works with Jason, but doesn't think much of him. Flat, disjointed, but sometimes interesting, 70s film about the emptiness of the American dream. Most of the film takes place in Atlantic City – very picturesquely photographed as dilapidated in its faded glory (not yet reinvented as a gambling mecca), pale colors, sparsely inhabited by Brooklyn-style New York tourists, monumental hotels with chandeliers in the lobby but with few customers and the paint peeling on the walls. The main plot line has Jason ranting naively about the Hawaii scheme – just a step away from completion, individual homes built on 10-acre plots, etc. Reserved David is of course skeptical and even disdainful, but his attachment to his brother, which seems genuine, prevents him from telling him the bald truth and returning to Philadelphia. The second plot line develops the relationship of Sally with her stepdaughter and boyfriend; at first locked in a sort of sexual competition for Jason's attention, Sally – somewhat inexplicably – decides to throw in the towel, burning her clothes and burying her eye make-up on the beach; afterwards, her rage at Jason's hare-brained schemes builds until she picks up his pistol and shoots him five times. An ex-beauty queen that has nowhere to go in her life after she loses her youth? The rather passive David then returns to Philadelphia, and the last scene has him reflecting to his followers on air about his experiences (Who would listen to his ramblings?). Back to the exact spot he was in the beginning of the film. Some off-the-wall (New Wave?) scenes, such as the pretended Miss America Pageant featuring Jessica as the contestant, David as Burt Parks, and Sally on the organ. The most amusing scene has the guys eating lobster in a restaurant with two potential Japanese investors, who have to listen to Jason's wild ramblings; they leave without committing themselves. Theme is clear – the hollow American dream; one brother is an introvert that talks essentially to himself in radio monologues; the other is an unrealistic dreamer. Open ending – Jason is dead, David back to where he started, the women moving on to an unknown future. (2015)

**The King's Choice** 2016 Erik Poppe (Norway) 3.0 Absorbing, rather long-winded, semi-historical docudrama about the king's intervention in Norwegian politics at the time of the German invasion in 1940. Jesper Christensen as the stoic, weary, inward King of Norway, Haakon VII, unsure about what to do about the German invasion; Anders Baasmo Christensen as the more fiery Crown Prince, Olav, who urges his father to confront the invaders; Karl Markovics as the conflicted German ambassador, Bräuer, a decent German devoted to preserving Norwegian neutrality in the teeth of the invasion; Tuva Novotny as Olav's wife, worried about her children; Katarina Schüttler, Bräuer's outspoken wife. The film at 2:10 is rather slow-moving, focusing on the flight of the royal family northward from Oslo, the indecision of the Norwegian cabinet about whether to surrender to the Germans or to declare war, the meeting arranged by Bräuer to engineer a surrender rather than wage a war of conquest; and the *pièce de résistance* – with his back turned to the camera the king makes the decision to resist the German, announcing to his cabinet that if they didn't concur, he would abdicate along with his entire family. (Following the end of the film on April 11, 1940, with the help of the French and the British the government resisted the Germans until the beginning of June; neither country is mentioned in the film.) The king's decision has a twofold aspect: whether the constitutional monarch, who is supposed to play no role in politics, should intervene to force the hand of his hesitant cabinet; and whether it would be better to surrender like the Danes and spare Norwegians further suffering, or to stand up to adversity and save one's honor, even though chances of success are zero. The film moves slowly with long shots of characters smoking silently, wrestling with their consciences, playing with their children and grandchildren (mainly the king, but Bräuer also pauses to baby talk his infant child); 15 or 20 minutes of editing might have improved the film's flow. The action sequences – particularly the early one when an antiquated Norwegian shore battery blasts and sets afire the German heavy cruiser *Blücher* (the German commander was foolishly aggressive) – are pretty exciting. The film works as a quiet Norwegian patriotic piece – the monarchy can do some good and the country saved its honor by resisting the invaders. (January 2018)

**Kings Row** 1942 Sam Wood 4.0 Peyton Place-like look at the underside of an all-American Midwest town where the film announces it would be great to raise your kids. Ronald Reagan in his best movie as charismatically good humored guy with the big smile; Robert Cummings perhaps a little over his head as Reagan's best friend, kid from European background that goes to Vienna to study the new

discipline of psychiatry; Ann Sheridan the best actor in the film as tomboy Randy, who grows up to become the sincere caretaker wife of Reagan; Claude Rains as reclusive doctor, who kills his daughter, the usually hysterical Betty Field, because of her mental illness and then commits suicide; Charles Coburn as the evil town doctor that murders patients because he believes they are evil; Judith Anderson spooky as Coburn's ruthless and intolerant wife. Outstanding exuberant, over-the-top film about scandalous reality underlying the normal appearance of a typical American town. It covers the lives of Reagan and Cummings from childhood until early adulthood: their loves -- Cummings for Field (ends tragically) and then for an Austrian girl at the end, Reagan for Ann Sheridan, who agrees to marry him and take care of him after Coburn amputates his legs to keep him from marrying his daughter, Louise! The characters are very evil (Coburn), troubled (Field and Rains), or wonderfully normal and positive -- despite every appearance America is still a wonderful place to live! Reagan is smiling, positive, a loyal friend to Cummings; he stands out in the moving climax, when he accepts from Cummings the truth about his legs being amputated intentionally, sends him off for a joyful reunion with his Austrian girlfriend (Kaaren Verne), and plans with Sheridan to develop low-cost housing to benefit the workers of the town (most of them work for the railroad). The film is class conscious -- in general, the wealthy are conflicted and often unhappy, but the working class stiff is Irish, kind, self-sacrificing, and solid; marrying across class lines is difficult. After a slow beginning, it becomes soon evident that the director has constructed a colorful and vivid ensemble. Outstanding is the crisp, detailed cinematography of James Wong Howe, in particular the dramatic close-ups that are somehow made more immediate and memorable by the use of special lenses. Also playing an important role is the vivid music score by Wolfgang Korngold, which at first seems intrusively ubiquitous, but soon emerges as an indispensable part of the melodramatic style. One example is the climbing of the boy Parris over a fence to return home and then after a cut his immediate return as a young man -- we see only his legs and the bombastic main theme blasts away as if announcing the Resurrection; another is the final shot of Cummings and Verne racing toward one another in an open field, then falling into one another's arms as the same theme plays buttressed by a choir. The novel upon which the movie is based would have served well as a TV miniseries. Although the film is self-consciously lurid and scandalous, it demonstrates well the strengths of the Hollywood studio system; knocks your socks off. (2015)

**The King's Speech** 2010 Tom Hooper (Britain) 4.0 Colin Firth is eloquent in realistic, moving portrayal of the decent, conscientious, stubborn, class-bound younger son of George V, the second heir to the throne; Helena Bonham Carter low-key and effective as his supportive wife; Geoffrey Rush as speech therapist Lionel Logue, a contrasting personality with the future king -- he is Australian, common, enthusiastic, impulsive, presumptuously intimate with Bertie (whom he insists on calling his patient); Derek Jacobi looking aged in almost cameo role as the Archbishop of Canterbury; Guy Pearce as attractive, sociable, sometimes harsh Edward VIII, who is however thoroughly under the thumb of his mistress (he resembles the historical figure); Eve Best strong-willed, manipulative, and resembling Edward's mistress Wallace Simpson. Superior royal historical drama with outstanding acting (what else can one expect from English A productions?), a touching story, and a 'Rocky'-like curve to final triumph when the tongue-tied Bertie successfully delivers a moving speech from Buckingham Palace at the beginning of World War II, and even the radio operators congratulate him as he walks away. The story moves from Bertie's initial stammering debacle at some Commonwealth games in 1925, through his long, often adversarial relationship with therapist Logue, and ultimate success when -- his hand virtually held by Logue -- he delivers the war speech. The story is quite moving: Bertie is a sweet and conscientious man but he cannot express himself verbally in front of others; he has to break through his strong personal reserve to allow an intimate relationship with Logue (he is used to being called "His Royal Highness"); in a bit of reluctant personal revelation, he confesses to Logue that he was much punished and repressed as a young man by his parents (including having his left hand tied behind his back to break him of his left-handed vice), and that he was close only to his second nanny; although he doesn't want to be king, he has no choice when Edward abdicates to marry "the woman I love"; and then with the help of his loyal and patient wife (an understated performance from Bonham Carter), he rises to the challenge. Other characters are equally interesting if not perhaps so moving: Rush's brash, impulsive, enthusiastic, aggressively common personality from *Down Under*; Edward's sociable friendliness, but he shows his

fangs when he responds with bitter sarcasm to what he perceives as an attempt by his brother to replace him; dark-haired Best strolling casually through guest-filled rooms making sure she gets her way. Historical characters such as Stanley Baldwin and Winston Churchill (Timothy Spall!) are amusingly recognizable. What with its focus on Bertie, the future Queen Mother and Elizabeth and Margaret while they are still children, the film provides good press for the royals. Finely honed, enjoyable film that deserves many awards. (2011)

**Kinsey** 2004 Bill Condon 3.5 Liam Neeson speaking flawless American in first-rate portrayal of the hyper-driven Kinsey, Laura Linney as the free-thinking, loyal, tolerant, understanding wife with a sense of humor, Chris O'Donnell as one of Kinsey's assistants who enjoys his sexual perquisites, John Lithgow as impossible father, puritanical Methodist lay preacher, Oliver Platt as beleaguered Indiana University president trying to talk sense to Kinsey, Lynn Redgrave as final interview subject who pays tribute to the personally liberating impact of Kinsey's research. Excellent film about Kinsey's research, his personality, and his relationships, marred only perhaps by being slightly long and meandering at the end. Film deals very frankly with the facts of American sexual behavior in the late 1940s – both the establishment moral position that we *should* have only heterosexual marital sex and in the missionary position for the purpose of making babies and that that is what almost everybody *in fact* does; and the reality that Kinsey discovers through his carefully empirical research that there is an amazing variety of human sexual behavior ranging from standard marital sex to frequent homosexuality among men and even bestiality. The roots of Kinsey's obsessive drive for discovery and taxonomy is located in the repressive legacy of his surrealistically difficult father, who in the beginning of the film rails against the zipper since it makes sex easier; and also from the memory of his and his wife's own sexual ignorance on their wedding night. Kinsey is depicted as obsessive/compulsive researcher who stops at nothing in pursuit of his mission. He says that he is perfectly objective (he is a "churchy" nerd, and his interview technique is a model of impartial teasing out of information), but the audience knows that underneath he is crusading against sexual prudery and repression. He comes across as insensitive because of his insistence that sex and a loving relationship are separate domains (he says love cannot be studied through science) and that recreational, exploratory, investigative sex is harmless; in fact, his wife is sometimes deeply chagrined by his behavior (including homosexual contact with one of his assistants), and his encouragement of exploratory behavior among his assistants also causes friction. His willingness to interview an arch-seducer goes awry when the latter admits he has had sex with several hundred underage children (Kinsey's assistant walks outraged out of the room). But film ends on more or less high note with Redgrave's sexual history interview in which she gives tribute to Kinsey for enabling her to acknowledge her lesbian inclinations and to live "three happy years" with her partner. Film also connects Kinsey at the beginning and the end with a sort of Transcendentalist spiritual connection with nature (including an upward shot at cathedral-like redwood trees); implies that his contact with true human nature creates a relationship with Nature and perhaps with God. Funny and perceptive look at American academic politics, as Indiana University President tries (without much success) to keep Kinsey from harming his own cause, and as public outrage and congressional pressure (this is the age of McCarthyism) finally force the generous Rockefeller Foundation to withdraw its funding (but only after the publication of the first two volumes of his study). Film is basically a tribute to the man who brought the USA out of the sexual Stone Ages and into the realm of sexual freedom, but it recognizes the faults of the hero. (2009)

**Kiss Me Deadly** 1955 Robert Aldrich 3.5 Ralph Meeker a bit laid back as handsome, hard-hitting PI Mike Hammer; Maxine Cooper as Velda, who can't keep her hands off her boss; Cloris Leachman as Christine, who gets the narrative moving in the first scene; Gaby Rodgers as pixie-like girl that turns out to be the femme fatale. Excellent 50s film noir style detective story based on Mickey Sillane's Mike Hammer series. Very linear story: begins with intriguing encounter with (will she be fatal?) Leachman wandering in only her trench coat on a dark, lonely road; picked up by Hammer; she is murdered (he almost); the narrative then follows very linear plot moving from one character to another looking for information until the trail leads to a final secret surprise – it is all about a powerful substance in a sealed box. It is not clear what the bad guys want to do with the threatening little box filled with the

huge energy. Has great apocalyptic ending with the house on the beach glowing and rocking and finally exploding in violent fireball; Hammer and girlfriend just barely escape in the original ending, which apparently had been replaced for most of the movie's life by shorter ending that suggested that the two had been killed. Meeker does a good job as very tough (he regularly beats up people in order to get information) and sleazy private eye (in his regular work he has secretary Velda frame guys by seducing them), but he apparently has decent streak, since he seems to care deeply about finding out why his hitchhiker was killed and he is very upset when his friend Nick the mechanic is knocked off and when Velda disappears for a while; his competency is marginal, since he is adept at getting people killed. Script is excellent – all the characters are interesting, even the minor ones we encounter on the way (Nick, the enthusiastic mechanic that loves fast cars; the venal coroner [a simpering Percy Helton]; the clerk at the desk of the Hollywood Athletic Club, etc.). All sorts of high culture references – Christina Rossetti's poem "Remember," which provides a clue in Meeker's search, Schubert's "Unfinished Symphony" and the slow movement from Beethoven's Seventh Symphony play on the radio, one of the many male characters sings along with his recording of Caruso when Hammer walks into his apartment, etc. Excellent direction with atmospheric shots of 50s streets day and night; inventive moving camera that follows complex actions keeping main characters in frame, or tracking up a complex set of stairs to suggest the the machinations behind the apparently straightforward plot. Although the main female character is supportive of Hammer (his secretary), women can be dangerous – the original hitchhiker leads him into dangerous story, and the blond that Hammer meets in the flophouse – Rodgers – is posing as the murdered woman's roommate and trying to undo Hammer; her true intentions are finally revealed in the final sequence. Uses topical 50s dangers (atomic materials used for bad purposes) to create a shocking nightmare scenario at the end. (2005; 2014)

**Kiss of Death** 1947 Henry Hathaway 3.0 Victor Mature, Richard Widmark, Coleen Gray, Brian Donleavy. Rather low-key crime drama that is interesting at times, but somehow dissatisfying. Directed in more or less deadpan style, semi-documentary and matter of fact, with everything shot on location in New York. Mature good as nice crook, who goes to prison for a jewelry heist, but loves his family; much motivated by crooks' code of honor not to "squeal" on your buddies. Widmark is riveting as maniacal killer/crime boss, who giggles compulsively in falsetto voice as he pushes an old lady in a wheelchair down the stairs. Characters are generally more civilized and well spoken than most characters in crime drama. Has elements of "noir," but key woman is angelic (not black widow), lighting is too realist and unshadowed, and sense of fate is present but attenuated. Ending rather confusing. Mature wants to put Tommy (Widmark) in prison and not kill him in self defense (he would go to prison for gun possession?); he appears to walk willingly into Tommy's gun (wants to die?), but on other hand he needs Tommy to have the gun in hand for him to go to prison for life; then it is ambiguous as to whether Nick is dead. Voice-over of Gray says he "got what he wanted." We are left in the dark: is that death or recovery and reunion with his beloved family? (2004)

**Kissing Jessica Stein** 2001 Charles Herman-Wurmfeld 3.0 Jennifer Westfeldt as very neurotic, "so conservative" Jessica Stein looking for a mate but not sure which sex; Heather Juergensen as pretty, free-spirited bi-curious Helen; Tovah Feldshuh as Jessica's very dominating Jewish mother always trying to set up her daughter; Scott Cohen as Jessica's ex-boyfriend, who is her boss and a friend of her family. Pretty good romantic comedy with a lesbian twist. Since Jessica can't seem to find a heterosexual mate (she dated Cohen for a while, but at the beginning of the film, they have been broken up for some time), she decides to try a lesbian relationship with Juergensen; quite a lot of comedy generated by Juergenson's sexual aggressiveness met by Jessica's tortured reluctance and by her resistance to telling her mother about her experiment; with the approval of Jessica's family, the two finally strike up a relationship, but eventually it peters out because there isn't enough sexual fireworks for Juergenson. The film's suspense toward the end is generated by Jessica's romantic dilemma – can she be happy with Juergenson or will she return to a solid heterosexual relationship with Cohen. The film has a quiet ending: Westfeldt meets an always-faithful Cohen in a store (he spends a good deal of the film standing in the edge of the frame pining after Jessica), and then she goes to have coffee with now good friend Juergenson eager to tell her about her newly rediscovered heterosexual proclivities. Juergenson is

in a new lesbian relationship, and one supposes that Cohen won't be too demanding in bed and they will live happily ever after. The film relies quite a bit on Woody Allen – New York as supremely pleasant place filled with interesting people, gorgeous horizontal shots of the city skyline, big band jazz favorites on the soundtrack; and of course a quirky, often scatter-brained female lead who can't decide what she needs to do to be happy. Jessica's predicament is the comic heart of the film: while attracted by female sex and a relationship with Juergenson, she is ashamed about it, constantly wondering and worrying about being straight or gay, caught squarely between her mother and her girlfriend and unable to "come out" and be honest. Although dragging at times, the film is often clever and amusing: the opening scene during a synagogue service in which Feldshuh and the grandmother publicly discuss Westfeldt's inability to land a suitable man stands out. (2010)

**Kitty Foyle** 1940 Sam Wood (RKO) 3.0 Ginger Rogers (AA) glowing, expressive, and compelling as white collar girl working in New York who is faced with a impossible romantic dilemma; Dennis Morgan as her wealthy Mainline, weak-willed, and inconsistent sometime husband; James Craig perhaps less inexpressive than usual as wimpy and patient doctor, who wants to help poor children in medical need and would like to marry Kitty; Ernest Cossart as classic Hollywood Irish father who can't stop exclaiming 'Judas Priest'; Gladys Cooper as stuffy if not completely unreasonable Mainline mom. Written by (the commie) Dalton Trumbo. Sort of soap opera set in New York and Philadelphia about the romantic entanglements of Ginger Rogers. The principal strength of the film is the stage presence and performance of Ginger Rogers; she may not have deserved the Academy Award for best actress, but the screen sparkles in all of her frequent close-ups; she is good-humored, a good soldier who doesn't let disappointments get her down, pretty and compelling even if not beautiful; she wears an incredibly stylish succession of hats and clothes, always matched with a different hairstyle. All the other performances are good enough, even with the likes of Morgan and Craig. The film is well-directed and edited: it begins with Kitty in indecision, and then in a series of flashbacks each introduced by a clichéd snowman-in-a-ball transition, the script takes us through her teenage days into adulthood when she goes to work as a shop girl in a fashion store, and through the ins and outs of her amours with Morgan and Craig. Kitty's head is turned by the rich, and she cannot resist a marriage proposal from the Mainline Wynn, but he periodically disappears and reappears, and she takes up at time with the reliable Craig, although never being able to forget Morgan (you know, true love). The script and characters sometimes defy credibility: Kitty just can't seem to get enough of Morgan and she instantly drops competitors when he resurfaces after years; she gets pregnant with him (of course during the short period when they were married – gratia Code), but then the script knocks off the baby in childbirth, presumably to keep him from getting in the way of the "happily ever after" ending; nice guy Craig just seems to be there all the time to keep Kitty from getting bored when her true love is not around. At the end Morgan, Kitty is ready to run off with him to Buenos Aires (nirvana!) without benefit of matrimony (what would Mr. Breen say?), but the flashback reflections bring her to her senses, and in allusive dialogue with a doorman she announces her intention of marrying the good boy instead. A woman's film about the problems of women: the point of view is that marriage is clearly the destiny of every woman; having a job might be a stop-gap until you find the right man; and of course you need to choose the right one. (2010)

**Klute** 1971 Alan Pakula (Warners) 3.0 Jane Fonda as high-class prostitute Bree, who is threatened by a creepy sex killer; Donald Sutherland psychologically impenetrable as private detective Klute, who is hired to track down the whereabouts of an executive – his investigation leads him to Bree; Charles Cioffi as the apparently respectable executive that hires Klute but who is really the killer and the one threatening Bree; Roy Scheider as arrogant, slimy pimp; Jean Stapleton sounding and looking just like Edith Bunker in a cameo appearance as a secretary. Neo-film noir thriller that tries hard but somehow lacks the fascination of the real thing. Shot in very dark shades by Gordon Willis, the film has Sutherland encountering hip prostitute Bree because of her previous business dealings with the missing man. As Klute investigates, Bree is being stalked by an unknown man, who makes disquieting phone calls and trashes her apartment, even filling a pair of her underwear with his semen. A seemingly devoted Klute becomes her protector, and after some time her lover. As the ring closes in on the perp (who turns out to be the same man that hired Klute to conduct the investigation), he corners Bree in an old-fashioned

clothing factory; after Cioffi threatens her in sexual-sadistic tones, Klute rushes to the rescue causing Cioffi to jump to his death out a window. Throughout the film much use is made of audio tapes to convey information and pump up the suspense. The postscript has Bree packing her things to leave with Klute for another city, but their relationship appears to have a dim future. Since the script affords little insight about the deadpan though persistent Klute, most of the focus is on the character of Bree. Fonda of course gives her a chic and modern appeal – sexy, apparently confident, chic clothes, carefully coiffed, braless with nipples visible, an accomplished performer in pleasing her customers. She is however lonely and frightened – she calls herself “numb” and “just a nervous broad” – and she depends intimately on a psychiatrist, whom she consults at least three times during the film. She falls progressively under the protective influence of Klute, although she periodically rebels against him – once verbally after she has sex with him (which was initiated by Bree) and again when she tries to stab him with a pair of scissors toward the end. She seems to be looking for autonomy and “control” outside of prostitution, but every indication is that will be in a relationship with a man: she moves from pleasing her johns to the possibility of a monogamous relationship. Perhaps in the sequel (never happened) she will find what she is looking for, but as the film ends, her future with Klute is problematic. Fonda may be a living symbol of feminism, but her character is too dependent and confused to make a feminist statement in this film. To like this film, the viewer will have to like Fonda. (2015)

**Knife in the Water** 1962 Roman Polanski (Poland) 3.0 Cynical psychological drama about competing male egos that lead to violence and betrayal. Leon Niemczk dark-haired, powerful, arrogant man in his 30s; Jolanta Umecka pretty, a little plump, quiet wife of Leon, her thoughts and feelings simmering; Zygmunt Malanowicz as blond-haired 19-year-old hitchhiker, a bit sassy, potentially rebellious. As the couple drives down the road toward the lake in the beginning of the film, one senses the tension between them -- they stare ahead while Polanski photographs the back of their heads. For unstated reasons, the couple picks up a lone hitchhiker; they board their worn, wooden sailboat and cast off onto the deserted lake (we never see another boat or person). The first half of the film takes place on deck navigating in good weather in picturesque surroundings; it moves very slowly as Polanski builds tension between the two men. Leon seems determined to embarrass the younger man by giving him sailing orders ("there can be only one captain") and ridiculing his lack of sailing experience; Zygmunt retaliates as best he can by climbing the mast of the boat to trim the sail, etc. The sexual tension is enhanced by all three characters being dressed in swimsuits (the viewer is constantly aware of the near-naked body of Umecka). Niemczyk clearly has the upper hand, but Zygmunt threatens him implicitly by displaying his large switchblade-style knife. The tension ramps up sharply when the storm forces the three to seek shelter in the cabin below deck: the conflict between the two men sharpens when Umecka shows some of her body as she changes clothes and they play a game of pick-up sticks. Conflict breaks out into the open on deck, when Niemczyk openly taunts Zygmunt and the two get in a fistfight. The latter falls overboard, and when Umecka is not able to find him (he is hiding behind a buoy), a distraught Niemczyk, thinking that he is in trouble with the law and reeling from the furious insults of his wife, dives off the boat to look for him further. When Zygmunt appears on board safe-and-sound, Umecka is at first furious with him, but then relents and has sex with him (no explicit scenes; just a passionate kiss). The boy then leaves, and when Niemczyk and Umecka reunite at the dock, they drive off back to the city amidst some recrimination, but mainly in mutual indifference and avoiding frank discussion. The black and white film is beautifully photographed on the lake in different meteorological conditions, and Polanski surpasses himself in the ingenuity of his camera compositions, which combine shots of the three characters in varying ways. The glacial movement and detailed focus on simple activities like tying knots in the first part of the film is surely deliberate, but it may undermine the ability of the viewer to appreciate the director's intentions. (2017)

**Kuroneko (Black Cat)** 1968 Kaneto Shindo (Japan) 2.5 Kichimon Nakamura as forbidding Time of Troubles samurai that returns from the wars to find his wife and mother disappeared and his house burned; Kiwako Taichi as his pretty, youthful wife transformed after death into a vengeful ghost; Nobuko Otawa as his mother, also a ghost; Kei Sato as arrogant samurai chief surrounded by a bevy of simpering concubines. Theatrically staged classic Japanese ghost movie that fails to frighten. The



narrative is in part a revenge drama – the women somehow become ghosts that have vowed to take revenge on all samurai warriors, whom they lead to their destruction by seduction – and in part a tragic love story – Nakamura is commissioned by samurai authorities to find and punish the women ghosts, but he ends up having a week of passion with his (ghost) wife, who is then confined to hell for her treason; the story ends with Nakamura confronting his mother, who defies the viewer's expectations by killing him – the last scene has him lying dead in his own destroyed house. The film's style is artificial and theatrical: harsh lighting, dense forests of bamboo trees, the actors (especially Nakamura) shouting their lines Kabuki style to the camera with a lot of facial emphasis, heavily stylized costumes beautifully presented in carefully composed black-and-white images, awkwardly artificial, repetitive shots of samurai riding their horses through a featureless landscape as we await their encounter with the curiously veiled ghosts, who lead them to their outdoorsy house to murder them. The wife's seduction scenes are moderately erotic; the mother is extremely acrobatic – spinning slowly when she and her daughter-in-law prepare an execution, somersaulting and ultimately bursting through the roof and soaring into the sky in her final confrontation with Nakamura. The film includes a theme critiquing the destruction wrought by samurai on the commoner population, despite the claims of the arrogant warrior class that they are protecting the people. The potentially moving love story between Nakamura and his ghost wife never gains momentum, perhaps because of the artificiality of the film. Can be appreciated as an art film of the 1960s; but its repetitiveness, artificiality, and failure to frighten undermine its emotional impact. (2014)

**Kwaidan** 1964 Masaki Kobyashi (Japan) 3.0 Legendary four-part ghost movie that presumably sets the standard for Japanese ghost films for the past 40+ years. The first film ('The Black Hair') is perhaps the most compelling: a samurai chooses career over domestic bliss, and leaves his wife to serve a lord; he even marries an upper-class woman to advance; regret sets in and he returns to his presumably Penelope-like wife patiently waiting for him and weaving at the loom; when he lies down with her at night, shock sets in -- she turns into a desiccated cadaver and he follows suit while reeling in panic through the house; the director makes much use of the jilted woman's long, straight, shiny black hair, a trope that becomes very popular in subsequent Japanese horror films. The second, 'Woman in the Snow' is less arresting: in a raging snowstorm two woodcutters are approached by a beautiful yet pale and disturbing woman, who kills one of them, but because she finds the other attractive, she spares him on the condition that he tells no one about the experience; he later meets a modest, pert young woman whom he marries and with whom he engenders three children; one evening, for no particular reason, he reveals to her the forbidden experience, and since it turns out that his wife is the same as the original witch, she is very angry and unforgiving; however she does spare him and commands him to protect her children faithfully or else.... The third, "Hoichi the Earless", is the longest and memorable in many parts; Hoichi is a blind bard recalling Homer or the like who works in a Buddhist temple; through views of ancient paintings and hieratic-like reenactments the viewer is introduced to an ancient naval disaster in which all the losing side lose their lives in the blood-tinged waves; Hoichi is visited by an imposing samurai warrior who invites him to perform telling the story of the battle to the assembled ghost court, which he does in a cemetery transformed into a court setting by the director; when the temple employees try to protect him against further visits by covering him with sacred Japanese writing, they forget to cover his ears; the rage of the samurai is then visited upon Hoichi by ripping off his ears in a length, and fairly grisly scene; the punishment however seems to backfire, since the fame of Hoichi spreads and real live nobles come to him asking for his performance, earless and all; he then becomes rich. The last, "In a Cup of Tea", is the slightest and shortest: a samurai keeps seeing the image of a younger man in cups of water and cups of tea that he consumes; since he slashes with his dagger at the ghost-man when he appears to him, he is visited by three of his retainers, who taunt him but whom he is unable to touch; the story ends with the film asking us how we would finish the story.... While often interesting and beautiful, the viewer's mind often wanders. Dividing the film into four unrelated parts undermines the dramatic intensity of the film. It has a rather frozen, hieratic character that subtracts from dramatic intensity and virtually eliminates horror frissons: the background of 'Hoichi' are obviously painted sets with images of the moon and the sun (?) that look more like stylized eyes; three of the four ghost stories have more or less happy -- or at least open -- endings; the pace of the narratives is usually painfully slow; we are expected to appreciate the beauty of the painstakingly designed mise-en-scene as a compensation. There

can be no doubt that the mise-en-scene and cinematography are lovely -- one need only think of the meticulously and sensitively photographed shots of the ceramic cups in the last segment. Also interesting are the references to Homer -- Penelope and the bard singing about heroic deeds. Lacks dramatic punch, but aesthetically memorable. (2011)

**L.A. Confidential** 1997 Curtis Hanson 3.5 Kevin Spacey as Jack Vincennes, fundamentally decent LAPD sergeant who flourishes as adviser to a tv series (obviously based on 'Dragnet') and who makes a little graft by "selling" scandalous stories to the press; Danny Devito, very amusing and in-your-face as Hollywood reporter making his living digging up dirt on local grandees for his magazine 'Hush-Hush'; Russell Crowe as Bud White, bare-knuckled sergeant that doesn't hesitate to use violence to punish evil-doers and to make sure he gets his man (and gets the "evidence" to convict him); Guy Pearce as straight-arrow, but extremely ambitious street cop that will even rat on his fellow officers in order to make his way up the promotion ladder; James Cromwell speaking with a light Irish brogue as corrupt, ruthless, downright evil police captain responsible for multiple killings in the story; Kim Basinger in overrated (AA) performance as supposed Veronica Lake look-alike prostitute that (having that heart of gold) falls in love with Crowe (actually she looks like a cross between Lake and Marilyn Monroe); David Strathairn as elegant, good-looking crime boss involved primarily in providing prostitutes that resemble movie stars. Complex, baroque, well-acted, and extremely violent and hard-hitting adaptation of famous James Ellroy crime novel. The film is fiendishly entertaining. Focusing on the interaction of the main LAPD characters, the story eventually narrows in on a series of murders and the gradual but shocking uncovering of corruption in the LAPD and the satanic evil of Cromwell. Spacey is murdered by Cromwell (one of the many cold-blooded killings carried out by the cops), but opposites Pearce and Crowe team together to reveal Cromwell; in a lengthy and (as usual) extremely well-choreographed shootout at the end, Cromwell is killed, but the two protagonists manage to survive and to prosper -- Crowe is coupled with his squeeze Basinger and Pearce is again promoted and treated as a hero (he receives his second medal of valor) when he agrees with the police brass to peddle a false story that won't discredit their beloved police force. The sense of epoch and place are vividly presented by the film: backed up by crooner Perry Como and pictures of movie stars, DeVito occasionally narrates to show that the All-American, progressive image of LA is a sham under which lurks murder and corruption much more extreme than what is depicted in 'Chinatown'. Since the police force routinely beats up Mexicans and plots to pin responsibility for the "Night Owl" shootings on a bunch of outlaw black kids, most of whom are shot and killed in the course of resisting arrest, the film presents racism as part of the true LA picture. The rather improbable complexity and brutality of the film is given credibility by the marvelous acting of the entire cast: with the exception of Basinger who is stuck with the prostitute-with-the-heart-of-gold-and-a-trembling-lip-that-plans-to-open-a-dress-shop-when-she-saves-up-enough-money-to-return-home, all the characters are real, distinct, and compelling; the viewer is shocked when Cromwell murders Spacey and pleasantly surprised when Pearce and Crowe survive to live what will be probably reasonably happy lives. A great colorful roller coaster ride of a police thriller. (2009)

**Labyrinth of Lies (Im Labyrinth des Schweigens)** 2014 Giulio Ricciarelli (Germany) 3.0 Alexander Fehling as Johann Radman, rather stiff, conscience-stricken prosecutor in Germany around 1960; Friederike Becht as his girlfriend Marlene; Hansi Jochmann as Schmittchen, the secretary that reminds Radman of his duty; Gert Voss as Generalstaatsanwalt Fritz Bauer, the historic originator of the prosecutions; Andre Szymanski, Johannes Krisch. TV-movie-like, longish record of the first prosecution of German war criminals by German public authorities. Striking that at the beginning of the film (1958) virtually no one in Germany had ever heard of Auschwitz; the general attitude was leave it alone, we know the previous generation had committed war crimes under the Nazi dictatorship, but we would rather not stir up the embers. Radman and Bauer decide to brave public opinion and the weight of ex-Nazis in high places in order to make Germans aware of what was done in their name; it wasn't just Hitler and Himmler that did it; we are all associated with the guilt and must publicly own up to it. A bit pedestrian in places, the film follows Radman's investigation backed up by Bauer (a Jew that suffered at the hands of the Nazis). A kind of prosecutor's procedural, the film picks up speed when the investigators are able to confront and arrest some of the perpetrators, who were teachers and bakers imagining that they would

never get caught. To keep the film from becoming a documentary, Ricciarelli follows Radman in an obsessive wild goose chase after Josef Mengele, whom he is never able to corral; the Israelis put all their resources into arresting and trying Eichmann. Radman also develops a romantic relationship with Marlene, who falls for him despite a traffic court confrontation at the beginning of the film; the obstacles he is facing are dramatized by the efforts of the higher-up ex-Nazis to rope both Radman and Marlene into their entourage by offering them employment, Radman as a lawyer, Marlene as a clothes designer. The film ends on a happy note: Radman and Marlene are reconciled after a bitter spat over Radman's alcoholic depression; and in printed postscripts the viewer learns that several of the defendants were condemned for murder. The Auschwitz employees were tried for simple murder (difficult to prove beyond a reasonable doubt) and not for crimes against humanity. Satisfying and interesting film with a compelling subject matter. The film style is a bit pedestrian. (2016)

**Lacombe Lucien** 1974 Louis Malle (France) 3.0 Pierre Blaise as Lucien, uneducated, morally obtuse, even brutal peasant boy who is part of la police allemande; Aurore Clément as France, pretty French girl he falls in love with; Holger Löwenadler as unshaven, depressed, laconic, apparently wealthy Jewish tailor trying to live in anti-Semitic culture of a town in southeastern France during World War II. Rather off-putting drama about emotionally vacant peasant boy who decides to join the Gestapo when he is turned down by the Resistance. His motivations are boredom (he works in a hospice in Souleillac) and incipient brutality (fascinated with guns, he senselessly shoots birds and rabbits with his father's shotgun and casually breaks off the necks of chickens). Acting like a tough, he performs low-level functions for the French collaborationist police; things become more complicated when he meets Löwenadler (who makes him a golf-style suit) and falls in love with his daughter and he begins to experience the contradiction between being French and collaborating with the Nazis. When confronted with the arrest of Clement and her father, Lucien instinctively shoots a German soldier; hiding in the countryside when their car breaks down, Lucien and France live a momentarily innocent sexual idyll. The film ends quietly with a postscript informing the viewer that Lucien was arrested and executed by the Resistance in October 1944. The film depicts vividly the beauties of the French countryside, the dilapidated interiors of the bourgeois buildings, and the relationships among the Vichy police and their girlfriends. Blaise is an uncertain amateur actor, whose inability to express human emotion fits the character, to be sure, but it also constantly reminds the viewer that he is in over his head. A prisoner of circumstance, he drifts from experience to experience with no moral center to help him find his way: he joins the Gestapo perhaps because he is just bored and would like an opportunity to use his peasant shooting skills, or perhaps because he is as fundamentally amoral and brutal character; while working for the police, he struts about enjoying his power, but the violence of the police against the woman he loves and her father makes him pull up, shoot the soldier and escape (he was tempted to leave behind France's servant woman until France objected); back in the country, he reverts to a kind of Rousseauian idyll, until the reality of the war catches up with him and kills him. Perhaps portraying the attitude of the filmmaker, Lowenadler observes the proceedings with a quiet, though jaundiced eye. The film style affects a complete objective distance from the subject: a lot of long close-ups, long-winded, deadpan conversations; even the violent scenes of the Resistance attacking the police station toward the end seem half-hearted. Interesting film that could have been much better. (2013)

**Lady Chatterley** 2006 Pascale Ferran (France) 2.5 Marina Hands (Lady Chatterley) as pretty, apparently reserved wife of wealthy mine owner (Hippolyte Girardot as the complaisant husband) living in rural England in the 1920s; Jean-Louis Couollo'ch as taurine garde-chasse, Parkin, living by himself on the estate. Women's version of the D.H. Lawrence story based on the second of three treatments by the author; this version emphasizes the beauties of sylvan nature surrounding Couollo'ch's hut, the lyrical aspects of sex between a man and a woman; and it has the two eventually falling in love after several couplings and vowing in the end – by which time Hands is with child – that they will live together sometime in the future. Girardot is paralyzed from the waist down and impotent from world war wounds, and Hands, who is restless and yearning for motherhood and sexual-romantic connection, happens upon a half-naked Couollo'ch washing up outside his hut; the encounter occasions Hands to admire herself naked in the mirror and then seduce the gamekeeper in a series of sexual trysts: most of

them are outside, rather quick, and not leading to orgasm for Hands, but when she finally agrees to spend the night with him, they undress in each other's presence and behave like true lovers. Much of the movie shows rustling leaves and waving grasses as the lovers walk through the unkempt woods and fields with birds singing and chirping overhead. Hands always takes the initiative with Coull'och following often with a light reluctance. The Lawrence ideology of the artificiality of English civilization and the naturalness of sex in union with nature – the sexual juices rising and flowing like the sap of the trees – obviously drives Hands in her quest; Coull'och seems to act more reluctantly driven by a romantic disappointment with his wife, whom he refuses to talk about. Class complicates the relationship, since true friendship between the gentle and the laboring classes is very difficult in England due to social and cultural differences; but the class issues seem less apparent in the film since, being spoken in French, the two lovers do not speak in distinct accents like they would if they were speaking in English. Despite the numerous sexual encounters, the film moves slowly. The sex scenes focus on the facial reactions of the couple with only a few Lawrencian sexual remarks (“your penis is so small now, like a little bud!”). The most interesting part of the film are two conversations: one in which Hands' husband indicates that he would accept as his own a child fathered by another man with Hands; and another at the very end of the film in which the two lovers declare their unending attachment to one another and their intention eventually to live together when Hands gets tired of living with her husband and decides to leave him (they seem happy enough to be apart for the time being). The film's style is low-key and undramatic: no scenery-chewing, and matter-of-fact ending of scenes with a simple fade-out. Please, no more Chatterley films. (2008)

**The Lady Eve** 1941 Preston Sturges; Paramount 4.0 Henry Fonda as naïve, absent-minded and clumsy scion of rich industrialist family interested mostly in snakes but dressed in high-fashion impeccable suits; Barbara Stanwyck lively and radiant as younger of con card sharp duo (daughter of Coburn) trying to bilk Fonda for some money on board ship but then complicating the situation by falling in love with him; Charles Coburn as her father and partner in crime; the gravel voiced Eugene Pallette as Fonda's father (croak-singing an English folk song and banging his dishes like a child when he is hungry) talking good sense to his son; and Sturges regulars Eric Blore (lispng away), William Demarest (tough talking and often confusing words – “It's the same dame!” as assistant trying to keep Fonda from being duped), Jimmy Conlin as steward, and Robert Greig as butler in the Connecticut estate (where was Franklin Pangborn?). Sturges film that has it all: star power, fabulous performances, witty screenplay, imaginative direction, and convincing, true romance. First half has Stanwyck trying to cheat Fonda on board ship, but then falling in love with him whereupon she defeats her father's efforts to cheat Fonda out of money – she wears a Waldo cap in one shipboard scene. Second half has her going to his estate in Connecticut after they had broken up and posing as another woman (without changing her appearance) – an elegantly dressed noblewoman with an amusing English accent – in order to win him back; he marries her under her new identity (is he stupid?); still playing the con woman who expects a big settlement from a divorce, she provokes a break with him in the famous train scene on their wedding night; but regretting her behavior she arranges to meet him on the ship, where he pratfalls one more time and they kiss torridly; although he does not understand that she and Eve are the same woman, she leads him to her stateroom and begins to close the door; when he objects “But I am married”, she replies, “So am I, Darling,” and closes the door! Firmly in the realm of screwball comedy: e.g., single women on board lying in wait for the easy mark, Stanwyck's shrieking panic at the sight of a snake in Fonda's cabin, Fonda's repetitive messy pratfalls when obsessed with Stanwyck (he is on his last tuxedo by the end of the dinner scene at the Pike estate), Demarest and Greig spilling a platter full of meat on Fonda, Fonda being constantly nudged by a horse when he is making his second declaration to Stanwyck. Film has snappy dialogue, although perhaps it isn't as funny as its reputation: “That's the tragedy of the rich: they don't need anything.” “They say a moonlit deck is a woman's business office.” A house of millionaires “in the heart of the contract bridge belt.” Charles as “tall, backward boy always toying with toads and things.” Revenge-bent Stanwyck: “I need him like the axe needs the turkey.” Stanwyck “If anybody deserves me, you do, Charles...so richly.” Sturges presents a mildly satirical look at the antics of the rich (servants everywhere, traveling on luxury liners, always in evening clothes, fawning over English aristocracy, servants furiously polishing silver, etc.). The film is a duel between the male and the female

with the latter being constantly compared to the seductive Eve (and in this case a rather unequal contest, much like 'Bringing up Baby' with Hepburn in charge of Grant) and frequent reference to the snake of temptation, an obvious phallic symbol. Wonderful scene toward the end in which Stanwyck tells the gullible Fonda about all the men she has had (starting with the stable boy on her estate) to the accompaniment of 19<sup>th</sup> century operetta overtures and even 'Tannhäuser' when Fonda is speaking – prematurely – of the beauties of forgiveness and while the camera cuts to the powerful locomotive cutting through a violent electrical storm; scene ends with a classical closing phrase. Fonda plays the clueless role well, and Stanwyck stands out as the bold-faced, though surprisingly radiant comic lead. There is a certain romantic sexiness in Stanwyck's seductive campaign and in Fonda's romantic vision of her and his dreams of them together. Often interesting directing techniques: flashing forward to a future scene when cued by a remark in a conversation; a very long montage scene detailing the wedding preparations and the marriage of Stanwyck and Fonda; the long sequence of Fondaesque pratfalls that finally deliver him into the arms of the waiting Eve. The film deserves its reputation as Sturges' masterpiece. (2008)

**Lady Macbeth** 2016 William Oldroyd (Britain) 3.0 Murderous drama about the consequences of marrying strong-willed women against their will. Catherine Pugh very young (born 1996!) as the young woman seething with lust and resentment about her marriage to...; Paul Hilton cold and forbidding as her older husband; Cosmo Jarvis as the good-looking day laborer that Pugh has a passionate affair with; Christopher Fairbank is frosty and unforgiving as Pugh's father-in-law; Naomi Ackie as the black servant girl observing the goings on. The low budget period drama is set in an estate in County Durham – barren heaths, lowering clouds (resembling Scotland), steep gullies, forests, well-lighted, noble interiors. The director's shots of Pugh are arresting – initially seated in her vivid blue dress that billows out from the crinolines (the film seems to be set in the 1850s or 1860s); or later pale, stony-faced, and virtually immobile when she is suspected of murder. Catherine is understandably dissatisfied with the husband that she has been "sold" to – dour, incommunicative, incapable of making love to her (he tells her to face the wall naked while he masturbates seated in a chair). Catherine's subjugation is visually emphasized by having Ackie lace her up in a corset and examining her limited movement when wearing her crinolines and expansive skirt. Catherine soon takes Jarvis, the local field hand, as her lover. They are at first delighted with one another, having reckless sex in Pugh's marital bed when her husband is absent and making no effort to hide the affair; Catherine even provokes violence from her husband by having sex with Jarvis in front of him. The plot then turns to murder of her father-in-law by poisonous mushrooms, her husband whom she beats to death on the floor of her bedroom, and her husband's bastard son, whom she smothers with a pillow. And she gets away with it all by accusing her lover and the maid with whom he is acquainted. Belonging to a lower social class, they are carted away manacled to almost certain execution. The film resembles Shakespeare's *Lady Macbeth* only in the character's extreme behavior. The film has an interesting take on sexual and class politics: Catherine suffers the same indignities as some other fictional Victorian women, but she rebels in the most extreme, lurid manner, becoming a triple murderer without compunction; Ackie and Jarvis are powerless to defend themselves against the mistress of the house because of the British class system. The director has a gift for arresting *mise-en-scène*. (February 2018)

**The Lady Vanishes** 1938 Alfred Hitchcock (Britain) 4.0 Michael Redgrave, Margaret Lockwood, Dame May Whitty, Paul Lukas. Already viewed several times. This time the print was pretty good, audio was completely understandable. Film starts slow with painstaking set up of situations and characters in the Swiss hotel. Main plot is the thriller of Mrs. Froy being kidnapped and rescued, but several subplots: of course the romantic one as Lockwood and Redgrave start off antagonists, but when Redgrave comes to rescue (in baggage car) they begin to melt, which does not come to fruition until the taxi to the Foreign Office; Caldicott and Charters at first are concerned only with cricket results and they shy away from getting involved in search for Mrs. Froy, but then being good red-blooded, stiff-upper-lip Englishmen (Charters genuinely shocked at being shot in the hand but he carries on), they do their part to defend the railroad car against the Nazi-like police; the evolution of Paul Lukas' fake nun, who being English, has to rally to her countrymen and ends up on the side of the good guys. Caldicott and Charters provide bluff British humor all the way through – unaware of what is happening outside England,

inability to speak a language other than English, befuddled reaction when something unexpected occurs. Much of success of movie depends on charm of Lockwood and Redgrave, who engage the audience; especially Lockwood, who shows a lot of pluck as she persists in her search for Mrs. Froy; May Whitty is also very sympathetic as kindly old lady we all want to protect. The usual comments about suspense, deceiving and manipulating the audience through plot twists (surely there was a Mrs. Froy, but why is everybody denying it?) and clever editing (when Mrs. Froy first mentions her name to Lockwood, her voice is covered by the whistle [shades of '39 Steps'] and then she writes her name on the dining car window; subsequently when Lockwood is trying to convince Redgrave that Froy really existed, the name "Froy" appears in steam on the window just as train enters the tunnel; and then also third scene in dining car, where camera focuses suggestively on the different size wine glasses that are supposed to contain a soporific). Final shootout with the fascist police is patriotic declaration – all Englishmen must rally together to oppose the tyrannical threat of the fascists, and the one pacifist (the cowardly barrister who won't fight) will meet an ignominious end; seems to be Hitchcock declaration in 1938 that Britain must stand up to Hitler. Fetching ending when Redgrave and Lockwood in London have decided to marry, suddenly Redgrave has forgotten coded tune and can remember only Mendelssohn's 'Wedding march,' panic, then they hear in adjoining room the McGuffin tune played on the piano, and then walk eagerly toward Mrs. Froy who greets them with outstretched arms. A very nice mix of light-hearted humor and suspense with at least a little bit of menace, even though it is a safe thriller. (2004)

**Ladybird** 2017 Greta Gerwig directs and writes. 4.0 Eloquent, engaging, perfectly directed coming of age comedy-drama about a young woman going to a Catholic girls' school (actually St. Francis High School) in Sacramento. Saoirse Ronan looks angelically Botticellian as the teenaged Ladybird, but she is full of longing and (half-) rebellion against her provincial environment in Sacramento (Joan Didion: "Anybody who talks about California hedonism has never spent a Christmas in Sacramento."); Beanie Feldstein as overweight, uncool, but faithful and good-humored best friend; Odeya Rush as her friend Jenna, the rich girl from the other side of the tracks (East Sacramento); Timothy Chalamet as her hedonistic boyfriend who rather hypocritically claims to be a rebel; Lucas Hedges as her first love, who later is tortured by his gay identity; Laurie Metcalf terrific as Ladybird's complex mother – loving and supportive of her family and yet filled with resentment at her family situation; Tracy Letts moving as Ladybird's kindly father, depressive and unemployed but complicit with his daughter; several other actors depict the good-humored, nurturing nuns at St. Francis and Ladybird's half-brothers and -sisters (taken in by Ladybird's parents). Despite the early swipes at her hometown, the film is a love letter to Sacramento – the trees, the lovely East Sacramento homes, the McKinley Park Rose Garden, especially the old steel girder H Street Bridge shown many times (always followed by a view of the American River) as a symbol of the old-fashioned, sturdy, picturesque nature of her home turf. The film follows Ladybird's coming of age. From the beginning she is obsessed with escaping her provincial environment: she presents herself as a half-rebel in school (the most amusing scene was her denunciation of the anti-abortion speaker in a school assembly), she moves into drama by acting in the productions partnered with the local boys' school (actually Jesuit High School), she moves through the usual trials and tribulations of adolescence, dating Hedges and eventually losing her virginity to Chalamet, turning over every stone in her search for an eastern college to attend. Her relationship with her mother is the most arresting aspect of the film: sensing that her mother is giving her life to her family, Ladybird is strongly bonded to her, but the two constantly dispute in evocative, beautifully written dialogue; resenting her condition, Metcalf can't resist pejorative comments designed to make her daughter feel guilty. The film ends beautifully with Ladybird taking off from Sacramento Airport and going to New York; there she is "reborn" (symbolized by an episode of extreme drunkenness, then looking at her ID bracelet when she wakes up in the hospital), and then after attending a church service, calling her parents and leaving them a message of love and reconciliation. Who knows what the future will bring, but Ladybird is firmly grounded in her love for her parents and her hometown. The film has a light sense of humor reflecting Gerwig's buoyant view of life: one amusing moment is that despite Ladybird's invitation to Hedges to "touch her boobs", he replies he would never do it because he respects her too much; despite her desire to have sex, she replies that she would never touch his boobs if he had any. Sensitive writing, perfect directorial tact, and charming actors make this a superior film. (November 2017)

**The Ladykillers** 1955 Alexander Mackendrick (Ealing Studios: Britain) 3.5 Alec Guinness with hilarious protruding teeth as rather oily and ineffective chief of the group planning an armored car heist; Katie Johnson steals the show as the compulsive, batty little old lady who constantly upstages Guinness and gets in the way of the gang's plans; Cecil Parker as stiff-upper-lift Major who falls under the influence of the lady; Herbert Lom smooth and evil as the most serious of the gang members; Peter Sellers stays mostly in the background as the cipher Harry; Danny Green as the dim-witted but good-hearted bouncer One-Round. Delightful, light-hearted caper film that focuses on the problems caused to the hold-up team by their landlady and finishes with the death by murder of all members of the gang, thus giving the lie to the title. Performances of Johnson, Guinness, and Green are particularly endearing and amusing: Johnson is hilarious in her moral decency and her tendency to repeat phrases fed to her by the criminals; Guinness, whose teeth never cease to amuse, is also very funny in his often scattered, Uriah Heep-like ineffectiveness; Green combines verbal incompetence with a developing affection for Johnson that creates anarchy for the group. The five crooks provoke chuckles by posing as a string quintet that needs a space to practice; the violin and cello cases could also be used for carrying weapons and cash. Guinness *et al.* pull off the robbery without a hitch, but things go awfully wrong when they return to Johnson's house to pick up the money-filled trunk (counting on her innocent appearance, they had sent her to the railroad station to fetch it). They decide that she has to be "done away with", but repetitive drawing of straws ends up instead in the progressive elimination of all but Guinness and their bodies being dropped off a railroad overpass into the hopper cars of passing freight trains. As Guinness looks on with satisfaction at the removal of Lom's body (they had previously dueled), a railroad signal changes, bops him on the head, and he too falls on to a passing train. In a humorous ending, Johnson tries to turn the money into the police, but, not believing her, they tell her jokingly to keep it, and she walks off down the street, light-hearted and passing out large bills to a beggar she had previously ignored. The setting is humorous and appropriate – a small, almost fairytale-looking house perched precariously (some of the rooms are condemned) on the edge of a busy railroad freight yard, which of course is put to good use. The film celebrates modest English subjects and the virtues of making modest, non-studio style movies. Understated humor and the ability to see the light side of the most perverse subjects – robbery and multiple murders. (2010)

**Lantana** 2001 Ray Lawrence (Australia) 2.5 Anthony LaPaglia as low-key Sydney detective feeling guilty about infidelity to his spouse; Kerry Armstrong as his unhappy wife, who is looking for more excitement and satisfaction in her life by taking salsa dance lessons; Geoffrey Rush as upper-class deadpan law school dean, who is also losing contact with his wife; Rush's wife, Barbara Hershey, mannered and self-conscious as a psychological therapist distanced from her husband (Rush) by his infidelity and the murder of their daughter; Rachael Blake as a pretty, drifting woman, who begins the film having sex with LaPaglia; Paula d'Amato and Russell Dykstra as reasonably well-adjusted couple that gets caught up in the marital and thriller drama. Multi-layered drama that focuses on the relationship problems of several couples for most of the film and then adds a thriller element in the last third, when Hershey disappears on a deserted suburban road and is found dead. With the exception of d'Amato's, the relationships in the film are in deep trouble because of infidelity, dissatisfaction, mutual trust, and lying. For some reason, the film begins with an intrusive shot of a lantana thicket (apparently very common in Australia) in which lies the body of a young woman; the viewer naturally believes that there has been a murder, but after an hour or so of tracking the emotional suffering of the main characters, the body is not discovered, and in fact no one has been murdered. It is only when Hershey has a breakdown on a deserted road that she disappears and LaPaglia's investigation begins; the viewer is led to believe that Dykstra picked her up and murdered her (although he has no motive whatsoever), but his Angst-laden confession indicates that her death was an accident. The thriller element in the film appears to be unrelated to the emotional drama of the main characters. The film then wraps up with the reconciliation of LaPaglia and Armstrong, the aloneness of Rush, and Blake's tentative, beginning reconciliation with her estranged husband. This viewer tired of the suffering and unhappiness of impassive Rush, anxious, affected Hershey, poker-faced, deadpan LaPaglia (he does break down and cry at the end) and nervous, fretful Armstrong. Are Australians really that unhappy? The physical environment of the Sydney region

and the culture of Australian society are vividly portrayed: Upper class (Rush), working class (d'Amato whose husband is unemployed and stays home to watch the children while his wife works extra shifts), the police environment, the leafy suburbs of Sydney, Rush's stunning modernist house perched on a hillside overlooking a beautiful, finger-shaped bay. The multi-character approach perhaps recalls Altman. The film perhaps takes itself too seriously; a little humor would have helped. (2001; 2014)

**Last Days of Disco** 1998 Whit Stillman 3.0 Unique, Stillman-style confection about the relationship and career issues of attractive young Ivy-League graduates in Manhattan during the time of disco in "the early 1980s". Chloë Sevigny as quiet, mild-mannered, thoughtful young woman, who is central to the events in the film; Kate Beckinsale as her stunningly charming, manipulative, passive-aggressive roommate and friend; Chris Eigeman as the somewhat shady Des, who pretends he is gay in order to break up with his most recent female conquest; Robert Sean Leonard as Tom, a "sympa" environmental lawyer early tied Sevigny; Matt Ross as Dan, who works at the editorial office; Mackenzie Astin as Jimmy, who works for an ad agency, a low prestige occupation in the group; Matt Keeslar as attorney, Josh, working for Manhattan DA and suffering from depression; he brings the narrative to a sort of conclusion by raiding the club for drug offenses. The film stylishly presents the appearances (preppy, well-dressed, neat, thin young people), careers (most of them struggling a bit to find their place just a few years out of college), romantic-sexual attitudes (varies, but most are not looking for that one permanent relationship, but for temporary hook-ups lasting a few weeks or perhaps months), and speech patterns (grammatical good expression analyzing one another and making striking observations about various middle-brow pop culture phenomena) of about ten New York "yuppies" (although most of them would indignantly reject that characterization). The plotless goings-on congregate around the campaigns – sometimes successful (the young women), sometimes not (most of the guys) – to gain admission to "the Club", where the collection of cool young people gyrating and bouncing to the disco music provide temporary "meaning" to their lives; one has the impression throughout that disco is fading, and a newsreel film of crowds in a stadium blowing up disco records and the closing of the Club at the end of the film. On one occasion Leonard opines that the death of Bambi's mother in the Disney movie marks the beginning of the environmental movement; on another several characters get into a fruitless discussion of the meaning of 'The Lady and the Tramp' (was Tramp a rootless serial seducer?). All the male characters tend to fit into the same loquacious, analytical category. The viewer's attention focuses on the two charming women: Beckinsale (manifesting a perfect American accent) giving to Sevigny supposedly constructive advice that is really cutting criticism; Sevigny, the only true narrative focus of the film, learning to find her own moderate path through the conflicting directions and examples of her friends. The last two scenes of the film have Beckinsale alone and Sevigny celebrating a bit with her new boyfriend on the subway. An enjoyable film without true theme or drama. (2016)

**The Last Detail** 1973 Hal Ashby (written Robert Towne) 3.5 Jack Nicholson as Badass, cynical, wise-cracking, cigar-chomping Navy signalman "detailed" to escort Meadows to prison in Portsmouth, New Hampshire; Oliver Young as Black Navy lifer, Mulhall, quiet, serious, thoughtful contrast with Nicholson -- he also escorts Meadows; Randy Quaid as Meadows, innocent, naive, obedient 18-year-old condemned to eight years in prison for attempting to steal \$40 from the charity jar of the wife of the base commandant; Nancy Allen as cute (as always) member of Buddhist cult -- she befriends Meadows in a bar; Carol Kane as pretty, no-nonsense, but vulnerable-seeming prostitute that helps Meadows lose his virginity. Quintessential 70s buddy and road movie about two Navy lifers escorting Meadows to prison. The film is in part a road movie, chronicling the voyage of the three guys in buses, trains, and through train stations from Norfolk to Portsmouth with stops in New York and Boston; the decor is relentlessly dour and realistic with blank 70s interiors and slush-filled streets under cold, overcast skies. It is primarily a buddy movie that starts with the two ne'er-do-wells detailed to escort the clueless Meadows; but because of Badass' unreflective hedonism it turns into an "education" for Meadows before he is taken into custody by the prison system. The guys get him drunk in a long scene in their hotel bedroom strewn with empty beer cans and food crumbs; they introduce him to pornography, visit several restaurants; and finally they take him to a whorehouse, where he hesitantly loses his virginity to the attentive Carol Kane. The sex scene is treated as fulfillment and coming of age for Meadows, who before



the trip had apparently never gotten drunk or had sex with a woman; even if the prison experience ruins him, at least he has been through the male coming-of-age ritual. The film is intermittently critical of American culture and the military; most of it deals with Meadows “education”, but overarching it all is the excessive punishment for petty theft (this what happens to you when you defy authority in the land of Nixon), the brutal treatment of the prisoner when he arrives at the prison, and the aimlessness and emptiness of Badass’ and Mulhall’s prospects as they walk through an empty landscape in the final scene. All three performances are effective, but of course Nicholson’s sarcastic, unpredictable, volcanic personality leaves the lasting impression; at times harsh and flippant in his treatment of Quaid, he becomes progressively more sensitive and sympathetic, appearing to understand his ward’s predicament and filled with rage when he realizes how hopeless it is. The film is often entertaining rather than analytical, but it ends up generating a deep sympathy for the plight of ordinary people at the bottom of the social scale. A good, representative document of the cultural attitudes of the early 1970s. (2015)

**The Last King of Scotland** 2006 Kevin Macdonald (Britain) 3.0 Forest Whitaker pretty mesmerizing as the Ugandan dictator able to alternate between juvenile charm (snookering McAvoy but also every western reporter that comes into his presence) and brutal blood-thirstiness; James McAvoy as young Scottish doctor come to Ugandan to do good but who falls for Amin’s charm big-time, Kerry Washington as one of Amin’s younger wives, who falls for McAvoy (as do several other women in the film), Gillian Anderson as the virtually seduced wife of a humanitarian doctor. Historically based film that makes Idi Amin rather attractive and interesting: sure, he kills 300,000 Ugandans in the course of his rule, but he is charming, boyish, impulsive, and he is a great admirer of Scotland (he fought with Scottish soldiers against the Mau-Mau) to the point of wearing the Scottish hat and kilts. The McAvoy character is quite annoying – from boundless enthusiasm for all that Amin is doing to astounding success with African women including one of Amin’s wives to complicity with Amin and finally whimpering victimhood before a noble African doctor sacrifices his life to ship him out of the country to “tell the world the truth about Amin”. But that is perhaps the way it was meant to be – the white European naive, lost, and making things worse in a place where he does not belong, just like many thousands before him. The Grand Guignol images at the end are shocking – when Amin discovers that his third wife, Washington, has been unfaithful with McAvoy, he has her hunted down, quartered (cut into pieces) and then he displays her separated body parts in the basement of the hospital. The center of the film is the character of Amin as portrayed in bigger than life fashion by Whitaker (who received the Academy Award). Film can also be enjoyed for its attention to historical context. (2007)

**The Last Metro** 1980 François Truffaut (France) 3.0 An essentially light-hearted sketch of what it was like to run a theater and produce plays under the German occupation in Paris. Catherine Deneuve as rather frosty actress and directrice of a small Parisian theater; Gerard Depardieu as young actor, a womanizer who appears to be secretly in the Resistance; Heinz Bennent as Lucas Steiner, Deneuve’s husband and Jewish playwright living in hiding in the basement of the theater; Jean Poiret as mild-mannered man who stands in for Steiner directing the play; Sabine Haudepin as cute young, aspiring actress; Jean-Louis Richard as Daxiat, a journalist at the collaborationist ‘Je suis partout’ that keeps ideological tabs on the theater for the Germans/French fascists. The film seems to say that theater life was not all that different from normal under the German occupation. True, the Jew Steiner is in hiding, but no one seems especially concerned to uncover him. Two apparently Gestapo agents appear at one time to search the basement, but they turn out to be civil defense officials looking for underground shelter. There is the slightly sinister anti-semitic Daxiat, who is fascinated with the theater and particularly with the glamorous Deneuve, but he tells Deneuve that he wished that Steiner were still in France (“The Germans are great lovers of art”) and he is efficient at procuring the licenses required for publication of plays. Depardieu is involved in Resistance activities (he passes to a young man a record turntable that appears to be instrumental in the assassination of a German official), but the viewer never sees him active in resistance and he seems much more interested in obtaining good roles. Much emphasis is placed on how a theater operates – the tightness and lack of comfort in the building, the rehearsals (monitored by Steiner from the basement), relationship among actors, the importance of stars (Deneuve, who is worshipped by the public), getting along with the German authorities (not that hard if you stay

away from Jewish subjects), technical difficulties like electrical outages arising from the war. The point seems to be how to make the theater survive even in trying circumstances. Much of the film performs the same service for the theater as Truffaut did for film in 'La nuit américaine' (the latter is more impassioned and poetic). Part of theater life is of course matters of the heart – the friction between Deneuve and her husband, the flirtatiousness of Sabine as she seeks new and better roles, her apparently lesbian relationship with the theater's costume designer, Depardieu's womanizing, which however he keeps secondary to his acting, Depardieu's and Deneuve's unfulfilled romantic feelings for one another. Disappointing if you expect a homage to the heroic acts of the Resistance. Sparkling, entertaining sketch of theater life during the Occupation. (2016)

**The Last Picture Show** 1971 Peter Bogdanovich 4.0 Based on McMurtry novel. Timothy Bottoms as protagonist Sonny, Jeff Bridges as Duane, Sam Bottoms as half-wit Billy, Cybill Shepherd as Jacy the wealthy, oversexed manipulator of Anarene males, Ben Johnson as the town elder Sam the Lion, Eileen Brennan as maternal café waitress, Ellen Burstyn as Jacy's cynical, disabused mother, Cloris Leachman as the very sad and lonely wife of the basketball coach and sometime lover of Sonny. Extraordinary old-fashioned Hollywood movie perfectly approximating a declining West Texas town in 1951 – country/western and popular music ("The Thing"), early TV shows, the last hurrah of great Hollywood movies (last movie shown in town was John Wayne's 'Red River'), the perfect beat-up pickup truck that Sonny drives around, kids drinking beer and driving, making out and getting perhaps to third base in the back or front seat of their cars. Anarene is declining godforsaken town, flat as a sidewalk, no employment aside from working in oil fields; movie opens with pan shot of dusty, windy streets and ends that same way. Content reminds one a bit of 'Peyton Place' – sex is on everybody's mind, it would seem mainly because there is nothing else to do in town, and everyone realizes that the town is dying; movie avoids soap opera status by its beauty, sincerity and contemplativeness. Film seems to address the demise of small town America, looking upon it with some nostalgia, but also with realism about how provincial it was. Cast is large and superlative – almost every performance is interesting and moving. Film is coming of age film following the travails of Duane, a not-so-smart, quick-tempered kid dating Jacy, but who has a hard time consummating the relationship (in a very funny scene where the high school friends are waiting outside the motel in Wichita Falls for a report); and mainly Sonny, who has a sweet, passive disposition that makes him a plaything of women he is attached to and that makes it hard for him to make decisions and grow up; he has a long love affair with 40-year old Leachman, is manipulated into running off to Oklahoma to marry Jacy (marriage then broken up by the parents), and then when Billy is tragically killed, he rebels and revolts...only to end the movie comforted by ex-lover Leachman. Is he any more adult? Beautifully and expressively photographed in black and white. (2005)

**The Last Samurai** 2004 3.0 Ed. Zwick Tom Cruise, Ken Watanabe, Koyuki. Rather annoying epic/samurai movie about guilty American (he has killed Indians) who hires self out to organize Japan's emperor's army, and then goes over to opposing samurai resisters. Lots of excellent battle scenes, and beautiful photography. Cruise good, although annoying in usual way as he works his way toward maturity and redemption. Watanabe complex and fairly interesting character. Koyuki beautiful, quiet, submissive, and noble. Historical aspect annoying. Idolizes the samurai tradition, implying that if Japan had just remained loyal to it (where the emperor was free and powerful!), then Japan would have been better. Modernizers in Japan are evil and venal and selfish. Emperor follows redemption path similar to Tom, implication being that he will assert self and have dignity. Narrative has certain tragic dignity, but 1) awfully predictable in usual Hollywood fashion, and 2) ending has Tom survive despite trillions of machine gun bullets, and he ends up getting the girl, the widow of the man he had killed in battle! (2005)

**The Last Seduction** 1994 John Dahl 3.5 Linda Fiorentino center stage as the nastiest, most manipulative, and consummately conscienceless femme fatale in the history of the movies; Bill Pullman good as her husband who gives it back to her almost as good as he gets it; Peter Berg a little annoying as the chump she picks up after she flees with Pullman's money from New York to the Buffalo suburb of Beston; J.T. Walsh as Fiorentino's sleazy lawyer with great one-liners and cynical advice for

her over the telephone. Excellent noir-style thriller focusing on the most brazenly evil, man-hating and man-using woman in the movies since Barbara Stanwyck (although Kathleen Turner in 'Body Heat' was just as conscienceless, she was not as steely mean). Bridget/Wendy is completely ruthless; she treats her men worse than a female preying mantis. Tall, thin, attractive, and brazenly aggressive, she practically rapes Berg when she meets him in a bar in Boston: when she unzips his fly under the table, every man in the audience knows his goose is cooked. While she parries her husband's attempts to get his money back, she hatches a (somewhat confusing and incredible) plot to bamboozle Berg into killing her husband. The film ends with a couple of sudden satisfying twists: Berg cannot bring himself to murder Pullman (Fiorentino is watching outside the window of his New York apartment), so Fiorentino has to do it herself by prying open the mouth of the handcuffed Pullman and in a protracted shot spraying a large amount of mace directly into his mouth. And when Berg, who has been framed for the murder, remembers that Fiorentino had put a false name on her husband's door, we cut to her driving through New York in a big limo, and then she burns the exculpatory name card with a lighter: Berg will have to take the rap! Like Kathleen Turner, she takes the money and heads off to a new life. The script has some great lines: the best ones are about Bridget: Walsh – "Anyone check you for a heartbeat lately?" and Berg – "I love you... I'm sure you feel the same way - I'm sure you love you, too" – or from her -- "Spare me your brainless, countrified morality." (2007)

**The Last Sentence** 2012 Jan Troell (Sweden) 3.5 Jasper Christensen as fiery, unbending Swedish newspaper editor, Torgny Segerstedt, who has a (personal and political) hatred for Hitler; Penilla August as his lover Maja Forssman, who is married to his boss and best friend, Axel (Björn Granath); Ulla Skoog as Torgny's disconsolate wife. Slow-moving, impressionistic treatment of the last 12 years of Segerstedt's career, railing to not much avail against Sweden's campaign to remain toward Germany neutral before and during World War II. The film focuses mostly on Segerstedt's domestic concerns – his entanglement with Maja, his concern with mortality (regular conversations with his dead mother à la Bergman), his muffled conflict with his own editor, who is indulgent about his writing, his affection for his usually large dogs that follow him into his bedroom and office – but every so often the editing switches the view to newsreel footage of the Nazis and Hitler and to Segerstedt's enraged prose as he calls upon his countrymen to resist the monster. Segerstedt is not a very sympathetic character – aloof and absorbed in his own world, he treats his wife with contempt, betrays his best friend by having a permanent affair with his wife, prefers dogs to humans, and is completely and egotistically unbending in his colorful condemnation of the Nazis regardless of the consequences for his own country, which – under the leadership of Prime Minister Hansson – is trying to spare Sweden the ravages of war by maintaining its neutrality. For the historically inclined, the last part of the film is the most interesting, as Segerstedt defies his editor, public opinion, the prime minister, the foreign minister (both old friends), and even the spindly king to continue his campaign until the government decides to forbid his articles. The last part of the film also deals with the imminence of death – Segerstedt looks increasingly gaunt and exhausted by his struggle; his death after collapsing on a grand staircase with his dogs has him passing more or less content when his daughters lie to him that Hitler is already dead (he actually lived about five weeks more). The narrative thread of the film is meandering and lazy through about the first half – dogs, women, exquisite shots of elderly heads and the objets d'art and the place settings in his home, Segerstedt being feted on his 65th birthday (presented with a papier maché model of a horse to mount and a lance to carry), etc. – and it picks up only in the second half as the political theme picks up (Will the Germans be allowed to transport troops through Swedish territory?) and Segerstedt begins to wrestle with death and the possibility he will not outlive Hitler (he was only 71 when he died utterly exhausted). Beautifully shot film in black and white; a delight for a viewer interested in history and concerned about imminent and inevitable mortality. (2015)

**The Last Station** 2009 Michael Hoffman (Britain) 3.0 Christopher Plummer with lots of long facial hair and a hearty joie de vivre as the elderly Leo Tolstoy; Helen Mirren as his beautiful, expressive, and outspoken wife, Sofia; James McElroy as the callow, open-ended secretary Valentin; Paul Giamatti as the fanatical director of the Tolstoyan movement – a man entirely devoted to the master; Kerry Condon looking for love in Tolstoy's camp. Well-financed, lush Euro film about the last days of Tolstoy in 1910.

The narrative involves the life-and-death conflict between Giamatti, who wants Tolstoy to leave his literary inheritance “to the Russian people” (whatever that means), and Sofia, who fights tooth-and-nail to preserve the heritage for herself and her children (she gave birth to 13). Valentin is the fellow caught in the middle: he is sent by Giamatti to spy on the wife, but he soon finds out that Tolstoy is not as ascetic and priggish as he thought and that he sympathizes more with Sofia than with Giamatti. Meanwhile, Condon seduces Valentin, and as he hesitates in his life choice (priggish Tolstoyan or embracer of life?), she pulls him away from the community. Photography dwells on lush interiors and exteriors of Tolstoy’s mansion, intriguing shots of Russian trains at the turn of the century; soaring strings of the orchestra reinforce the deep feelings aroused in the audience by the story. The heart of the film is the thunderous performances of the two principals. Tolstoy is a hearty lover of life, bigger than life with his outbursts of laughter, anger, and rooster-like crowing to seduce his wife. Sofia is a dynamic font of emotion: charming, elegant, seductive, personable, a tower of strength, a tiger when aroused to defend her rights and those of her children, bellowing hysterical rage when she and her husband descend into the pit. Their relationship is stormily ambiguous: they have been together for almost 50 years and constantly profess love for one another, and yet their fights are epic in their violence and emotion. Tolstoy is finally driven out of the house by the conflict and suffering, but he gets no farther than “the Last Station” before he takes ill and then dies. All are chastened; Valentin and Masha are married, Giamatti continues his campaign, and Sofia prevails in the end, as indicated in the postscript normal for historically oriented films. Film is lushly entertaining with two blockbuster performances by dramatic cinematic lions. One has often the feeling that the performances overwhelm the genuineness of the story. (2010)

**The Last Temptation of Christ** 1987 Martin Scorsese 3.5 Willem Dafoe as Jesus, Barbara Hershey as wild, intense, even scary Mary Magdalen, Harvey Keitel as fiery New-Yorkese talking conscience of Jesus, David Bowie as urbane, flat Pontius Pilate, Harry Dean Stanton as inspired, faith-filled, strong-willed Paul. Scorsese’s passionate meditation on the relation between body and spirit, the world and grace, comfort/happiness and duty/mission, in the person of Jesus. He starts off as a Roman collaborator despised by all the Jews around him, including Mary Magdalen but especially the fiery Judas (associated with the Zealots). Jesus resists the will of God that he preach and die for mankind – sacrifice and atone; he resists his messianic destiny. Impressive Devil-inspired scenes of visions in the desert – where snakes (woman) and lion (Judas) and fire – that tempt him with pleasure, possessions and power. He resists, is transformed, and goes on to perform miracles and exorcisms, the most impressive and moving of which was the raising of Lazarus from the dead. Jesus warms to his mission under the lash of Judas (although unclear whether he wants to emphasize a gospel of love or to be more political), although he still pleads with God (Father) in the Garden to spare him the agony of crucifixion; Jesus finally gets Judas to betray him to the Romans so that he will have to fulfill his destiny. On the cross, though, he is brought down, spared, by an angel (reminds one of a Botticelli cherub) that might have been sent by the Devil (the angel tells Jesus that God “killed” his wife). He then lives as an ordinary man in a fertile oasis with wives (the first of which was Mary Magdalene) and children, and he is happy as a man and enjoys life. This phase is ended when his disciples come to him and reproach him – Judas being of course the angriest – for having abandoned his destiny, for fleeing the sacrifice that God intended for him. Jesus then returns to the cross and dies in agony and has the right to cry out “It is accomplished.” According to this version, about which Scorsese says in the beginning that it is not based on the gospel, Jesus was a weak man, tempted to be just a man and be happy, and only with a great struggle did he overcome his reluctance and submit himself to the will of his father. Obviously comes out of the author’s own struggles between the blandishments of the world and the attraction of grace. Few special effects. Very veristic textures – dusty, reddish, earthy environment with poor, ragged, gritty characters. The score is exotic and draws a lot of Arab music. The prevalence of flat New York accents (especially Keitel; the exceptions are Pilate and the last tempting angel who speak British) is sometimes off-putting, especially in such a realistic seeming environment. Certainly one of the most challenging film treatments of Jesus; it makes you experience the ambiguities and agonies of being both God and man. (2005)

**The Last Time I Saw Paris** 1954 Richard Brooks (MGM) 2.5 Elizabeth Taylor as beautiful, free-living daughter of, Walter Pidgeon as eccentric free-spirited father who loves his two

daughters, Donna Reed as the other more straight-laced daughter who loves the guy but loses him to the more glamorous Liz Taylor, Van Johnson as the American newspaper reporter, pretty free-wheeling himself, who marries Liz Taylor, Eva Gabor as the other woman that (apparently) seduces Van Johnson, a young, callow Roger Moore as the tennis pro who makes a play for Taylor. Based on Fitzgerald novel 'Babylon Revisited,' soap opera/melodramatic romance about the relationship of Johnson and Taylor, their problems and infidelities, and finally Taylor's death. Takes place against the backdrop of post-World War II Paris, most of it shot on good studio sets. Tenor of movie is a bit annoying – infidelities occurring but with no details (presumably because of Hayes Code), and we are always looking for something really dramatic. All the principals do a pretty good job. Movie is watchable mainly for its stars (a beautiful 22-year-old Liz Taylor, especially before she cuts her hair short, Donna Reed as the more conformist daughter whose hair and gowns are always just prim and perfect, etc.) and for fabulous women's wardrobe – the height of 50s women's fashions, especially Taylor who appears in one stunner after another, including a vivid red gown that is photographed against the white of the Paris snow (?). The theme song wears a little thin after the 25<sup>th</sup> repetition. (2006)

**The Last Tycoon** 1976 Elia Kazan (wr. Harold Pinter) 3.0 An exquisite 'A' film about a big Hollywood studio in the 1930s sound era, obviously modeled on MGM (Monroe Stahr in place of Boy Wonder Irving Thalberg). John Carridine spectral as tour guide (50s) in the beginning; Robert DeNiro handsome, serious, elegant (always wears a coat and tie), svelte, arrogant, confident, often scowling, enormously successful and profitable as Monroe Stahr as production chief; Robert Mitchum as a studio head; Jeanne Moreau as temperamental and prima donna actress; Tony Curtis very fit, ego-rich star performer with mustache who is having sexual problems with his wife; Donald Pleasance in cameo role (two short scenes) as difficult disgruntled alcoholic writer; Ray Milland as a passive executive in the background; Dana Andrews looking grizzled in the beginning as a director who has to deal with a temperamental star (Moreau); Theresa Russell as Cecilia, cute, glamorous, spoiled daughter of Mitchum – she however is overly coiffed and not an expressive actress; Angelica Huston in tiny cameo as aspiring actress; Ingrid Boulting ethereally beautiful, broad-faced (with bad teeth but a pretty nude body manifested in her nude scenes), and very low-key as DeNiro's romantic obsession; Jack Nicholson in calmer than usual role slicked up in cool suit with mustache, apparently a Communist representing writers in the studio. Much information on how movies were made: the studio system; the studio people have to keep their eye on the bean counters in New York; DeNiro at the center of everything, he even reads all the scripts, and reviews all the rushes telling the editor how much to take out of a shot; he objects strenuously to a couple of lines in a scene ("Nor I you." Monroe – "Have you ever heard anyone talk like that?") and requires it to be reshot despite the cost; he takes a script from a writer and farms it out to other writers for modification and polishing; he fires director Andrews at the drop of a hat and without warning; has a conference with discontented writer Pleasance (Fitzgerald, Chandler?) and teaches him how to write for films (the nickel = the visual emphasis of films); but later he has to intervene when Pleasance is roaring drunk; writers are making a bid to unionize and increase their income and standing, but Monroe resists mightily; in the end Monroe is fired by New York because of his stance on the writers' union. Drama focuses on Stahr: in bad health and yet working himself to death; he is a lonely man after the death of his beloved Mina Davis, who was an actress, and he embarks on a stubborn romantic pursuit of the elusive Boulting; he exercises a sort of sensual spell over her, and when they are together she is a sexual and romantic tiger. Boulting is obviously presented as his escape from isolation and loneliness. Film increasingly focuses on Monroe's isolation, ill temper, and autocratic character, as Boulting moves away from him and marries another man; he gets drunk, provokes the union representative, and throws up. Film ends in loss: Boulting sends Monroe a telegram telling him that she is married, and DeNiro is fired from the studio. He says he "doesn't want to lose you", but he walks down an empty studio street and then disappears into the darkness of a soundstage. The strong point of the film is an astounding set of experienced stars. Gorgeous production – sumptuous costumes, jewels, and sets, although writers work in virtual hovels. Monroe drives a fabulous vintage red convertible. Nice cuts between the rushes of black and white movies and the color-soaked present. (2008)

**The Last Wave** 1977 (Australia) Peter Weir 3.0 Richard Chamberlain as David, a lawyer, Gulpilil as Chris, an Aboriginal inhabitant of Sydney. Foreboding film about sort of environmental crisis happening to Sydney (lots of rain, water dripping down stairs and out of the car radio, mud falling from the sky, frogs doing the same, and in the finale a large wave [rather unimpressively depicted] that presumably carries away the protagonist), its relation to an Aboriginal tribe that turns out is still living in Sydney with its sacred places deep in under-city caves (you have to pass through sewers to get to them), and how a corporate lawyer is drawn into the events. Chamberlain is hired to defend five Aboriginal Sydneyites accused of murder (the victim was actually killed by Aboriginal medicine since he had committed some offense against the tribe); he ends up losing the case. It turns out that Chamberlain is somehow related to the local tribe, that he participates in their dream time (dreams are proclaimed to be somehow more real than waking thoughts and actions), and that he has been receiving dream apparitions from Chris. Movie is more creepy (the incessant rain, the branches always brushing against the windows, the unexpected appearances of Chris and the elder Charlie in David's house, the playing of the didgeridoo in tense moments) and foreboding (What is going to happen to Sydney? Is this the end of the world?) than it is scary. Film suffers somewhat from a vague story line (What exactly is David's relation to the Aborigines? How explain the coincidence that David, who is vaguely one of the Aborigines, is drawn into the defense of the accused? Why is he killed by the wave in the end?); and the climactic scene in the under-sewer cave is anti-climactic – even with the painted Aborigines jumping out from behind rocks, the scene lacks panache. After 'Picnic at Hanging Rock,' this is another Weir contribution to the encounter between urbanized, rational modern civilization and the primeval/primitive that unbeknownst to us, lurks in the middle of our cities. (2005)

**A Late Quartet** 2012 Yaron Zilberman 4.0 Christopher Walken in counter-persona role as a gentle, nurturing cellist that is the heart and soul of a famous New York quartet; Philip Seymour Hoffman pulling out his acting stops as frustrated second violinist that wants to take the lead role; Catherine Keener as the retiring violist that is married – rather unhappily – to Hoffman; Mark Ivanir as the obsessively precise first violinist that sets the pace for the quartet; Imogen Poots as the self-centered, impulsive daughter of Hoffman and Keener – also a violinist, she harbors a serious grievance against her mother. The film is essentially a soap opera of clashing egos and libidos transformed by a superior script, superior acting, beautiful and moving music and a satisfying integration of music and narrative. Walken's announcement that he has Parkinson's disease unleashes a chain reaction of changes and personal clashes. Some of them are artistic. Can Walken continue to play? If not, can the quartet find a substitute for him? Should the quartet continue to emphasize precision under Ivanir's guidance, or should they play without their scores – as proposed by Hoffman – so they can play more from the heart. When Hoffman decides he would like to alternate first chair, his insensitively timed announcement sets off a lengthy confrontation with Ivanir, who would never give up his control of the quartet's playing style. Much of the conflict is however personal. When Keener suggests to Hoffman (her husband) that he does not have the stuff for first violin, he reacts violently, has a one-night stand with a female running buddy (the sexy Liraz Chari), which leads to a violent break with Keener, who not only does not have a forgiving or understanding bone in her body, but she does not seem to have true love for her husband; it also leads to Poots' seduction of Ivanir, a move obviously intended to stick it to her mother, who had had an affair with Ivanir before her marriage, and whom Poots accuses of being a terrible mother that left her daughter to fend for herself for months on end. The quartet appears to be in shambles when good fortune restores it to health: Poots decides that she has to give up Ivanir for the sake of the quartet (for music – art), and Hoffman decides to set aside his anger, shave off his beard in front of the mirror, and play with the quartet in their 26th (?) inaugural season. The film ends on an upbeat note, when Walken stops the music toward the end of the Beethoven quartet (something that the composer expressly forbade) and invites another cellist onstage to replace him, and Hoffman walks over to Keener, who accepts his make-up kiss. Balance and harmony are restored with even Poots smiling from the audience. Despite the soap operish moments (Hoffman slugs Ivanir for fucking his daughter, Poots' seduction of the supposedly impassive Ivanir, the last scene with the new cellist walking onstage), the film benefits from an intelligent script, a lovely interpretation of the Beethoven Quartet, Op. 131 by the Brentano Quartet, and a matching of the progression of the narrative to the successive seven movements of the quartet. Some musicians criticize

the unrealistic bowing of the actors, a problem not noticed by this viewer. Acting is moving and convincing: Keener's calm detachment from the storms around her, including her husband's emotions; Hoffman's passion to play music from his soul and to love Keener more profoundly than ever; and mostly Walken's calm, avuncular, nurturing personality constantly reminding his colleagues that their service to art is the most important thing. A wonderful entertainment bringing together most of the elements of a great film. (2013)

**Laura** 1944 Otto Preminger (20cFox) 4.0 Gene Tierney as ethereally beautiful and mysterious Laura whom we are led to believe is dead until halfway through the film; Dana Andrews as low-key detective investigating her murder – he falls in love with Laura while still believing she is dead; Clifton Webb as venom-soaked gossip columnist who, although apparently homosexual, loves Laura with ultimate possessiveness; Vincent Price as decadent, self-indulgent gigolo type of guy, incapable of any courageous act, who latches on to women for support; Judith Anderson as unattractive middle aged woman who pays men to pay attention to her. Although often contrived and artificial, an outstanding semi-film noir about apparent murder of Laura, although in classic scene she comes back to her apartment and then becomes a murder suspect. Much of the languid, haunted, nostalgic romantic atmosphere of the film comes from the famous song by Johnny Mercer. First half of film wonderful as Andrews investigates murder, compiles list of suspects, and then as he gazes at her ethereal portrait over the fireplace in her living room (what kind of woman would display a portrait of herself in her own home?) imperceptibly falls in love with the dead Laura himself. Wonderful halfway scene as Andrews cruises alone through Laura's empty apartment, rummages through her underwear drawer, gazes longingly at the large portrait, and takes a couple of drinks – so far this is like a date with a dead woman; falls asleep, camera tracks in and out slightly (passage of time), then with camera on his face we hear the apartment door open and close (who would enter the apartment without a key?), then camera switches to Laura from the back as she closes the door, she turns around and voilà! Laura is alive! (I wish the revelation could be handled to generate even more surprise.) Clifton Webb priceless as the real guilty man, sarcastic, venomously verbal wit that he uses in his gossip column, highly conscious of his superiority to anyone around him, particularly toward the Scots working class police detective McPherson, whom he insults continuously; Andrews pulls out his baseball puzzle almost every time they meet to heighten the class hostility between them. Waldo comes across as kind of Nietzschean overman, who because of his presumed superiority is not bound by the usual moral and social rules of the run-of-the-mill guy. He is probably gay (although it is understandably [1944] not made explicit in the film) – note Andrews' amused glance when Webb steps out of his tub toward the beginning of the film; he jealously blackens the reputation of any man who gets close to Laura; his murderous passion may come partly from his own conflicted feelings about his sexuality. Webb's persona is particularly vivid since he narrates the film. Tierney is beautiful and mysterious; her beauty is used to great effect by Preminger. Although she is held in high esteem by everyone who knew her (particularly her maid Bessie, who worships her), Laura is implicitly presented as a manipulator who likes to fool around with men (the first boyfriend spent time in the evening in her apartment) and use them for her own purposes; her using of Waldo almost backfires on her (she is saved only by luck), but her growing attachment to Mark at the end makes us wonder where that relationship will be going. Do we really think that Laura is going to settle down with Mark? Nice final scene when after Waldo is shot by the police, camera focuses on the clock shattered by the shotgun blast – the social order is blasted and what is in store for Andrews in the future with Laura? Although somewhat hidden, the whole movie is perverse – a homosexual man is driven to murder, the mainstream detective “falls in love with a corpse” (Waldo), a woman (Anderson) is determined to pair up with a Shelby, even though she knows he is a worthless wastrel; the whole society is decadent and even rather perverted. Not quite a film noir – the cinematography is high key, the femme fatale is ambiguous, the protagonist does not move inevitably to destruction – but relation to trend is obvious. Quite a few implausible points in the plot; and Andrews' crime investigation is often routine and even clichéd. Great movie that could have been a little bit better; but who cares. (2007)

**Laurel and Hardy (2007)**

**Angora Love** 1929 4.0 Laurel and Hardy. Truly hilarious silent L&H. Plot gets going with goat following them home to hotel room. Two are a domesticated pair sleeping in same bed together. Hardy with his patient slow burn, exasperation, incredulous gaze into the camera, and Laurel with his smug look of superiority, his weeping and whining, his clueless look, blinking his eyes, scratching his head. A lot of little indignities (stepping on nails in the floor, catching finger in the door, bumping heads against the headboard, glass lamp shades crashing to the floor), but ends with donnybrook slow revenge drama as several characters retreat from room to come back and throw water on one of the others; ends with water accidentally thrown on the cop.

**Oranges and Lemons** 1923 Hal Roach Studios 3.0 Stan Laurel by himself. Set in orange packing factory in an orange grove, Laurel makes chaos of the whole operation, making a pest of himself no matter where; just a fool he creates anarchy. Very little indication of his eventual persona; here he is acrobatic and clueless, and quite annoying. A lot of petty violence – hitting people over the head with empty packing crates. Some inventive writing, e.g., how to raise empty crates to the next level.

**Roughest Africa** 1923 Hal Roach 3.0 Laurel alone in his first two-reel comedy for Hal Roach. Mocks travelogue films to Africa. He encounters ostrich, lion, bear(?), porcupine, elephant. Nothing particularly funny, although some wonder at his being in same frame as lions and elephants. Particularly true for the end of the lion sequence that has him being chased by 8-10 lions apparently in the same frame! His routines seem an awful like Buster Keaton. His embarrassed expression is compelling.

**Busy Bodies** 193x 4.0 Laurel, Hardy. One of the best, since mayhem begins with an original smaller problem (the nail in the water pipe), which then escalates into bigger ones from Hardy caught in the window to punches exchanged with the victim worker, and on to a very violent and extreme conclusion as Hardy is expelled through a large pipe to the outside. Final gag is that the boys' car is sawed in two by a band saw. Ironic that the guys, who are of course dressed in ties and bowler hats, happily go to work in their job in the blue collar lumber mill.

**County Hospital** 1932 3.5 Laurel, Hardy, Billy Gilbert. Hardy is in the hospital with his broken leg elevated in a huge cast; Laurel comes to visit, and disaster ensues. Usual catastrophic interplay between the two. Laurel has good quiet shticks – eating the hard-boiled egg with his usual quietly fussy mannerism; when embarrassed after the disaster, he is awkward, not knowing what to look at, what to do with his hands, and how to deal with the exasperated Hardy; so he ends up taking off his bowler hat and scratches the top of his head (with the hair sticking up, of course). *Pièce de résistance* is Laurel causing Gilbert to fall out the window holding on to the rope holding up Hardy's leg; Hardy is lifted to the ceiling where he dangles helplessly but yelling; Laurel as usual makes things worse when trying to help, and order is restored only when the hospital staff enters to see what the matter is. Hardy is of course frustrated, looking into the camera vainly for sympathy from the audience. Film short ends with poorly photographed driving sequence, in which Laurel, falling to sleep because of the hypodermic he sat on – cannot control the car.

**Sons of the Desert** 1933 4.0 Laurel, Hardy, Mae Busch. Absolutely hilarious feature length film (68 minutes) on husband/wife relationships. The boys as two hen-pecked husbands, who want to go to the Sons of the Desert convention in Chicago (an obvious satire on the Shriners), but are afraid to ask their wives and they resort to subterfuge (a cruise to Honolulu for Oliver's health recommended by the veterinarian that Laurel brings in to 'examine' the supposedly ill Hardy) to fool them. Wives are real shrews – Laurel's ('Honey') is tall and carries a hunting rifle; Hardy's ('Sugar') is the incomparable Mae Busch, who is an expert at throwing crockery and loses her temper and goes through moods swing as she dominates her husband. More verbal jokes than the short subjects, e.g., Laurel referring to Honey as his "ball and chain" unwittingly in her presence. Some great routines, particularly on the boys' being terrified of the wives, especially when they return from their ambiguous journey. Hardy has a hold over Laurel since he threatens to tell his wife that Hardy caught him smoking a cigarette! Best scene is when they reveal the truth to their spouses: Laurel is hilarious since he has a hard time telling a lie weeping and



blubbering, and Hardy is disgusted with him because he can't stick to the party line. Lightning strikes them while they are hiding in the attic, presumably because they have lied. In the end Laurel is treated well by his wife since he has told the truth; Busch collects all the crockery in the house and breaks it over Hardy's head since he did not tell the truth.

**Flying Deuces** 1939 3.0 Laurel, Hardy, Jean Parker. Produced away from Hal Roach and his crew, but still is fairly funny. Boys in France, Hardy in love with JP, his suit is rejected, joins the Foreign Legion, and they have various adventures. Some personae and approach as early 30s talkies, although dialogue seems more important; the guys also stop twice to do a little music and dance – Laurel “plays” the “harp,” and the two of them do a soft shoe routine in front of the soldiers. Some good gags: Laurel keeps bumping his head on the slanted roof wall, despite Hardy's protestations and helpfulness; L always walks into walls on the wrong side of doors. L&H do only one of their tit for tat routines (water, laundry iron, etc. when they are supposed to be doing laundry for the Foreign Legion); in any case, Laurel continuously “assaults” Hardy, who does not appreciate, and does at times his patented slow burn. Long final chase scene; first is dull with soldiers pursuing the duo; but then gets more exciting with the boys in an airplane trying to pilot it themselves, with several stalls, corkscrew moves, dives, near misses with ground, etc. (and of course Laurel squealing in terror and hugging Hardy); plane finally crashes and Hardy is killed. Running joke in movie is incarnation. Last scene has Laurel talking to Frances the Talking Mule, who now has the voice of Hardy (he has transmigrated!).

**Way Out West** 1937 Produced by Hal Roach 3.0 James Finlayson as the boys' nemesis. The rather late Laurel and Hardy feature doesn't strike the writer as funny as some of the others. The boys are in the West riding on a donkey to tell a girl she has inherited a gold mine; Finlayson and his wife try to steal the deed from them, and the adventures ensue from their competition. Some good running gags, e.g., Laurel's ability to light a match by popping out his thumb; he does it three times, but Hardy is not able to imitate...until the very end he shocks himself with a success. A couple of very noisy, hyperkinetic slapstick sequences, particularly the one in Finlayson's apartment, where both sides compete violently for the deed; perhaps the funniest part is Stan giggling endlessly while the wife (quite sexy) is trying to extract it from under his shirt. The boys also do a couple of songs, the first one having them dance in a saloon. The best routine is Stan trying to lift Ollie into an upstairs window using block and tackle and the donkey; after several tries, Ollie ends up on the ground, but the donkey ends up on the second floor! A lot of hilarious competitive, tit-for-tat action between the two with Ollie glowering and blustering and Stan looking clueless, scratching his head, etc., although this doesn't prevent him from getting his little revenge on his partner.

**Lawrence of Arabia** 1962 David Lean (Britain) 4.0 Peter O'Toole inspired, on the edge, internally riven, but instinctive military genius as Lawrence; Omar Sharif as Ali, his friend and ultimately the measure of his madness; Anthony Quinn as rougher, macho and barbaric Arab leader from different tribe than Ali; Claude Rains with prominent false teeth as clever diplomat accompanying General Allenby; Jack Hawkins marvelous as stiff upper lip but humorous and competent British general in chief, who regularly thanks God that he is not a politician; Anthony Quayle as somewhat priggish staff assistant to Allenby; Jose Ferrer as existential, lonely and perhaps sexually bizarre Turkish general who has Lawrence beaten; Arthur Kennedy as brash and intelligent American journalist who (somewhat cynically?) creates the myth of Lawrence the inspirational military and political genius of the desert; Alec Guinness as a rather too European Prince Faisal, clever and reserved, who seems to end up on top at the end. Extraordinarily epic version of the incipient Arab rising in Arabia during World War I, the Arab rivalry with the British, and the final situation in Damascus where Lawrence, the lesser leaders (Lawrence, Sharif and Quinn) are eclipsed by the power of the British Army (Hawkins) and the sly maneuverings of Faisal (Guinness) – their alliance seems to presage the takeover of Arabia by Faisal in due time. Small things seem weaker – Alec Guinness' studied Englishness (and make-up?), the somewhat anti-climactic last part of the film – but overall impact is dramatic and overwhelmingly emotional. The epic expanses of the desert, the mountains, etc., are enormously impressive even on a wide computer screen with sharp resolution. The excitement generated by the story carries the film

forward – recruiting a bunch of ragtag Bedouins to fight the Turkish army, leading to victories at Aqaba and Damascus. The transformation of the misfit Lawrence into a successful desert warrior adored as a kind of demigod by the tribesmen and prized equally by the British high command. The character of Lawrence is an important focus – a more or less useless misfit in the British Army becomes a dynamic field commander when leading the Arab detachments; a pretty guy with his glowing light blue eyes often appearing like an angel in his white Bedouin robes, riven internally between his excitement at doing something great and his revulsion at the blood he is shedding and his doubts about leading the Arabs only to turn them over to the British (much trembling of lips and jittery eyes); in the end he falls into near nervous collapse after he is beaten by the Turks and after his attempt to take over Damascus collapses in internal chaos and defeat. Not a single female character in the film (thank God no token woman). Memorable scenes: the famous match that cuts to the rising sun over the dunes of the Arabian desert; the destruction of the Turkish train in the desert and the release of the beautiful Arabian horses; the scenes of the defeated Turkish army retreating and then slaughtered by the Bedouin horsemen (and camelmen); the two mirage scenes of or horsemen approaching interminably over the mirage; the ship in the Suez Canal passing unexpectedly behind the dunes announcing the arrival of the near dead Lawrence to Egypt. Possible to become impatient at the end of the almost 4-hour movie; but it has to be the greatest epic! (2009)

**Layer Cake** 2004 Matthew Vaughn (Britain) 2.5 Daniel Craig in his first starring role as gentleman-style drug dealer telling us that he is on the verge of retirement; Colm Meaney as Irish-accented mobster assistant to the boss Jimmy; Kenneth Cranham as Jimmy the underworld boss; Michael Gambon as pretentiously speeched gangster; Sienna Miller as supposedly seductive babe who doesn't quite make it. Star vehicle for fairly charismatic Daniel Craig: slim, muscular, and handsome (although he sometimes resembles Vladimir Putin), kind of cool and sensible, wants to stay away from the worst of underworld life but he gets drawn in deep. Initially he is persuaded by his associate Jimmy to do a favor for Jimmy's friend Gambon and rescue his daughter; in the meantime, Craig and his men get mixed up in a deal about ecstasy pills, which have been stolen from a vicious Serbian gang by the nearly insane Duke and his hysterical, drug-pumped girlfriend. The plot is filled with twists and turns – so many that the viewer doesn't know what is happening, and he gets so far behind that he gives up. There is Jimmy and Colm, Craig and his two men (Craig later gets furious about a murder and executes his boss Jimmy), Gambon and his crowd who are masking a play for the pills, renegade Duke and his shrieking girlfriend, Dragan and his sadistic Serbs who are trying to get their pills back, and the police, about whom we are also rather suspicious. Craig has a momentary romance with Miller (she looks a little like a gawky candidate for top model on TV) but the connection is interrupted when Craig is kidnapped by one of his antagonists. Film is quite violent and has a sense of humor; it moves along at a rapid pace giving one barely a moment to reflect and figure out who is who. The dialogue is incomprehensible to the polite American ear and has to be supplemented with subtitles. What makes the film work in some ways is the star quality of Craig, who has weight and the loyalty of the camera. The film ends ironically: Craig meets Jimmy's former confederates in the same elegant restaurant where he had met Jimmy in the beginning; they expect him to take over the operation (even though he murdered Jimmy?), but in a white suit he announces that he is getting out; he walks through the main dining room, picks up a beaming Sienna Miller, and when the two of them walk out the front door, Craig is shot twice and he lies dying on the steps with blood staining his white coat – the gunman is Miller's ex-boyfriend murdering him out of jealousy; it has nothing to do with drug business! (2009)

**League of Gentlemen** 1960 Basil Dearden (Britain) 2.75 Rather overrated British bank heist film featuring narrative energy and a bevy of well-known British actors. Jack Hawkins clipped, unswerving and slightly bitter retired army lieutenant colonel, who organizes the bank robbery; Nigel Patrick as his mostly loyal adjutant (second in command); Roger Livesey a bit long in the tooth as religious man, who poses as a clergyman; Richard Attenborough as the short whippersnapper ladies' man; Robert Coote as fatuous upper-class friend of Hawkins introduced for comic effect at the end of the film. In pleasing, high definition black and white; other conspirators include Bryan Forbes, Kieron Moore, Terence Alexander. The film's screenplay dictates clockwork direction that follows the mechanical

organization and implementation of the bank holdup: colorful and slightly scandalous introduction of the principals; Hawkins' recruiting speech in a downtown London café; execution of two preliminary operations, the more amusing of which is the effective army impersonation that obtains weapons for the conspirators (being former army officers the participants play their roles to the t); the execution of the bank heist, rather mechanical with smoke bombs, the men carrying tommy guns while wearing gas masks – no one is injured in the gentlemanly operation; the denouement, in which all the men are captured by a massive police presence at Hawkins' home and then led off in comical fashion in the police van, Alexander, who had nothing to do with the robbery, included. The film has a mechanical, highly organized structure reminiscent of 'Rififi' and 'The Killing' released only a few years before, the only suspense being whether they would get away with the heist. Hawkins has the clipped authoritative military presence to lead the film; the personas of the rest of the cast pretty much get lost in the momentum of the plot. All the men are more "gentlemanly" and respectful than one would expect from a bunch of crooks and low-lives. The filming style is strictly functional focusing on clear presentation of events – little room for themes, cinematographic beauty, or character development. The ending of the film is disappointing: the police superintendent's explanation of what led to the arrest of the perpetrators is too facile (a license plate is written down by a little boy who does that for a hobby?), as is the superficially amusing final shot of the bemused bad guys being led away in the police van. The film is entertaining with good narrative momentum. (2017)

**Leave Her to Heaven** 1945 John Stahl 3.0 Gene Tierney icily, scarily and murderously possessive as daughter of wealthy Maine family; Cornel Wilde as normal, pretty dull guy who somehow marries her (he is not able to explain how it happened); Daryl Hickman rather irritating as Wilde's younger brother, who gets in Tierney's way; Ray Collins as sensible older family lawyer. Rather bizarre studio product halfway between a soap opera and a film noir. A film noir filmed in blazing Technicolor, where the colors are super-saturated and often unrealistically glowing (reminding one of 50s 'South Pacific'), but which are capable of conveying the intense and scary beauty of Tierney's face or the natural beauty of a Maine lake. Tierney is the heart and soul of the film. She is hard to figure out – intensely possessive to the point of murder, on horseback and with a frighteningly manic expression on her face she distributes the ashes of her dead father in New Mexico, she sits idly by in a rowboat as Wilde's brother drowns in the famous drowning scene, and she throws herself intentionally down the stairs in order to force a miscarriage and get rid of the baby she doesn't want; she is wildly affectionate with her new husband, who seems often distracted by something – writing, his brother, his Maine house – and does not respond when Tierney is looking for affection; but then she harbors dangerously silent resentment against anyone who she thinks comes between them. Close-ups of her face are memorable – perfect alabaster beauty with long, wavy dark hair, brightly painted red lips, steely hard eyes, triangle-shaped dark glasses that hide her eyes as she watches the boy drown. She commits suicide but sets it up as a murder to frame her sister (Jeanne Crain), who has fallen in love with her husband (innocently of course). Film ends with improbable courtroom scene in which DA bully Vincent Price browbeats practically everyone within reach; but of course the tables are suddenly turned and the deceased Tierney is recognized for the monster that she was. The film ends with a gloriously framed Maine lake shot of Wilde and Crain embracing – true love has won out. The film has important noir elements such as the *femme fatale*, but the non-noir elements predominate – the blazing color, the survival of the male protagonist, the happy, true love ending. One has the impression that the script would have made an excellent noir thriller, if it had been deepened and sharpened and if the film had been shot in black and white. (2008)

**Lee Daniels' The Butler** 2013 Lee Daniels 2.5 Forest Whitaker as White House butler Cecil Gaines that served seven presidents from Eisenhower to Reagan; Oprah Winfrey doing some serious acting as Cecil's often stressed wife; Mariah Carey as his mother; Vanessa Redgrave as the mistress of the plantation where Cecil's father was murdered; David Oyelowo as Cecil's son, who is politically active in the civil rights movement in the South; Cuba Gooding in neutral role as the head White House butler; Robin Williams not looking like or seeming like Dwight Eisenhower; John Cusack as depressive, alcoholic Richard Nixon; James Marsden way too youthful as John Kennedy; Liev Schreiber as Lyndon Johnson issuing orders sitting on the toilet; Alan Rickman looks a lot like Ronald

Reagan; Jane Fonda in pungent cameo appearance as Nancy Reagan. Often hokey, melodramatic treatment of the career of a White House butler put in the context of the Civil Rights movement from the 1950s to the 1980s. The film constantly paints a contrast between the subservient career of Whitaker – “house nigga”, servant, etc. – and the prosecution of the campaign for equal rights of African-Americans, which is depicted through newsreel footage and the activism of Cecil’s son Louis in the Southern Freedom Rides. The film often edits back and forth between Cecil’s stately movements through the White House and the (heroic!) struggles of Louis’ confrontations with Southern racists. There is a lot of domestic turbulence between Cecil and Oprah as a result of Cecil’s long, dedicated hours at work and the long-winded alienation between father and son over values and life style. The film ends in idealistic triumph as Cecil retires from service with the help of Nancy Reagan, who actually invites him as a guest to a state dinner (were the Reagans really so noble and undiscriminating?), and Cecil has a change of heart and joins his son in a political protest; credits roll giving homage to the heroes of the Civil Rights movements. The low point of the film is the extremely melodramatic beginning, where the rape of Cecil’s mother and the unpunished murder of his father use the most lurid imagery of slavery instead of depicting the real conditions of African-American workers in the 1920s. No doubt that Whitaker and the film’s make-up team ably carry the extended career of Gaines from his relatively youthful self in the 50s to the elderly man bent over with age in the 80s. Perhaps the most entertaining aspect of the film is observing the impersonations of the various presidents (minus Ford and Carter, who get only newsreel appearances), most of which are pretty unconvincing. The film is perhaps a good idea, but undermined by Daniels’ heavy-handed, hyper-Hollywood approach; not to mention the disconnect between a story focused on a man that has no political connections and a theme that emphasizes the glories of civil rights liberation. (2014)

**Lemming** 2005 Dominik Moll (France) 3.0 Laurent Lucas as low-key engineer in a high-tech firm in the Toulouse region; Charlotte Gainsbourg cute (although not very pretty) and also low-key and passive as Lucas’ stay-at-home young wife; Charlotte Rampling as take-no-prisoners, angry, sexually aggressive wife of Lucas’ boss; André Dussollier as seemingly straight arrow boss of Lucas, although he likes to have sex with prostitutes. Fascinating, although frustratingly vague follow-up to Moll’s big hit, ‘Harry...’. Film is set in the most normal of circumstances – Lucas working in a high-tech firm in France and returning home every night to his loving and attractive wife in a tastefully decorated home in a leafy French suburban neighborhood. Strange events soon interrupt their equilibrium. A classically unpleasant dinner visit from Rampling and Dussollier (shades of the classic Chabrol: angry arguments and Rampling throwing a glass of wine in her husband’s face) bemuses the young couple; they find a lemming (Norwegian mouse-like rodent) caught in the kitchen drain pipe; Rampling makes sexual advances to Lucas, which he rejects hesitantly; and then she commits hysterical and messy suicide in the couple’s spare bedroom. The film then journeys into the supernatural: Lucas returns from a business trip to find his kitchen crawling with lemmings, only to wake up in the hospital and be told that he was severely injured in an auto accident and the lemming incident must have been a dream; when the couple journeys to Dussollier’s alpine cabin for as rest, Rampling inhabits Gainsbourg’s body and makes passionate love with Lucas; she then returns to their home and appears to Lucas as both herself and Gainsbourg and then has a love affair with Dussollier (!); the jealous Lucas then journeys to Dussollier’s house to murder him, taking care to make it resemble a suicide; he brings a willing Gainsbourg home and then all returns to normal: the couple seems again content, and the script provides a naturalistic explanation for the appearance of the lemmings. The first half of the film is absorbing and fascinating; the director is expert at slowly building tension and suspense coming from the two separate narrative lines – the lemming (the viewer wonders what its symbolism might be) and the scary encounters with the apparently demented Rampling and her normal-seeming husband. The central part of the film is confusing and stimulating: it seems that some supernatural force is at work in the possibility of Rampling’s return from the dead and the confusion of the identities of Rampling and Gainsbourg. The end of the film however is deflating: the murder of Dussollier seems unnecessary and the return to normal at the end takes the steam out of the film, leaving many threads hanging. One wonders whether the theme might be related to the self-destructive tendency of humans (the lemmings plunging off the cliff to their death) or the inevitable

disintegration of marriages (Rampling and Dussollier and the ending cluelessness of Lucas' and Gainsbourg's relationship). Entertaining, disturbing, although highly ambiguous film. (2011)

**Leon: the Professional** 1994 Luc Besson 3.0 Natalie Portman in her first film at age of 12: terminally cute with her pageboy haircut, strong acting with effective trembling lip portraying a lonely, abandoned, but courageous child; Jean Reno (born in Morocco but raised in France) as ruthlessly efficient professional hit man who saves Portman's life and acts as her surrogate father; Gary Oldman sneering, snorting, and contorting his face as bloodthirsty, psychotic police detective who is doing a drug business on the side; Danny Aiello as kindly bar/restaurant owner who keeps money for Reno, and then Portman, and doesn't want to let it go. Over-the-top film with a highly improbable, even absurd, plot but with compelling action sequences and a charismatic performance from the pre-teen, 12-year-old Natalie Portman. Portman is part of a dysfunctional, mixed family that is rubbed out mercilessly by Oldman's "cops" (really drug dealers) when he suspects the dad of cutting cocaine behind his back; Reno rescues Portman from Oldman's hit men, and he develops a touching, if somewhat clichéd, paternal relationship with the orphaned Portman; Portman is dead set on revenge, using techniques and weapons taken from Reno, but it is the latter that manages to kill (slaughter) several of Oldman's underlings; in the final lengthy Armageddon, Reno eventually dies in the bloody shootout, but he takes Oldman with him by strapping explosives to his own body; Portman returns to the private school that her parents had sent her to, and the Headmistress promises to help her "if she doesn't lie"; the implication is that Portman will turn out ok, although we can anticipate psychological bumps from all she has been through. Portman's career as a hit person (called "cleaner" in the film) is a bit ridiculous (at least she does not succeed in rubbing out her marks), but the film has strengths. The action sequences are filmed with panache, quick cutting, good make-up, and dramatic accompanying music; and the adorable Portman charms every theatergoer with her classic face, the hair in her face, her adult-like guts and resourcefulness, and her ability to convey loss and anger through facial expressions. Memorable mainly for Portman's performance. (2011)

**The Leopard** 1965 Luchino Visconti (Italy) 3.5 Burt Lancaster, Claudia Cardinale, Alain Delon. Epic treatment of wonderful novel by Giuseppe di Lampedusa. International epic with an American, French and Italian star to make it sell; but a big commercial failure in USA (completely predictable -- which American would sit for three hours to watch a story about the Risorgimento, even with 20 minutes cut from the Italian version?). Seems to remain faithful to theme of novel (the passing of the aristocracy to the bourgeoisie paralleled by the approaching death of the Prince), but changes and simplifies the plot to "make it work" for the screen. Done in lushly sumptuous color with very bright reds and golds and deep greens, particularly effective in indoor scenes where the deep colors and textures on the walls conjure up a feeling of declining aristocracy. Epic feel in the big sweeping, national theme (Italian unification and the passing of the nobility), the battle scenes where the 'camicie rosse' battle the ineffective Bourbon soldiers in the streets, the sweeping views of the beautiful, stark Sicilian countryside, the incredibly sumptuous costumes in practically every scene, etc. Dubbing in Italian is good; even Lancaster seems to be speaking Italian (and warning, do not watch him speaking his own language in the English language version!). Actors are all good: Lancaster is convincing and noble as the enlightened, existential aristocrat, who carries the weight of his country's and family's history and traditions on his shoulders; Delon is dashing and sympathetic as the nephew Tancredi, who by marrying the bourgeoisie Angelica shows that he will be a success in the new Italy; Cardinale is beautiful and spectacular in her 1860s gowns, and does a good job suggesting her sensuality; Concetta (actress?) is pretty but puritanical, dour and colorless, representing the past, the girl that Tancredi leaves behind in order to move into the new order. Visconti goes for the slow epic pace, with extremely long scenes -- for example, the ball scene toward the end has many "empty" moments as we watch the couples dance and admire the spectacular costumes; the battle scenes are too long by American standards. The best scenes are the Prince searching his soul -- shaving in the mirror when Tancredi enters room and is seen reflected in the mirror; his irritated snappy relationship with his house confessor -- the Prince values the Church as a tradition, but he is no firm believer; the scene where he explains that he cannot be a senator under the new Piedmontese system; when he sits in the drawing room and looks at the picture depicting death, and then is comforted by the sensuous Angelica, with whom he has a potential lover's connection as he longs for

youth and vitality; the scene with the tear running down his face is a bit sentimental. The ending is disappointing. Instead of the scene changing to much later, showing the decline of the family and using the Death image of the lady dressed in the brown suit, he merely stops on the way home and kneels before the sacrament; somehow an explosion is supposed to suggest death, and he merely walks off the screen. (2006)

**The Leopard Man** 1943 Jacques Tourneur 3.0 Dennis O'Keefe in low-key, uninteresting portrayal of man trying to solve the mystery of the murders, Margo as Clo-Clo the good time party girl and entertainer, who is killed in the third murder sequence. One of the earlier Lewton creepy, low-key horror films and the last directed by Tourneur. Some great understated horror sequences. The first is the best: the teenage girl walks through the darkness, down streets, over fields, under a railroad bridge; lots of shadows and eerie sounds; surprises as the train passes overhead, and then the sight of the leopard in the shadows; she is killed by the leopard at her mother's door, the latter having locked her out as a punishment; we experience the murder from the inside through growls, screams, and finally blood flowing under the door. The second is of the wealthy girl looking for her lover in the cemetery (the photography makes us wonder whether the attacker is the leopard). The third is of Clo-Clo tracked through dark streets, where there are shadows, cigarette on the ground, followed by a scream. Film set in American Southwest with a lot of references to the Indian background (slaughtered by the Spanish), Spanish speaking people, and creepy processions through the streets to commemorate the murders; also a fortune teller (cards) who seems to have predictive powers; overall the supernatural atmosphere less convincing and pervasive than 'Zombie.' Film is very well directed and photographed, but has to deal with unsatisfactory script: the characters of the couple protagonist are developed awkwardly; they learn to love somehow (redemption), perhaps through the guilt they feel at being responsible for the escape of the black leopard (puma?). Halfway through O'Keefe insists that a man did all but the first killing, and though the script tries to hide the killer's identity, it is pretty obvious that he is the pseudo-scientist/museum curator. He has a final sequence in which the sound effects seem to be in his head rather than in the environment as they had been in previous sequences, and then he is tracked down by the good guys and confesses before he is killed. His confession does not clear up for the viewer why he killed. Sometimes engrossing; interesting for Tourneur fans. (2009)

**Less Than Zero** 1987 Marek Kaniévská 2.5 Andrew McCarthy as somewhat saintly Beverly Hills friend returned home from one semester in an Eastern elite school, Jami Gertz as his basically non-acting, coke-head ex-girlfriend who pleads with him to help her save the soul of... Robert Downey Jr. very dramatic as the third of the Beverly Hills High threesome who in a short time has completely gone to seed with dealing drugs, coke use, and selling his body to pay off his debts, James Spader in early role as rather low-key bad guy who won't let his friend Downey off the hook of his \$50,000 debt. Based on infamous novel by Bret Easton Ellis, film about drug use among the rich elite in Beverly Hills, the radical decline of two of the threesome, death of Downey in clueless shot in the desert, and then salvation for McCarthy and Gertz – McCarthy takes her back to the Eastern school with him to save her from the perils of life in the West. Story seems considerably cleaned up for Hollywood. Very hard to believe the moralistic story line (don't use drugs, and check into a recovery clinic before you die) since the director films the whole movie in glitzy, cool shots – lots of scenes in cool nightclubs where the beautiful people get nosebleeds from coke use, impeccably appointed homes and loft apartments, uninteresting cool shots of McCarthy and Gertz having sex against the wall with their clothes on, McCarthy driving everyone around in his very cool 50s red Corvette, audacious angles and moving camera where there is no reason for such. Reflects the drug scene of the 80s, where parents step back from their children and refuse to have anything more to do with them – "tough love," you know. Very annoying in its glitzy coolness. Generates a little pathos as we watch Downey slide downhill, and his friends, who love him dearly, can do nothing about it. His death in the Corvette in the Mojave Desert is sad, but effect is rather undercut by useless helicopter track over the Joshua trees to the car to find his head slumped on the shoulder of McCarthy. ""Less Than Zero" is noodle-headed and faint-hearted, a shallow swipe at a serious problem, with a happily-ever-after ending yet.... dumber and duller than primordial ooze " (*Washington Post*) – well, perhaps not that bad. (2006)

**Let the Right One In** 2008 Tomas Alfredson (Sweden) 3.5 Kare Hedebrant (Oskar) as intently blond, somewhat snaggle-toothed loner boy living with his mother in a Swedish suburb – he is an outcast, more or less abandoned by his mother and bullied mercilessly at school; Lina Leandersson (Eli) as equally lonely 12-year-old girl next door, who happens to be a vampire; Per Ragnar as old fart, who appears to be Lina’s father and who collects blood to feed her. Very original take on the vampire franchise. Set in a quiet, abandoned feeling Sweden of the 1980s; it is winter, very cold, snow crunching everywhere, people bundled up, everything moves slowly, if at all. The two lonely children obviously need one another, since Kare’s parents barely pay attention to him, and Lina loses her father in a horrifying scene in which he eats away the right part of his face with acid. Vampire lore is interesting and horrifying: Lina has to ask permission to enter anyone’s house, and when once she doesn’t, she begins to bleed copiously from every visible orifice – the horrified Kare quickly blurts out that she is welcome; Lina’s father (?) prepares an icky blood-collecting kit (including a funnel) when he gets ready to collect blood for Lina; when one woman is hospitalized after being non-fatally bitten by the ruthless Lina, she catches on fire and is consumed when the doctor opens the window (light is not good for them!); Lina is ravenous, growling low like a mad dog when she feeds on someone, batting upon them tenaciously and ruthlessly until she emerges with black blood and gore smeared on her mouth; she is able to climb trees and walls like Dracula in the original novel; when Kare is close to being drowned in a swimming pool, the underwater camera catches glimpses of Lina’s rescue efforts – a head falls into the water, feet skitter across the pool just underwater, a bloody, severed arm falls between the camera and Kare’s now released head. The horror is balanced by some light moments, e.g., a very proper French poodle interrupts the dad’s collecting blood from a body that he has chloroformed and strung up head down on a tree limb. More important is the sympathy and pity that the director generates for the two lost children; Lina has the willpower to resist her impulse to feed off her friend; she slips her hand into hers; he asks her to be a girlfriend, and she accepts; she rescues him from the bullies in the swimming pool. The final shot has Kare riding alone in a train compartment with Lina’s large box sitting on the floor next to him: one wonders whether one should be happy that they are now united as a couple (and lovers eventually?) or whether one should be horrified by the probability that he will replace the father in gathering blood for his beloved. A masterpiece of atmosphere; an imaginative amalgamation of horror and a love story. (2009)

**The Letter** 1940 William Wyler (Warners) 3.5 Bette Davis in another show-stopping performance, Herbert Marshall subdued and low key as the clueless, emotionally dependent husband with less than average intelligence and powers of observation, James Stephenson as rather suave defense lawyer who endangers his career to defend Davis, Gale Sondergaard (from ‘Black Cat’) as the Eurasian wife of the murdered man – mysterious and inscrutable, Victor Sen Yung (Charlie Chan’s Number Two son) as Stephenson’s legal assistant who acts as go-between to get hold of the letter that we think in the beginning of the film will incriminate Davis. Excellent, gripping melodrama centered on riveting performance of Bette Davis who keeps our attention in her every scene, and makes us wonder until the end whether she is a cold-blooded killer capable of any manipulation or lie, or whether she has erred only from an excess of passion (there is never a doubt that she killed her lover). Although she is not beautiful, she looks great – notice her smooth ankle-length white gown with the metallic buttons all the way down the front, the perfectly tapered pearls she wears in evening clothes, etc.; she is pretty. Script is excellent – we are always in suspense and wondering what will happen next; nothing is predictable. Film continues after Davis is found not guilty of the murder: Will Marshall find out that Davis and the lawyer have used the money to buy back the incriminating letter from Sondergaard? Is Davis really remorseful? Will Marshall forgive her for the infidelity? Will she succeed in her thought of committing suicide with the knife she had picked up in Chinatown? Excellent ending – the knife that was lying outside Davis’ door has been removed by Sondergaard, and when Davis emerges into the garden, she and her man (Davis’ “head boy”) grab Davis, and Sondergaard stabs her to death with a knife; so, it turns out that Sondergaard had sold her the letter so that the state would not get the opportunity to punish her – that she will do herself. The vengeful wife will not even allow Davis to commit suicide; she must be executed. Film is exceedingly well directed – seamless, flowing and elegant. Wyler uses his trademark deep focus photography and moving camera to tell the story beautifully. The first scene is memorable: the camera

pans over the sleeping Malay workers on the rubber plantation, then focuses on a bird, who flies away abruptly when several shots are fired, and then Davis and her victim emerge from the house whereupon she fires two or three more rounds into him – all of this in one shot (reminds one of Orson Welles). Another outstanding scene is the one in which Davis opens the door to her room, finds the knife gone, and then stalks through the garden in search of... with the camera gliding after her. Motifs and symbols abound – the lace (crochet) that Davis works on as a symbol of her domesticity (she is good-hearted despite all; it is left behind in the last shot after Davis' murder); the moon that finally disappears behind the cloud just when she is murdered. The white folk in the film enjoys the privileges of a caste society: all the British colony is whole-heartedly behind Davis, even though it is obvious that she committed the murder; Davis' jealousy of her lover's wife was exacerbated by her being Chinese with her white face and her spangly earrings; Chinese characters tend to be rather shiftless, secretive, inscrutable, dirty, at least one of them smoking opium in a smoke-filled den. Film is sometimes talky, especially in the middle portion; and it probably would have benefited from five minutes of cuts. Collaboration between Wyler and Davis primed for the next year's 'Little Foxes'. (2010)

**Letter from an Unknown Woman** 1948 Max Ophuls (Universal) 4.0 Joan Fontaine in one of her best roles as young woman hopelessly and obsessively in love with a concert musician; Louis Jourdan as the gifted, feckless, although quite romantic musician who treats her essentially as just another conquest. The classic Ophuls film. The narrative is told in flashback, as Fontaine, about to die, like her nine-year-old son, from typhus, reveals the details of her life and romance with Jourdan in a letter to Jourdan. "Unknown" is ironic, since Fontaine has had a one-night affair with Jourdan and conceived her child, but when she returns to him years later, he does not recognize her but courts her for another seduction -- she leaves before it happens again when she realizes that he does not remember her. As he reads the letter, Jourdan appears to have his memory jogged; he feels remorse, and, although he has previously told his servant that he has no intention of fighting his challenger in a duel, he then steps out to face a probably fatal duel with Fontaine's husband. The film is quintessential soap opera -- girl hopelessly in love from a young age; rejects a good marriage because of her (one-sided) fidelity to the object of her affection; has a brief affair, conceives a child after he abandons her, but refuses to reveal his name; raises her son and marries a good, wealthy man for the sake of her son; and then – the gods do not smile in this film -- mother and son die from typhus. Film is suffused with the *Weltschmerz* of early 20th-century Viennese writing (Schnitzler and Zweig, and of course the piercingly bittersweet waltzes of Johann Strauss) -- everybody is seeking erotic happiness, but most things don't work out; if you are doing well, don't expect it to last long; the happiness of being with your lover is mitigated by the certainty it will not last. The course of your happiness is determined by fate (a specific statement in the film), and fate is not usually kind. Art direction evokes wonderfully the atmosphere and environment of Vienna -- the spiral staircases, the glass doors of 1900, the carriages in the streets, the snow on the ground, the typical vendors in the streets, the smart officers with their distinctive caps and mantles thrown stylishly over their shoulder, the *gemütlich* characters in the streets, the military bands playing the 'Radetzky March' as they march through the streets. Ophuls' famous camera -- panning gracefully, moving even more gracefully to follow characters, turning as the lovers climb the curved staircase to Jourdan's apartment -- evokes the instability and evanescence of Fontaine's happiness; life is in continual movement; one seizes happiness on the wing, but you never know how it will turn out or how long it will last. Film could be smarmy, but the restraint and taste of Ophuls makes it a moving and haunting commentary on the human condition. (2008)

**A Letter to Three Wives** 1949 Joseph L. Mankiewicz (Fox) 3.5 Jeanne Crain, Anne Southern, Linda Darnell, Kirk Douglas, Paul Douglas, Thelma Ritter. Mankiewicz women's film (concern mostly with their domestic dramas) with much dialogue but seemingly more attention to direction than in 'All About Eve.' His dialogue is often witty and interesting, but it seems a bit forced and self-conscious. Set in upper middle class suburb outside of New York with big houses and dinner at the country club. Addie (the invisible semi narrator, who never appears in film but about whom we learn a lot from all the other character's conversations) sends letter to three women off to help poor kids that she is running off with one of their husbands; the mystery and suspense is which one? The women can't find



out until they get back from their trip (film would not work in the age of cell phones). From introduction we already have reason to suspect two of them. Then three flashbacks that give us more reason to suspect especially Kirk Douglas and Paul. The men are all still attracted to Addie, whom they all had known in high school, as “classy,” and the women fear her as a woman with power over men; at one point Paul Douglas stares longingly at her portrait on his table, but we are not allowed to look! Southern flashback has some intense satire of radio drama and American advertising that is not particularly funny – seems dated; and Kirk comes off as a snob in his confident superiority over American popular culture (Brahms’ piano concerto keeps coming on to the soundtrack). Best one was the Darnell flashback. She was from the wrong side of the tracks, and there is witty, natural dialogue between her mother and Thelma Ritter, who is constantly sassing the rich people in the film. A clerk in a department store, she pursues her boss, and since he is firmly hooked, he finally – wearily – agrees to marry her. Funny running gag about their house in the wrong part of town shaking every time the train comes by; it shakes especially hard when Linda finally kisses her future husband (poor substitute for sex?). Ending has some surprises. Southern is now more firmly in love with her high school teacher husband; Crain thinks her husband is the one since he sends her a note saying he would not be home for the night; turns out that the man was Paul Douglas, who had run off with Addie, but then changed his mind and came back to Linda Darnell. The latter two are reconciled, and it seems that despite the mercenary beginning of their relationship, they have truly fallen in love over the past three years of marriage. All go off to dance, and the ghost (?) of Addie gaily tips over a crystal champagne glass that breaks; mission accomplished (!) It seems that Addie was well-intentioned, and just wanted everyone to love better? (2005)

**Letters From Iwo Jima** 2006 Clint Eastwood 4.0 Ken Watanabe as charismatic and controversial Japanese general Kuribayashi commanding the defense of Iwo Jima; Ryo Kase as soldier suspected by the others of being a political spy, but who has just as many doubts about ‘fight to the death’ as many of the others; Kazunai Ninomiya as Saigo, a rural baker who is drafted and who never believes in the heroic death for the Emperor; Tsuyoshi Ihara as the aristocratic Baron Nishi, who won the 1932 Olympics equestrian competition and who along with Kuribayashi serves also as a link to the USA. Wonderfully understated, yet sensitive treatment of the experience of Japanese soldiers who gradually learn in their defense of Iwo Jima that they have been abandoned by their High Command and that their only choice is to fight to the death with honor. Eastwood is astounding in his ability to make a Japanese language film so successfully; it is also researched and written so carefully that its treatment of the Japanese characters rings true even in Japan. The film is shot in unsaturated color that often looks like black and white – an impression abetted by most of the film taking place in caves. Japanese characters, who are individualized to get the viewer involved, are nuanced and human. Saigo is a simple person who is attached to his wife and child and who doesn’t buy into the sacrifice ethic of the Japanese army; Shimizu is similar in his inability to be brutal (in a flashback he refuses to shoot a dog that is barking too much in a civilian neighborhood); Nishi had spent time in Los Angeles, had met Mary Pickford and Douglas Fairbanks, and he treats a wounded American soldier (the Japanese soldiers usually finished them off) and mourns him when he dies; Watanabe is fanatically devoted to the cause of the Fatherland and the performance of his duty, but he is a sensitive family man (his letters home are illustrated) and he has emotional attachments to things American (he wears an American revolver that he commits suicide with at the end) and he rues the decision of the government to go to war with this industrial behemoth. Violence and death throughout film is grueling and unrelenting: Japanese soldiers die in their caves from flame throwers, and are mowed down mercilessly by American firepower when they go into the light of day. An American soldier shoots two Japanese prisoners in cold blood, when they get bored guarding them; Japanese soldiers do the same thing to captured Americans on a couple of occasions. The film challenges the cult of suicide from the beginning: the soldiers discuss it constantly, a bunch of them perform it by exploding hand grenades in front of their bodies (gore everywhere), and three of the soldiers, including Saigo, surrender (only 126 of the 20,000+ Japanese soldiers on the island actually surrendered). Saigo, who fervently desires to live and return to his family, actually survives the battle when American captors hold their fire, and the last scene has him lying on a stretcher next to wounded American soldiers – perhaps a concession to the Hollywood need for a happy element in the ending. Soldiers seem similar to American soldiers, although they probably gripe and bitch less; senior officers

sometimes display a certain humanity and breadth of vision; junior officers seem brain-washed and fanatic even to the point of beheading two soldiers they think are shirking in battle. A remarkable achievement depicting the horrifying cost of war on the Japanese side. (2007)

**Leviathan** 2014 Andrei Zvyagintsev 4.0 (Russia) Aleksey Serebryakov as Kolya, choleric, alcoholic mechanic living in beautifully situated home that the mayor is trying to seize by eminent domain; Elena Lyadova as his pretty, sensible wife, Lilya, who works in a depressing fish processing factory; Vladimir Vdovichenkov as Dmitri, good-looking, hot-shot lawyer arrived from Moscow to help Kolya defend his property; Roman Madyanov as porcine, corrupt, power-hungry mayor that wants to get his hands on Kolya's property; a host of secondary characters – all of them true and interesting. Outstandingly beautiful, dramatic, and pessimistic film that is based on the story of Job and takes square aim at the thuggish, corrupt regime current in Russia (film has passing references to Pussy Riot and Putin, whose portrait hangs in the mayor's office). The title appears to be a reference to the tyrannical state that Thomas Hobbes constructs in his work on political theory. In retrospect Kolya's resistance to the eminent domain proceeding against him seems hopeless. When Dmitri tries to give the mayor a taste of his own medicine by threatening him with exposure for his corrupt deeds, the latter unleashes his black leather-coated thugs on him, beating him up, performing a mock execution, and forcing the lawyer to return to Moscow with his tail between his legs. Kolya's protests are cut short by the courts (clearly under the mayor's thumb), who deliver the implacably negative verdicts in a rushed monotone. The film goes out of its way to critique the Orthodox Church as a tool of the regime: in contrast to a simple priest, who gives Kolya a lesson on patience, church officials, including a gold bedecked bishop, intone hypocritical support for the Russian system that is protecting Russia against all her enemies (he doesn't say who they are). The ending is fiendishly cynical and tragic. Lilya has an affair with Dmitri, thereby alienating her relationship with her husband (who shows surprising restraint). One day she disappears mysteriously, and when her body is found, Kolya is arrested and charged with the murder. He is of course found guilty, the sentence is read in the accustomed deadpan monotony, and he is condemned to 15 years in prison. Our assumption of course is that he is framed by the authorities. The film ends with the mayor expressing his satisfaction that such upstarts have been taught their lesson and a big Swedish-built machine tearing Kolya's old house down story-by-story. Kolya is of course the main victim, but the hapless Lilya in her suffering silence is just as tragic. The film is set in a strikingly beautiful, yet forbidding landscape – a fishing village on the Barents Sea, extensive views of the sea inlets, rocky mountains and outcroppings, dusty roads, Stalinist buildings, and ample symbols of decay – abandoned buildings, moldering boats, a huge whale skeleton on the rocky seashore. The characters, all of whom are caught in the web of corruption and oppression, are real and believable, even in their constant vodka-sodden state; drinking cheap vodka seems to be part of the Russian way of life. This depressing film has a tragic grandeur rarely seen. It is surprising that the Russian film authorities submitted this unrelenting critique of Russian society to Cannes as its entry. (2015)

**Libeled Lady** 1936 Jack Conway (MGM) 3.5 Jean Harlow as brassy, sexy, plain folks, petulant, though vulnerable blond dying to marry Tracy (she says “cahn't”); Spencer Tracy nervous, workaholic, domineering, fast-talking newspaper editor; Myrna Loy elegant, sophisticated, and a bit stand-offish and ironic as heiress suing Tracy's newspaper for libel; William Powell debonair, witty, lightly sardonic and wise-cracking as guy who is supposed to convince Loy to drop her suit; Walter Connolly as rather gullible father of Loy – he loves fishing (“angling”). Well-written and well-directed MGM screwball comedy with the ideal cast. The film deals essentially with whether Tracy, who is supposed to be marrying Harlow, can persuade Loy to give up her suit for libel against Tracy's newspaper. The plot complications are legion, resembling a French farce: Powell marries Harlow so they can produce a counter-suit against Loy when she “seduces” Powell, but then Powell and Harlow fall in love; and so do Powell and Loy, and they get married; is this bigamy, or is Harlow's marriage to Powell invalid because her previous divorce had been from Yucatan? Etc. Things are beginning to straighten out at the end – Loy has decided to drop her lawsuit, she and Powell are united, and Tracy and Harlow are moving toward a reconciliation – but not entirely; the film ends with Connolly shouting “Quiet” at the top of his lungs while the other four voices can be heard squabbling loudly in the background. The dialogue

is witty, the repartee sharp (e.g., Tracy about Harlow: “She may be your wife. But she is engaged to me!”); the four stars are sharp, witty, and entertaining throughout. The film’s *pièce de résistance* is the long fishing sequence in a Sierra stream that has Powell – posing as an angling enthusiast to impress Loy – stumbling repeatedly into the water trying to retrieve his fishing guide (he comes up once with the net draped over his face) and then catching a big walleye by pure happenstance that impresses both father and daughter. The screwball quotient perhaps peaks at the end when Powell and Tracy launch a fistfight that ends up bringing Harlow and Tracy together by evoking Harlow’s concern for the latter. Loy is elegantly sexy in her off-the-shoulder evening gown about this time. The film adheres to the classic screwball formula following the zany exploits of the rich and famous in luxury ocean liners and fancy mansions and night clubs with no harm done to anyone. The film has hardly a serious idea, but stands out for its witty script and its all-star cast. (2012)

**Liberal Arts** 2012 Josh Radnor 3.5 Josh Radnor (writer, director, actor) as laid back new York admissions counselor called to his old college (Kenyon College) in Ohio for the retirement celebration of his old mentor....; Richard Jenkins as Lit professor who, it turns out, is not so sure he wants to leave his ivory tower for the post-retirement real world; Elizabeth Olsen as pretty Kenyon sophomore a bit bored by her experience as a college student and looking for a connection with an older man; Allison Janney as hilarious, hard-nosed literature professor, who tells Radnor to get out of her house seconds after she finishes having sex with him. Engaging Independent, Sundance-style film about jaded, though gentle 35-year old New Yorker, who visits his idyllic alma mater in Ohio and reengages the dilemma between a literature-focused life of the mind and engagement in the real world. He strikes up an intimate friendship with the beaming, enthusiastic Olsen. They pursue the relationship by handwritten correspondence focusing on their mutual love of classical music, which Olsen had learned about in a music appreciation class she had taken at Kenyon. Invited by Olsen, Radnor returns eagerly to Ohio, where Olsen pursues him, informing him however that their sex together would be her first time. Radnor plays the responsibility card and backs out, much to Olsen’s humiliation and chagrin (something that would never have occurred in a Hollywood movie, where the age difference between the older male and the younger female is just another turn-on). The film ends in a rather conventional manner with Radnor finding an age-appropriate partner (the not terribly attractive Elizabeth Reaser) who also loves literature, and Radnor and Olsen in the latter’s dorm room have a calm reunion in which they promise eternal friendship. The charm of the film is not so much in the narrative, but in individual pleasures. It takes place on the idyllic Kenyon campus, which contrasts tellingly with the crowded, rushed urban landscape of New York City. The writing – sometimes a bit precious – shines in its grace and individual insights, e.g., in the couple’s discussion of the beauties and meanings of classical music. The film’s subject is , like Noah Baumbach’s ‘Frances Ha’, about the dilemmas of post-college young adults trying to find their way in the rough and tumble of the real world after the privileged four-year interlude of reading literature and history in a liberal arts college. Just what is the value of a liberal arts education? Radnor goes through a ‘Lehrjahre’ learning experience, in which he figures out how to build a real-world life on a love of literature and classical music. Especially pleasurable film for viewers who loved going to college! (2014)

**The Life and Death of Colonel Blimp** 1943 Michael Powell (Britain) 4.0 Roger Livesey as the inimitable Major General Candy; Anton Walbrook as his good German friend Theodor Kretschmar-Schuldorff; Deborah Kerr as three women who play important roles in Candy’s life. Fresh, original, endearing long Technicolor film about a British officer who is first presented as a fat, blustering old fool (a junior officer makes him furious by making fun of his mustache and his belly), but whom we get to know as a sensitive, sensible, dedicated, romantic officer. Film begins with a war game performed in the British Home Guard in 1943, in which Candy is deceived by an eager young officer who does not wait until the formal beginning of the games to arrest the opposing side (Candy himself!). Long flashbacks then take us back through his life – hero of the Boer War, British officer in Germany to contradict the anti-British propaganda common at that time, colonel in World War I when he gets the opportunity to visit Theo in a prisoner of war camp, and then finally World War II, when he is reappointed to be in charge of the Home Guard. We know from the beginning of the flashbacks that Candy is a good, if

sometimes foolish, person. He is a romantic: he falls in love with Kerr, playing an Englishwoman in Berlin, only to lose her to Theo; he seeks out and marries Kerr's sister (played again by Kerr) in England, although she dies in 1926; when at the beginning of World War II, he has to find a driver, he chooses a working-class woman who is again the spitting image of the original woman. He also maintains a life-long friendship with Theo, despite their fighting on opposite sides of the first war. The attitude of the film toward Germany and patriotism in World War II (1943) is somewhat ambiguous, explaining why Winston Churchill was strongly opposed to releasing it. The film does not demonize Germans: Theo is a good and honorable man, a good friend to Candy and a good husband to his wife. He arrives in England just before the beginning of the Second World War and in a beautifully delivered speech, he explains why he is leaving Germany to come to England, his true home; Germany has been ruined by the Nazis, even his own children have been seduced by them; in a second speech (almost as moving) he urges Candy to quite being so old school and to be willing to break a few of the old rules of fair play in warfare to defeat the criminals who have seized control of Germany. In a postscript, Candy decides not to persecute the rash young lieutenant, since he now understands that England needs that kind of initiative. The film is very different from the usual wartime propaganda; it strongly defends the thesis that Germany is decent and capable of future friendship. It leaves an unforgettable warm glow in its aftermath. (2012)

**Life is Sweet** 1991 Mike Leigh (Britain) 3.5 Jim Broadbent, Timothy Spall, Rather more cheerful Mike Leigh treatment of lower middle class English life. A few days in the life of Andrew, Wendy and their two daughters. Takes place in row house in Middlesex (whole movie is shot on location); most takes place in cramped interiors. Lower class English accents are very difficult to follow, except with the girls. A lot of problems - daughter Nicola is bulimic and does kinky sex (bondage and smearing self with chocolate) with her boyfriend when parents and twin sister are out of the house; father dislikes his job as sort of sous-chef and he dreams of owning his own snack wagon business; friend Tim Spall's dream is to open his own restaurant, but when he does with Wendy's help, not a single customer shows up. Wendy is the optimist; she is always cracking jokes (and her husband willingly joins in), and while Nicola is whining and complaining, she keeps at it dusting her little figurines. All seems to be going poorly (even Dad has broken his leg at work and is in pain), when Mom and Nicola have a heart-to-heart. Nicola is miserable, but Wendy explains to her that she cannot just "give up hope;" Timothy has not, Dad has not (every time she looks at his rusted snack wagon she cringingly recognizes that he still holds to his dream), and twin sis has a dream of going to America. With difficulty, Nicola begins to come around. After having semi-confessional talk with sister, film ends with an extended silence, suggesting the possibility of change. Poetic and exact in its modest and unassuming way. As usual, big emotional payoff when mother and daughter finally get around to speaking their minds. Good Leigh magic. (2006)

**Life Itself** 2014 Steve James 2.5 Disappointing documentary about the life and career of Roger Ebert that focuses extensively on his end-of-life experience, when he was severely handicapped by the aftermath of his 2006 operation for cancer; the film was shot by one of his protégés, and is based on Ebert's memoir of the same name written after his operation. Most of these scenes were shot in rehab (he had recently broken his thigh bone), when he was sitting weakly in a chair with no lower jaw and, since he could not speak, communicating through his computer (sometimes a voice synthesizer) and writing on a notepad. The viewer learns quite a bit about his personal life (he skirts around his difficult relationship with his parents); his wild days as editor of the student newspaper at the University of Illinois and as a young man carousing in Chicago dive bars – several amusing interviews with his former buddies; his apparently happy marriage to the supportive Chaz, his African-American family of stepchildren, and of course his travails with the horrifying effects of cancer on his body. One doesn't learn a whole lot about his career as a film critic: he loved the spotlight; with an eclectic approach to review-writing, he often championed off-beat films (e.g., Scorsese's 'Who's Knocking at my Door?') and debutante filmmakers that he took a yen to (moving tributes to his support from some of them). The film includes significant coverage of his television career as a film reviewer and his adversarial, sometimes vitriolic partnership with Gene Siskel (he dies of brain cancer at the age of 51), and his fondness for the Cannes film festival. One always gets the impression of a good-humored, gregarious guy, but with an outsized ego and looking to be the center of attention. His determination to continue writing reviews on his blog after his operation

demonstrates both his courage and his inability to exist without public attention. His service to film criticism seems to have been to popularize it, tailor it to the middle-brow public, rather than to expand ways to understand and appreciate films. For this he was sometimes criticized by other film critics; witness the famous 1990 Richard Corliss article “All Thumbs”, in which he criticizes the cheapening of film criticism by the Siskel and Ebert’ Show – he describes it as more of a sitcom than a critics’ show. The main problem with the film is the extensive coverage of Ebert’s struggle with poor health in his last years; we all know that we will wither and die, but that shouldn’t be the focus of our life story. (2015)

**Life of Brian** 1979 Terry Jones (Britain) 4.0 Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Eric Idle, Michael Palin, et al. Continuation of ‘Holy Grail’ madness in satire of Holy Land, Romans, Middle Eastern Revolutionaries, Christian story. Brian is born the same time as Jesus; apparently not the Messiah, but mistaken for one, and then tried and crucified by Romans, ending film with famous musical number “Always Look on the Bright Side of Life.” Sets, Roman military costumes, and locations (Tunisia) are very vivid and real, which makes for intense comedy when Python troop gets geared up. Objects of humor. Schoolboy stuff: Brian is corrected by centurion Cleese when scribbling ungrammatical anti-Roman graffiti, and Cleese makes him write slogan 100 times; the People’s Front of Judea denounces Romans among selves, but makes exceptions for roads, aqueducts, viticulture, law and order, etc.; classic gay-bashing scenes when Pilate and his boyfriend Biggus Dickus lisp and slur like gays, and soldiers laugh despite desperately trying to suppress it (like school kids in a church), and later the Jewish crowd in square double up in laughter when hearing the boys’ accents. Jews in Roman times – they are bizarre, excitable and unpredictable, much to befuddlement of their Roman rulers; they also participate enthusiastically in barbaric customs like stoning people (Cleese). Roman brutality is satirized (Pilate orders “throw him to the floor!”) and the bloody brutality of the gladiatorial contests in the Jerusalem Colosseum, whose floor is strewn with severed limbs, etc.; Roman are insulted when victims insist that crucifixion is not painful. The blind infighting of Mideastern revolutionary groups: they won’t speak to one another; when two happen upon each other in attack against Roman palace, they fight among selves rather than against Romans; they don’t know how to hide themselves when their house is being searched by Roman soldiers. Much on the tendency of Cleese’s People’s Front of Judea to talk, debate and pass resolutions rather than to take action; finale is when a delegation arrives in front of Brian’s cross and reads a statement expressing their appreciation of his sacrifice. Ultimate absurdity is the appearance of a suicide squad of about ten in front of Brian’s cross, and they commit hara-kiri. Also some slams on Christians: Brian and others preach in parables, etc., but are not firebrands, but extremely boring; “‘Blessed be the peacemakers’ is mistaken for ‘Blessed be the cheesemakers;’” crowd of Jews follows Brian devotedly and undertake all sorts of weird cults – holding up his sandals, his gourd, proclaiming the miracle of the juniper bush; most outrageous is when they become enthusiastic upon catching a glimpse of Brian’s penis. Ends perfectly with Idle and chorus’ rendition of “Always look on the bright side of life.” (2005)

**The Life of Emile Zola** 1937 William Dieterle (Warners) 3.5 Paul Muni as Emile Zola in beard and pince-nez fighting for truth and justice in the Dreyfus Affair, Joseph Schildkraut in smaller role as Captain Dreyfus (seen mostly on Devil’s Isle), Gale Sondergaard as the noble and long-suffering Lucie Dreyfus, Donald Crisp as the dynamic lawyer Labori. Effective Hollywood version of the Dreyfus Affair, that focuses on Emile Zola, presenting him as a noble man of conscience who sacrifices his much deserved retirement to crusade selflessly for the wrongly convicted Dreyfus and to struggle to restore truth, justice, reason and benevolence to the French character. Very balanced depiction, which, although not always historically accurate (e.g. it much simplifies the process of revision), gives an accurate impression of what it was all about – impassioned defense of the army, idealist politicians crusading for liberty and truth, political upheaval and near riots in the streets; names of most of the principals changed, although we keep Picquart, Henry, etc. Picquart presented as hero for truth inside the army, Esterhazy not nearly as seedy as he really was. All performances are good, although Muni’s AA role is a bit over-heated: he presents Zola as quirky, fussy, absent-minded, lovable, gesticulating, chin jutting out, a bit bug-eyed with lots of tricks in his rhetorical bag – seems that he rather overacts. Drama focuses on Zola’s trial, which is exciting, well-paced with compelling conflicts and speeches (from Crisp

and Muni), and guilty verdict of Zola carries story through to the next phase of revision. 1937 movie emphasizes the cause of truth and justice and the essential nobility of France – probably the usual Hollywood pro-Allied slant. Excellent late 1930s Hollywood product. (2007)

**Life of Pi** 2012 Ang Lee 2.5 Suraz Sharma attractive toothy kid as Piscine Molitor (Pi), the fellow searching for the true experience of God; Irrfan Khan, another Indian actor playing the adult Pi telling his story to a Canadian reporter, played in saccharin, attentive way by Rafe Spall. AA-winning film that astonishes by its CGI-executed sense of wonder, but fails as a spiritual meditation. The story, told in flashback by the adult Pi to a Canadian journalist, begins in the charming Indian city of Pondichery, where a wide-eyed Pi grows up fearlessly searching for a deeper understanding of life and the universe; the son of a rationalist Indian zookeeper, Pi is completely eclectic in his religious tastes, embracing a combination of Hinduism, Christianity and Islam (“Thank you, Vishnu, for introducing me to Jesus”). When the family decides to move to Canada, they die when their Japanese freighter sinks in a Pacific storm, with the exertion of Pi, who manages to get into a lifeboat in the company of several of the zoo animals. A hyena kills the zebra and the orangutan, but then the tiger – Richard Parker – dispatches the hyena, leaving himself alone with Pi on the boat. The two of them manage to survive the crossing of the entire Pacific Ocean (8746 miles from Manila to Acapulco despite having no means of propulsion!), where Richard Parker disappears into the jungle without looking back at Pi. Under pressure from Japanese insurance investigators, Pi delivers against a white backdrop an alternative story that emphasizes human evil and corruption as opposed to the fable-like atmosphere of the version shown on screen. The viewer is enjoined to decide which of the two stories is true. The essential middle part of the film is vivid, memorable, and exciting. Essentially a survival at sea epic reminiscent of Robinson Crusoe, it emphasizes the fantastic, picturesque, and phantasmagoric rather than practical details. As Pi looks on underwater, the stricken ship sinks in a play of spectral lights; jellyfish glow around the boat as a high definition dome of stars shines above; a huge whale emerges suddenly from the depths, breaches high into the night sky, and then swims off as recorded in a bird’s eye view; a dumbfounded Pi and Richard Parker are clueless as they are hit by a violent squall of flying fish that the tiger finally decides to feed on. The core of the story is the reluctant coexistence between Pi and the tiger, which in his picturesque realism is a triumph of CGI artistry integrated into a story. Pi has no illusions about friendship with the tiger – when the latter is hungry, he will certainly attack his available prey. The two do however manage to survive together, in part because Pi takes some pains to feed Richard Parker and to train him with a whistle and food rewards (!). Until the end the two are wary of one another. The weak point of the film is the avowed purpose to show the existence and the ways (benevolence, one assumes) of God. If a providential God is watching over us, he is very negligent and inefficient: in both narrative versions, Pi’s whole family dies through “an act of God”; in the central narrative, the animals eliminate one another (nature red in tooth and claw), in the alternative, the evil of humans leads to unspeakable crimes. Are we to praise God for allowing Pi to survive and the two antagonistic species to coexist for all those miles? The presence of the Lord remains murky to this viewer. The film would be much better without the theological overlay. (2013)

**Lifeboat** 1944 Alfred Hitchcock 3.0 Tallulah Bankhead as spoiled society lady trapped on a life raft with a group of survivors after their boat was sunk by a German submarine in World War II; William Bendix lovable but sometimes dull as seaman who has his leg amputated; Walter Slezak restraining himself as German U-boat captain who also ends up in the life raft; John Hodiak as tattooed tough guy who hits it off with Bankhead; Henry Hull as wealthy industrialist; Hume Cronyn (Hitchcock pal) as British radio operator; Canada Lee as black steward, who is kept to the side during most of the film. Unusual Hitchcock film that takes place on one small set – a lifeboat – with a limited number of actors talking at great length against a process backdrop of the ocean. The film has virtually none of the thriller characteristic typical of Hitchcock. Typical of Hitchcock’s yen in the 1940s to make film experiments. Editing and cinematography are expressive and aggressive: a lot of cutting and also camera movement among the different players and tracking in as they exchange remarks. The process shots are excellent – they always seem realistic, and dramatic moments of an intense storm and the shelling and destruction of the German supply ship at the end are convincing and welcome after the talkfest. The

screenplay is well written, focusing on the delineation of character, the contrasting of the social backgrounds of the characters, and the depiction of attitudes and conditions during World War II. In usually natural conversation (the exception being Bankhead's wild cackling when she realizes that she has lost all her prized possessions [raincoat, bracelet, typewriter, etc.]), Americans and British of all persuasions must come together to ride out the emergency. The attitude of the film toward the Germans is somewhat ambiguous: on the one hand, Slezak and the German seaman who climbs into the lifeboat at the end show their viciousness and ruthlessness (Slezak pushes a defenseless Bendix over the side and the sailor draws a pistol); but on the other hand Slezak uses his physician's skills to amputate Bendix's leg to save his life and – for some reason – he rows the boat steadily in the middle of the ocean. The good guys can also be ruthless: when they become incensed with Slezak because he has hidden a compass and some drinking water from them, they gang up on him like a bunch of vigilantes and expel him from the boat to drown. The film is moderately patriotic, although it also focuses on the damage done to the home crowd – dismemberment, suicide, vigilante justice, etc. Bankhead is entertaining to watch, especially if the viewer is familiar with her life style and the fact that 'Lifeboat' was virtually her only good movie. (2010)

**The Limey** 1999 Steven Soderbergh 3.0 A relentless British ex-con comes to Los Angeles to avenge the death of his daughter. Terence Stamp in compelling performance as good-looking, steely-eyed, unrelenting career criminal, who has absolutely no moral compunction about murdering the people responsible for his daughter's death and anyone else that gets in his way; Peter Fonda weak-kneed and cowardly as the music producing tycoon (living in the Hollywood Hills?), who is gradually hunted down by Stamp; Luis Guzman as good humored former friend of daughter, who assists Stamp in his quest; Lesley Ann Warren as another well-intentioned former friend of the daughter; Barry Newman effective as the security man for Fonda – he looks a bit like an executive, but he doesn't hesitate to wreak devastation. Stamp pursues Valentine from the moment he arrives; interrogating Guzman and Warren, recklessly murdering a posse of drug dealers (he is never pursued by the police for the crimes), throwing a Fonda henchman to his death off the balcony of Fonda's midcentury modern house, and eventually following Fonda up the coast to Big Sur, where he is finally able to dispatch him and perhaps a half dozen of his henchmen (he gets away also with these murders); Stamp then returns to Britain on a plane, where he has an innocuous conversation with a clueless woman sitting next to him. The film is essentially one-note – the relentless guy pushing inexorably through every obstacle until he gets his man. The story is often told with non-traditional editing, especially non-chronological presentations of Stamp in close-up at various points in his life: flashbacks or flash forwards to him sitting on a plane, flashbacks to black-and-white images of his daughter as a little girl, flashbacks to outtakes from 1960s films Stamp made with Ken Roach – all to deepen our understanding of Stamp's psychology. Nice visual picture of Los Angeles: strip malls, the hills, the PCH and the coast all the way to Big Sur. Some good riffs on LA culture, e.g., Stamp's introduction to valet parking: when observing several formally dressed guys lined up at Fonda's house, he wonders why he needs so many manservants; Guzman explains that they are parking valets. Film's weakness is perhaps the screenplay's failure to clarify the relationships among the characters – e.g., the daughter's relationship with Guzman and Warren remains undeveloped. (2016)

**Lincoln** 2012 Steven Spielberg (wr. Tony Kushner) 4.0 Daniel Day-Lewis's portrayal of Abraham Lincoln is so sincere and incisive that it will forever dominate our portrait of the 16th president; Sally Field in a powerful, highly emotional performance of his wife Mary Todd; David Strathairn good-looking, restrained, and eloquent when needed as Lincoln's right-hand man, Secretary of State Seward; Tommy Lee Jones extremely colorful and entertaining as Thaddeus Stevens, the sharp-tongued head of the Radical faction of the Congressional Republicans; Hal Holbrook old and grizzled as Preston Blair, the head of the Conservative faction of the Republicans; Jackie Earle Haley as Alexander Stephens, soft-spoken vice-president of the Confederacy and head of the Southern delegation; Jared Harris as a Ulysses Grant that doesn't look like the real guy; Lee Pace as Fernando Wood, fire-eating opponent of Stevens with sympathetic feelings for the Confederacy; James Spader as colorful political operative hired by Lincoln to "influence" the vote of lame duck Democrats in the House. Memorable portrait of Abraham Lincoln and of the political atmosphere in Washington, D.C. during the last three months of the Civil War. The film's narrative focuses on Lincoln's iron determination to get the proposed 13th Amendment through the House of Representatives; when he realizes that he does not have the requisite 2/3s majority,

he has Seward hire shady political operatives to recruit the votes of about 20 lame-duck Democrats by offering them federal jobs when their terms are over. The film climaxes in an exciting scene in the House in which the outcome of the vote depends on the vacillations of a handful of members (Lincoln actually spoke personally to some of them). The tone of the film is admiration for Lincoln knowing how to play the hard-ball political game in the service of a noble cause – the permanent abolition of slavery that he is afraid might return after the war when the Southern states are readmitted to the union (he fears that the Emancipation Proclamation may not have been legal or permanent). The film also affords a vivid portrait of Lincoln’s wife Mary Todd – very strong personality enabling her to issue a stinging denunciation of Thaddeus Stevens at a White House Reception, but mainly suffering a strong sense of grief and loss stemming from the death of her son a couple of years before. Lincoln’s associates are also portrayed vividly: the relatively avuncular and loyal (clean-shaven) Seward, the irascible, all-business Stanton, the mischievous shenanigans of Spader and his confederates. The dialogue is always arresting: Lincoln’s soft-spoken but pointed manner of persuasion, his habit of breaking off into a story (often of marginal relevance, although the one about the portrait of Washington in the British outhouse is hilarious) at the least opportunity, the vicious ad hominem attacks of Stevens and King in the House Debates – Stevens doesn’t hesitate to call his colleagues nincompoops, idiots, etc. Through the presentation of marginal African-American characters (butlers, observers in the House gallery), Spielberg positions the film firmly as a revision of the sympathetic portrait of the South and slavery presented in ‘Birth of a Nation’ and ‘Gone with the Wind’. The film has too many climaxes: Spielberg should have been happy with the one of Lincoln walking down the hall to the door of the White House on his way to Ford’s Theater. Dramatic, gripping, and colorful film. (2012)

**The Lincoln Lawyer** 2011 Brad Furman 3.0 Matthew McConaughey charming, glad-handing, and conscience-stricken as criminal defense lawyer in Los Angeles; Marisa Tomei as more or less decorative ex-wife sharing custody of their daughter; Ryan Philippe as rich kid from Bel Air accused of brutal beating of pretty (of course) prostitute; William H. Macy as McConaughey’s colorful investigator; Josh Lucas as smart, hard-hitting D.A.; Frances Fisher as Philippe’s formidable wealthy mother who is used to getting her way. Entertaining courtroom-detective mystery centered around McConaughey’s razzle-dazzle courtroom performance and his tender conscience about never allowing an innocent man to end up behind bars (he has few conscience qualms about putting dangerous men back on the streets). The film presents vivid pictures of McConaughey’s lifestyle driving around in his chauffeured limousine among the riffraff of LA, which include a motorcycle gang that executes a much needed beating of his client toward the end of the film. The plot is very convoluted: McConaughey is hired by Philippe’s family to defend him from an attempted rape and assault charge; our hero dives in with enthusiasm, but with the help of Macy he discovers that his client is guilty as accused and that he had committed the murder of another prostitute for which another client is serving time in San Quentin; the rub is that McConaughey is supposedly bound by his legal duty to continue to defend his client against the assault charge, which is distasteful for him especially since someone murders Macy; he succeeds in getting Philippe off and then maneuvering to have him arrested for the previous murder; he also finds out that it was Philippe’s mother who killed Macy, and he guns her down (Wild West!) after she shoots and wounds him; and McConaughey’s tender conscience is satisfied in the end. The film is quite entertaining: McConaughey is engaging, there are plenty of colorful characters (Tomei is quite attractive, although she doesn’t have much to do with the story); the courtroom scenes are fun if superficial and legally inaccurate (all sorts of Perry-Mason-style speeches and reversals that no judge would countenance), and the plot is twisty and intriguing, if often incredible and mechanical, e.g., the police arrest Philippe at the end on what appears to be flimsy evidence. One has to wonder about a film in which the lawyer pulls off little cons to make a buck and impress his clients and who hires his thuggish friends to beat up his client with baseball bats (“hospital not morgue”). Well executed entertainment vehicle. (2011)

**The Lineup** 1958 Don Siegel 3.5 Raymond Bailey as the lead inspector; Emile Meyer as no-nonsense inspector assistant to Bailey; Eli Wallach as Dancer, the professional criminal called to San Francisco to make a drug delivery; Robert Keith, his partner who tries to keep the volatile Wallach from



doing too much damage; Richard Jaeckel in smaller role as the Wheelman driving for Wallach and Keith. Good Don Siegel vehicle based on a TV show (the San Francisco version of Jack Webb's LA 'Dragnet'). Starts with a bang with a man grabbing a suitcase at the SF docks, the cab driver running over a policeman, and then crashing his car when he is shot by the dying policeman. The first part of the film is a police procedural as Bailey and Meyer figure out what is going on (drugs being smuggled into the country via unsuspecting tourists). The film then switches to the attempt of Keith, Wallach and Jaeckel to pick up other smuggled drugs in the City; Wallach encounters the mysterious 'The Man', and then they are tracked down on the unfinished Embarcadero Freeway (since torn down) after a very exciting, well filmed chase. Memorable is the clean, no-frills, functional direction of Siegel, who propels the film forward with great energy. Wallach is memorable as the psychotic Dancer, who has a sort of father-son relationship with Keith; he kills his pick-up contacts without compunction (one in a steam room scene with steam swirling thickly), and finally turns on Keith and shoots him in the back when they are cornered by the police. The views of 1958 San Francisco (the same year as Hitchcock shot 'Vertigo') are spectacular and picturesque, especially in the chase that runs from the Sutro Baths (since burned down), past the Golden Gate Bridge and the Palace of the Legion of Honor to the dramatic ending on the Embarcadero Freeway. Two deaths stick in the memory: the wheelchair-ridden The Man being pushed through a railing off a balcony to the ice-skating rink at the Sutro Baths, and Wallach falling down several freeway levels to his death at the end. Although often referred to as *film noir*, the film is a straight late-50s crime thriller ('The Killing' and 'Dragnet') – no chiaroscuro, no *femme fatale*, no overriding sense of doom, etc. Very entertaining movie with hard-driving action, great locations and memorable characters. (2009)

**Little Caesar** 1930 Mervyn Leroy 3.0 Edward G. Robinson as Rico, Douglas Fairbanks Jr. as his friend Joe who prefers dancing! Glenda Farrell as his true love girlfriend who dances with him, Sydney Blackmer looking young and handsome as the big crime boss in the city. The first of the Warners crime movies that introduces Robinson to the world. The film is early sound, amateurish and dated: the camerawork is unimaginative and clunky and the fade-outs at the end of scenes are usually anti-climactic, the dialogue is occasionally arresting, but usually stilted and hesitant, the acting is hard to watch with the exception of Robinson; Farrell and Fairbanks vie with one another for the awkward acting prize; the film even has a few title cards to tell us what is happening. Rico is ruthless, and except for his friend Joe, does not hesitate to kill his enemies, a good example being his man Tony whom he guns down on the steps of a church (Walsh seems to have copied this in his 'Roaring Twenties'); he is very ambitious and jumps at the opportunity to move up the gangster food chain (you gotta "be somebody!") – he even consider bumping off Big Boy toward the end; he is macho and will not take an insult and always talks tough; he considers dancing and hesitating to kill a friend to being "soft"; independent, he resents taking orders from anyone; he glares when he is threatened and sneers in his nasal voice; very materialistic, he likes cigars, snappy clothes and the latest in art deco interior decoration; everybody think he has "brains", but he is careless and his fall is just as fast as his rise to fame and power. Some excitement is generated by the duel between Rico and Sergeant Flaherty (Irish of course), who toughs just as tough as the crooks; in the end the cops gun down Rico through a publicity sign (advertising the dance team of Fairbanks and Farrell) with a tommy gun, making one wonder what the difference is between the cops and the bad guys. The business of the crooks is a bit vague – they rob stores and banks, but there is no mention of Prohibition! Print is in decent condition, although picture and sound are both a bit weak. The film interests mostly film historians and those who want to see the beginnings of Edward G. Robinson. (2006)

**Little Children** 2006 Todd Field 3.5 Kate Winslet as suburban mom with an MA in literature who is unhappy with her masturbating husband (Gregg Edelman); Patrick Wilson as stay-at-home dad who has failed his bar exam several times and who falls for Winslet; Jennifer Connelly as knock-out documentary filmmaker and cold and bossy wife of Wilson; Jackie Earle Haley as little weirdo Ronnie who has just been released from prison for a sex offense and is now living with his mother; Noah Emmerich as "retired" policeman whose seething anger has him leading the persecution of Haley. Kind of slice-of-life film set in a green, peaceful New York suburb, where well-off people experience the Angst of prosperity – Winslet and Wilson end up screwing in the laundry room and the attic while the kids are

taking their two-hour naps; Haley is very bizarre (he masturbates in a car while his first and only date looks on in despair) although with a deep-down sweet soul, and he cannot fit into the community; the mothers in the town are gossipy, pretty, and harsh, and all are horrified that a sex offender has been placed in their town and that he even comes to the immaculate public pool; Emmerich is angry, macho (he induces Wilson to join a take-no-prisoners touch football team composed of snarling cops), and ill-tempered. Film has a literary quality coming partly from the wise, pithy voice-over that comments the events like the omniscient narrator in a good short story; Winslet identifies with Mme. Bovary in a book club discussion. Film has no single narrative center, but oscillates between the saga of Wilson and Winslet, and the explosive combination of Emmerich and Haley. Intimations of salvation and epiphany at the end. An unseen hand seems to bring Wilson and Winslet to their senses after they decide to run away together: Wilson injures himself seriously when he (inexplicably) decides to skateboard jump with some local kids, and Winslet changes her mind when she encounters Ronnie in the park at night (audience is worried since he has a knife!); Winslet returns to her creep husband, one supposes, and Connelly shows up to support Wilson as he is wheeled into the emergency room. Meanwhile, Ronnie's mother dies, and in despair he goes to the park with a kitchen knife and...castrates himself so that he can "be a good boy" as his mother instructed him; Emmerich, who in his attack has caused the death of Ronnie's mother, discovers him and rushes him to the hospital in a fit of remorse and penance. Film reminiscent of soap operas, but ultimately it connects with truth in its exploration of the suburban middle classes. Expertly acted; every character is true and convincing. (2009)

**The Little Foxes** 1941 William Wyler 4.0 Bette Davis as selfish, manipulating matron Regina, cold as ice with dark teeth; Teresa Wright (first movie) as good-hearted ingénue – the conscience of the play; Herbert Marshall as Horace, wheelchair-ridden husband of Regina – sick and sick of her; Richard Carlson as apple-pie boyfriend of Teresa; Dan Duryea as contemptible, slow-witted, felonious nephew; Charles Dingle amusing as brother of Regina, equally greedy but redeemed by a sardonic wit; Patricia Comminge as pitiful, tragic sister-in-law. Near perfect movie adaptation of Lillian Hellman's play. Beautiful black and white photography by Gregg Toland – clear, crisp, expressive; deep focus often to stunning effect, e.g., close-up on Marshall's face and Davis in background next to window as they exchange barbs. Smashing Hollywood set, all textures perfect, rain outside coming down in sheets, giving impression of perfection that is strength of studio set movies. Action centers on the curved staircase in hallway of Giddens home – camera looking up at Davis as she tells off Alexandra, camera looking down, harsh words, and Marshall at end collapsing on staircase as he tries to get to his bedroom for heart medicine that Regina (Davis) won't fetch for him – the camera focuses in close-up on Davis' face as Marshall stumbles in the background. All performances are first-rate; no sign of film being a star vehicle for Davis, but Wyler coordinates and elicits performances into almost perfect ensemble (perhaps detestable, contemptible Duryea is exception). Davis outstanding as cold, heartless, haughty, calculating bitch with alternating blank and dagger eyes, and insulting tongue. Giddens (Marshall) is the respectable family that has some honor; the good sense and integrity rubs from father to daughter Alexandra; Birdie (Comminge) is wonderful as the decent, addled and tragic wife of Oscar, who has a memorable confession scene when she drinks too much blackberry wine. Hubbards are almost a caricature of greed. The conflict, plotting and vicious backbiting are almost unparalleled in Hollywood movies! They want to make a killing setting up cotton mill with help of Chicago investors and exploiting cheap Southern labor to the maximum. Then they turn on one another: Regina tries to get the upper hand over her brothers, Oscar and Ben (played with droll ruthlessness by Charles Dingle); then, when Horace (Marshall) won't provide money, the brothers turn on Regina and steal Horace's bonds; Horace turns tables on Regina, but then Regina refuses to get his heart medicine when he is dying; Regina gets last word by threatening to expose the brothers' theft and she ends up with 75% of the investment – family means nothing to her, only money: "You boys are sort of working for me from now on." She negotiates her deal ruthlessly just a few minutes after her husband's death. Film has social conscience as good characters object to the capitalists' (New South) exploitation of poor people, black and white (are the old planter families really morally superior to the new business people?). Several Black servant characters, who are good people, faithful and reliable but seemingly of limited intelligence, happy and feckless; it is a bit annoying that the soundtrack is in part Negro spirituals. Ends on upbeat note: Davis – now wealthy – will go to Chicago,

but Alexandra refuses to go with her, showing that she has become the daughter of her father; she goes off with Carlson, and it is apparent that Davis is frightened at the prospect of loneliness despite her prospective wealth; hint of some future revenge from Dingle. Last scene of her looking disconsolately through window as Alexandra leaves with Carlson. (2005, 2014)

**The Little Hours** 2017 Jeff Baena 2.0 Silly, mishit comedy about randy nuns based on a story in Boccaccio's 'Decameron'. Allison Brie and Aubrey Plaza as pretty young nuns acting and speaking like foul-mouthed American teenagers (reminds one of Sophia Coppola's 'Marie Antoinette'); Kate Micucci very annoying as insecure, flighty nun; Dave Franco with little to do as the hunky object of the girls' concupiscence; John C. Reilly in thankless role as the resident priest in the convent, who is having an affair with Mother Superior, Molly Shannon (she has little to do); Nick Offerman fairly amusing as the neighboring blowhard nobleman who can't stop denouncing the "Guelphs" (shades of contemporary conspiracy theorists); Lauren Weedman is the star of the show as Offerman's wife having sex with Franco and ridiculing her husband; Fred Armison fairly amusing as the local bishop come to put order back into the convent. Filmed in beautiful surrounding in the Italian Dolomites, the film cannot decide what it wants to be. The basic shtick is that the young nuns speak like foul-mouthed millennials, wear ill-fitting costumes, and make anachronistic references. Based on Boccaccio's story, the viewer expects a sex comedy, but there is nothing sexy about the film: the girls are covered in voluminous robes throughout with only glimpses of skin in a romp with naked witches in a Witches' Sabbath ceremony; their encounters with Franco lack any erotic spark. Toward the end the film gives feminist signs – the girls bemoan their boredom and sexlessness at the hands of their male superiors, and it turns out that one of them is a member of a witches' coven, whose shenanigans are free of sexual repression and male supervision. But that is abandoned when the girls show up at Offerman's castle in ninja costumes to free Franco from prison (he is threatened with extreme torture in the most vivid medieval fashion). They then trip joyfully back toward the convent, now presumably liberated; Shannon and Reilly reveal that they are lovers by kissing sweetly on an ancient bridge. Happily ever after. Some of the stupid jokes are amusing, but such baubles do not a good film make. (November 2017)

**Little Miss Marker** 1934 Alexander Hall (Paramount) 2.5 Moderately entertaining Shirley Temple vehicle based on a Damon Runyon story of more-or-less harmless underworld figures in the horse racing racket. Shirley Temple with all her tricks and gifts at age 5; Adolphe Menjou as small-time horse-racing crook who goes soft on Temple; Charles Bickford as tougher crook, who also goes soft at the end of the film; Dorothy Dell as Bickford girlfriend, who goes soft not only on Temple but also on Menjou, with whom she takes up with at the end of the film (Dell died in an auto accident just a week after the end of filming). The film's narrative is occupied with displaying the charm of Temple and demonstrating that even the toughest character can't resist her charms. After Temple's father commits suicide because of his losses at the track, Menjou takes her home and puts her to bed reading her (sort of) bedtime stories about King Arthur and company; gangster moll Dell adopts a maternal attitude and pushes the company to find a good home for Temple. Film ends steeped in sappiness: Dell and Menjou dress up all the gangsters as members of the Round Table to try to win Temple back to the world of childhood fantasy (shades of Disney); when Temple is then seriously injured in a fall, the tough-as-nails Bickford comes to the hospital to have his blood "transfused" directly to the veins of Temple, thus enabling her survival. Depiction of the world of essentially good-hearted small-time gangsters (à la Damon Runyon) is entertaining and amusing – talking gangster slang with their mouths barely open. The pièce de résistance is of course Temple: gamboling around in her very short dresses with her underwear showing, changing into her pajamas in front of the camera, standing up for herself in the company of adult men, whom she often seems to be seducing, talking back to the adults with impeccable diction, adopting gangster slang the longer she stays in their company, no dancing in this film, but one charming, bouncy song "You son of a gun" who should look out on the funny side (Dell sings two baritone-voiced songs). The little Temple is a flawless performer, completely natural in front of the camera. (January 2018)

**Little Miss Sunshine** 2006 Jonathan Dayton, Valerie Faris 2.5 Greg Kinnear as the dad whose hopes rest on marketing his nine-step, motivational, get-rich scheme; Toni Collette as fairly normal and

often exasperated mom who labors to hold the dysfunctional family together; Steve Carell thin and bearded as the suicidal brother (of Collette) who is the top Proust scholar in the USA; Alan Arkin as Grandpa -- he has been kicked out of his nursing home and carries around heroin in his ubiquitous fanny pack. Story about quirky family that takes a road trip from Albuquerque to LA in a barely functioning late-70s VW bus (yellow and white) so that the plumpish daughter can participate in a beauty contest! A lot of things happen on the road -- including Grandpa's death -- that cause members of the family to face into their life challenges. The film is somehow not as seductive as it should be. One tires of the gloomy antics of the depressed son (he refuses to talk for most of the film); one wonders why Olive (the little girl) is involved in beauty pageants to begin with -- she is not the type; the kidnapping of Grandpa's body from the hospital en route and piling it onto the back shelf of the bus to take it with them to Redondo Beach falls flat. The most amusing aspect (for a former owner of a '78 VW van) is the disastrous performance of the VW bus. The most annoying aspect of the film is its murky attitude toward the American devotion to success: it is mocked in the beginning, especially through Kinnear's absurd motivational program; and by the end of the film it seems that everyone has given up their dreams -- the son no longer wants to be a jet pilot, Kinnear has to give up on his motivational program (its marketing has been a failure), Olive has to accept that she cannot compete in beauty contests, and of course Grandpa is dead. The beauty contest is pretty horrifying: little girls dressed up like faux sexy monsters; the parents over the top; the family mocking it mercilessly by disrupting the final talent presentation. It seems that the family has a better idea than the American dream of success, but it is not clear what it is. The final scene has them driving down the freeway back to Albuquerque with the camera holding the shot until the bus disappears on the horizon -- but whereto? (2006)

**The Little Princess** 1917 4.0 Mary Pickford; scenario by Francis Marion. Totally adorable, sentimental classic tale about girl from India (British) sent off to boarding school in London and then orphaned. Good production although we tire of the 20 minute version of 'Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves' set in the middle to illustrate Sarah's story telling prowess. Already fairly sophisticated editing including close-ups to take advantage of MP's adorable face (e.g., when father and daughter take leave of one another), animation to show imagination (the dolls are playing) of MP, etc. Much ado about friendship between rich girl and poor servant (Zazu Pitts), who is also pretty adorable. Pickford outstanding in her relationship to camera. She is gay, sprightly, and the joyous center of attention; compassionate, understanding, generous; strong-willed, persevering and brave when things turn against her; excellent imagination and story-telling abilities; sensitive to the feelings of others. Some implicit critique of society -- headmistress treats her with respect so long as she thinks family is rich, but turns into evil stepmother image as soon as she learns that the family is broke. Obvious relation to Cinderella with Sarah slaving and mistreated in the house until she is finally rescued by the kindly man next door (who provides secret Christmas dinner!) and his Indian servant. Movie is moralistic with advice about kindness, character, fairness between classes, etc. Great star vehicle written by Frances Marion for her friend Mary Pickford. (2004)

**The Little Princess** 1939 Walter Lang 3.0 Shirley Temple, Arthur Treacher, Mary Nash, Ian Hunter. Pretty good rendition of Mary Pickford's movie, manipulated to suit Shirley Temple (her last successful childhood movie). Shot in early Technicolor! Several changes brought in: syrupy romance between supportive female teacher and her sweet, faithful, devoted boyfriend; Mrs. Minchin has vaudeville experienced brother, who supports Sarah and dances when appropriate; role of the servant girl friend is much reduced. Father is reported dead fighting against the Boers in South Africa (it's 1899; the film is pro-British patriotic, reflecting the contemporary international crisis), but 20c Fox provides happy ending by having him turn up wounded in a London military hospital; he is amnesiac, but snaps back when he finally sees his beloved Sarah. Nash very good as Mrs. Minchin, who is cruel beyond necessity and credibility, but audience loves despising her and rooting for adorable Shirley/Sarah. Lots of suspense at end -- Sarah escaping from police and Minchin as she runs through London streets; will father recognize her and respond? Well portrayed Queen Victoria appears endearingly at end and plays small role in helping Sarah to find her father. Effective sentimental touches all the way through. Temple is very gifted as performer -- song, energetic dance, big smile, always boisterously upbeat. Film is more an

entertaining show than the more searching comedy dramas of Mary Pickford. 1940s audiences who were familiar with Temple movies transferred many of their characteristics to Pickford films without having seen the latter. Pretty good show! (2006)

**Lives of a Bengal Lancer** 1935 Henry Hathaway (Paramount) 3.5 Gary Cooper not terribly underacting as rather arrogant and outspoken Canadian (so he doesn't have to speak British) lieutenant in the Bengal Lancers guarding 300 million Indians from the depredations of the Afghans, Franchot Tone as wise-guy new lieutenant who has adversarial relationship with Cooper until of course the going gets tough, Richard Cromwell as the son of the commanding Colonel, Sir Guy Standing charming and yet uptight and "ramrod" stiff as the commander of the Bengal Lancers regiment, C. Aubrey Smith as the more humane and understanding Major second in command, Douglas Dumbrille pretty heavily made up as the often sneering and over-confident adversary, Muhammad Khan. Stiff upper lip adventure film, handsomely produced with impeccable costumes, realistic location shots, blending of high quality studio shots with the location shots, vast interiors when visiting Oriental potentates, atmospheric scenes in tents when the men lounge around smoking and kidding around, etc. Ends as adventure movie since the three boys have to maneuver and sneak in disguise into the camp of the adversary to defeat a mortal threat to the regiment and to India; ending battle is well choreographed. Quite pro-British, as the British soldiers are presented as defenders of India and of the British Empire against its enemies. Col. Stone may be excessively stiff and spit and polish, but his is the devotion to duty that has made the British Empire what it is. Film follows the four major characters, their issues and relationships. Cooper is the mentor of the two younger men; he is killed in the final engagement. Tone is wise-acre new lieutenant, whose relationship with Cooper is at first prickly, but they warm to one another, and of course hang together in the final confrontation. Young Stone looks like a pre-adolescent, his face is so smooth; he has difficult oedipal issues with his father – he can't understand why his father can't be human and show some affection – and he momentarily betrays the regiment when tortured (burning bamboo shoots under the fingernails!), but Tone keeps the secret, and in the final scene, all three men are decorated (Cooper posthumously), and Dad is obviously proud of Junior. One rather sexy lady (Russian spy married to Muhammad Khan), but no sex to censor. An extremely classy, high quality production; you have to be able to take Cooper's dead-pan enunciation. (2008)

**The Lives of Others** 2006 Florian Henckel von Donnersmarck (Germany) 4.0 Ulrich Mühe convincing as East German Stasi captain that has a human heart after all; Sebastian Koch as (apparently) loyal writer watched by Mühe; Martina Gedeck as Koch's girlfriend, who is much less loyal to him than she leads us to believe. Beautiful, moving, dramatic film depicting the operations of the infamous Stasi in East Germany, and the progress of a mid-level Stasi officer toward humanity under the impact of observing love (well.) and experiencing art. Wonderful narrative: Mühe begins his surveillance of the writer, but it turns out that it was ordered by a minister to eliminate the writer so that he could have his girlfriend; in the course of the surveillance Mühe observes people loving, living, fighting, etc. and the lives of artists and writers (including the performance of a modernist piano piece composed for the film); he then falsifies reports to keep from incriminating his subjects; eventually his cover is blown by a complicated series of events and he saves the writer from incrimination by moving the typewriter from under the floorboard, and he is demoted to a menial job in the basement of Stasi headquarters; after the Berlin Wall comes down, Koch writes a story about his "guardian angel"; and film ends with Mühe opening the book in a bookstore and reading the dedication of the book to himself. The film depicts the various possible responses to the Stasi tyranny: the tactical acceptance of the writer while he maintains a certain independence in his heart; the actress who literally sells herself to the devil for success (has reluctant sex with the dog-like minister, and eventually turns her lover into the police); and the dramatic heart of the film, Stasi Captain Wiesler, who sacrifices his career out of his conversion to beauty and his conviction that people should be allowed to live their lives in peace and dignity. All performances are excellent, the most moving being Mühe, whose impassive face subtly reveals his inner journey. The Stasi, while repressive, seems to follow procedures, and compared to the KGB, e.g., intimidates people by letting them know they are watched and ruining their careers rather than sending them off to death camps.

Cinematography is interesting -- filmed in muted colors (without true reds and blues) giving the DDR a more attractive sheen than the dirty, peeling, tattered reality. Remarkable first film by the director. (2007)

**The Lobster** 2015 Yorgos Lanthimos (Britain) 2.5 Ambiguous and confusing dystopian novel focusing ostensibly on the fate of romantic love in modern society. Colin Farrell low key and taciturn as divorced man checking into a facility to find a new wife; Rachel Weisz as beautiful brunette he falls in love with after he leaves the hotel; Jessica Barden as attractive “hotel” patient with a new nosebleed; Olivia Colman as “hotel manager”, who patiently explains and enforces the rules. The first half of the film is moderately interesting as it sketches the rules and institutions of a near-future society where no one is allowed to live single: when you check into the hotel, you have 45 days to find a new mate; failing that you are then turned into the animal of your choice (Farrell chooses to be a lobster); if you succeed, you are returned to the city. Most inmates choose partners that share some salient trait, such as a nosebleed, near-sightedness, or extreme ill temper (one amusing sequence has Farrell kick a little girl to show his mate that he is as means as she is). A later trip to the city reveals a society not much different from the present, where policemen ask you politely for your couple papers and doctors are authorized to perform disfiguring operations. When Farrell’s obedient search fails, he escapes to the woods where he joins the society of loners, who have refused to become animals; although he finds there his true love (Weisz), he discovers that the loners’ rules are as bad or worse than the city’s – love is also forbidden, masturbation seems encouraged (Farrell matter-of-factly tells Weisz he just did it behind a tree), and you are required to dig your own grave and cover your head with earth and roots to prepare for death. The ending is either confused or pessimistic: while Weisz waits in a restaurant, he is poised in the restroom to put out his eyes with a steak knife (!); before he actually does it, the camera returns to Weisz, who continues to sit impassively while numerous trucks pass in front of the window next to her – is it true love or isolation for her? Especially in the first part the film makes you think and compare to present-day institutions; it also has a deadpan sense of humor; the second half of the film however is confusing, repetitious, and exceedingly pessimistic. The final impression is that there is no remedy for the suffering and loneliness of humanity in the city, and that revolting against it is doomed to failure. (2016)

**Locke** 2013 Steven Knight (Britain) 3.5 Tom Hardy as Ivan Locke, the only face we see in the film as a highly organized, conscientious, and sensitive construction foreman facing a triple crisis in his life; various beautifully acted voices on the telephone with him: Olivia Colman as his emotional girlfriend that is having a baby; Ruth Wilson as his affectionate wife, who becomes angry and unforgiving when she learns that her husband has been unfaithful (and his girlfriend is having a baby); Andrew Scott as Hardy’s assistant that is taking charge of the biggest concrete pour in the history of Europe (except for military nuclear projects!); Ben Daniels as Hardy’s boss Gareth, who becomes unhinged when he learns that Locke will not be present at the pour. A tense hour and a half out of the life of Ivan Locke as he drives down a British motorway to be present at the birth of his child by a woman with whom he had sex out of wedlock one time. The film is in real time – an hour and a half film time for an hour and a half narrative time. As his BMW sedan cruises down the road (the viewer is usually looking at him through his windshield with the lights and sounds of the freeway all around), he has non-stop, frantic phone calls with several parties: his panicky erstwhile mistress; his two sons, who are watching a soccer match and sharing it excitedly with their dad; his wife, who becomes embittered and irreconcilable when she learns what her husband is doing; his dumbfounded boss; and the unforgettable assistant Donal, who gets off to a bad start by drinking too much cider, but then rises to the occasion leaving the viewer with the impression that the concrete pour will go well. In the meantime, Locke has several imaginary – very angry – exchanges with his dead father, showing that his determination to be supportive of his baby’s mother comes from his resolution not to repeat his father’s fecklessness. Despite its visual simplicity, the film is fascinating, compelling, and suspenseful. It ends badly for Locke: although the pour will probably go well the next morning (a tribute to his conscientiousness), he has lost his job (as have probably Donal and Gareth), and his marriage is almost certainly over. He has remained faithful to his commitment to his child, but since he has no personal attachment to the mother, one is left uncertain about how he will fit the child into his future. Locke is undone by his virtues: his fidelity and

sense of decency lead to the loss of his family and his job, both of which are beloved to him; it would have been so much easier to ignore the needs of his mistress. The just do not always prosper. The viewer finishes the film with a strong empathy for the protagonist. (2014)

**The Lodger** 1927 Alfred Hitchcock (Britain) 3.0 Silent Hitchcock thriller based on the Jack the Ripper murders occurring in London in the 1880s. Ivor Novello has a feminine handsomeness as the lodger who is immediately suspected of the Avenger murders; Marie Ault as the landlady who insists on Novello's guilt – she is the narrative perspective of the film; June Tripp as her pretty daughter, Daisy, who is a fashion model and a potential victim of the killer; Malcolm Keen as the callow police detective who courts Daisy and is in charge of the Avenger investigation. The film is considerably less disturbing and frightening than the Brahm 1944 remake. Novello's appearance when he first appears at the door and inquires about a room is disturbing – obsessive staring, gaunt face, ringed eyes, mechanical reactions, much like Nosferatu a few years before. After taking the room, his actions are suspicious, and the viewer becomes worried about his romantic interest in Daisy, who returns his attention flirtatiously. But he soon reverts to his base personality – polite, well-groomed, open-faced, and affectionate toward Daisy, and it becomes difficult to imagine him committing serial murders on the “fair” young women of the Avenger – very different from the hulking moroseness of Laird Cregar. The film has a strong beginning shown through expressive close-ups (the face of a woman screaming (silently) with her teeth bared), rapid editing to newsrooms, men talking on the telephone (one of them Hitchcock as an extra), and teletype printing how the news is spread through the city by the media. Hitchcock uses several of his eye-catching camera tricks in the film to focus the viewer – the boyfriend/policeman playfully puts handcuffs on Daisy's wrists as Novello looks on obviously disturbed (the handcuff motif later taken up in Novello's torture on the fence); the sign of Novello's supposed agitation is the shaking of the ceiling lamp in the living room and Novello is shown pacing back and forth through a transparent floor above it; when Ault is creeping through the house wondering what Novello is doing, the camera uses angles and dark cinematography, and windows are drawn in rhomboid shapes (like ‘Caligari’). The ending is an anti-climactic switch: a handcuffed Novello is chased by a crowd through the streets, and he is manhandled by them as he hangs by his wrists from a fence he has accidentally become entangled with; then it is suddenly revealed that the real Avenger has been captured elsewhere, Novello is released, and he is kissing Daisy at the last fade out. Happily ever after. Film is interesting as a precursor of the classic Hitchcock in the following decade. The director's manipulation of the film medium is often interesting. The problem is that Novello is just not scary enough to convince the viewer that he is a serial murderer. (January 2018)

**The Lodger** 1944 John Brahm (Britain) 3.5 Nicely directed horror-crime thriller about the grisly murders of Jack the Ripper in the Whitechapel district of 1880s London. Laird Cregar massive, lonely, and threatening – treated from the beginning as the Ripper; Sarah Allgood as sensible landlady who lets a room to Cregar; Merle Oberon as pretty music hall singer (with fake French accent), who is tagged early as a victim of the Ripper; Cedric Hardwicke (with beard) as Allgood's stuffy husband, who is fascinated by the Ripper murders; George Saunders sleep walking through the film as charming police inspector, who develops an incipient romantic relationship with Oberon. Film focuses immediately on the vicious murders (some discussion of how the Ripper slashes and dissects his victims) and on the arrival of the highly suspicious Cregar in Allgood's rooming house – he avows that he is performing mysterious experiments in the attic room. The screenplay punctuates the action with periodic murders of theater performers (prostitutes would be far too controversial for the Hays Code), observation of the disturbing behavior of Cregar, and the development of the main characters, to whom the viewer becomes attached. Cregar is obviously a sexual deviant, although the subject is not of course mentioned explicitly: he states that he is avenging his brother, who was “ruined by a woman”, but his panting and drooling in the final music hall scene shows that he is also attracted to a pretty woman. He frequently quotes Solomon and Proverbs about the dangers of a “subtle” woman. The mise-en-scene is first-class film noir style (same year as ‘Double Indemnity’): immersed in realistically presented working-class culture including the bars and the nice lady with terrible crooked teeth, who borrows one of the victim's concertinas to play hymns in the street. Brahm invokes his German background with darkly shadowed

interior and night scenes, expressive angles, silhouette shots, and especially the scene in which a threatening Cregar suddenly appears in four mirrors surrounding a frightened Oberon. One of the murders is touching – a plain working class woman sings a version of Oberon’s song in the bar; she loans her concertina to the snaggle-toothed woman, and is then hunted and murdered by the Ripper in her room (the viewer never sees the murderer) while the hymn lady sings outside in the street. The climax in the music hall drags on: a crazed Cregar is pursued by the nonchalant Saunders up and down the cat walks until the monster throws himself through a window into the Thames, in which he has told the viewer several times he will find peace. Effective thriller becoming at times a horror film because of the brutish, disturbing presence of the massive Cregar. A few faults: the overly obvious identification of Oberon as the main victim, Saunders’ vapid character, the bloodless romantic subplot, the long climax in the theater. Nevertheless, a gripping thriller and a worthy lead up to ‘Hangover Square’ in the following year. (January 2018)

**Lola** 1961 Jacques Demy (France) 3.5 Anouk Aimée as flighty-seeming but fundamentally caring and vulnerable cabaret dancer in Nantes – Lola has a small child, Yvon; Mark Michel as existentially discouraged, unemployed young man; Elinas Labourdette as the dominating Mme. Desnoyers; Annie Duperoux as Cécile, her cute, cheeky, precocious 13-year-old daughter, who is more rebellious than one thinks; Alan Scott as George, good-humored American sailor (but he doesn’t speak English with a realistic American accent). Demy’s first major film: a breezy, sometimes optimistic, spontaneous-seeming look at romantic destiny in 1960 Nantes (and the lovely Passage Pommeraye). The film has a strong New Wave style. Shot in black and white wide screen, the film evokes vividly the busy industrial port with characters usually walking through the streets encountering friends against the backdrop of shoppers or the cranes that service the port. The narrative focuses mostly on the romantic destiny of Lola, who is still in love with Michel, her first love and the father of her child; she flirts and spends the night twice with George, and she is the subject of a declaration from Roland, but she remains fundamentally faithful to Michel (she repeats several times that one’s first love is the only one that endures), who returns with great fanfare at the end to drive her off in his big white Cadillac. The other characters have less success in their love lives. George has to leave Lola’s apartment to return to his ship at St. Nazaire. Sexy, little Cécile develops a crush on George, and after he leaves, she runs away from home to go to Cherbourg to learn to be a hairdresser from her Uncle Aimée. After Lola rejects his overtures, Roland remains a rootless, unemployed wanderer; while Lola and Michel drive off in the last scene, Roland is pictured walking down the port street by himself. The gods have decreed true love for some and not for others. The film is wistfully poetic and romantic: Michel Legrand’s bittersweet score (aided by Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony) sometimes make the film seem like a musical (fast forward three years to ‘Cherbourg’). The viewer is moved by Demy’s heartfelt devotion to the picturesque cities of western France (Nantes, Cherbourg, Rochefort). The very simple theme tells us that happiness comes through love, and that sadly few people achieve it. (2014)

**Lola Montes** 1955 Max Ophuls (Germany) 3.5 Martine Carol as sort of kewpie doll version of Lola, impassible as men and adventures pass through her life; Anton Walbrook as the old, nearly deaf, and quite lovable old king of Bavaria (Ludwig?) who becomes attached to Lola and thus sets off the Revolution of 1848 in Bavaria; a young Oskar Werner as a student lover of Lola - he saves her from the fury of the mob in 1848; Peter Ustinov as circus announcer, cracks his whip, talks under his breath, and refers obliquely to his own amorous intentions toward her. Lush, romantic, dreamy vision of the life of the infamous Lola Montes. Set in an American circus whose only feature is the scandalous and fascinating Lola Montes, now escaped from Europe trying to make a living in the USA; Ustinov presents her life in *tableaux vivants* in the circus that often fade to flashbacks of her experiences with various lovers (Franz Liszt, a drunken English gentleman, mad King Ludwig, and the student Oskar Werner) and the development of her entertainment career. The Bavarian king is very endearing with his regal bearing, his unassuming ways, his hard of hearing (invoked in comic moments), and his devotion to Lola, even in adversity. The camera and the editing are elegant, flowing – cutting from the circus activity to the flashbacks, the camera gliding gracefully, especially when the teenage Lola is being shunted off to the side by her mother who is having an affair with an Indian officer, the camera craning from the floor up



and then back down as it follows the progress of characters on various levels of the theater or of the palace of the King of Bavaria; the latter scene has Lola ripping off her bodice to make a point to the king, and then the servants running through the palace corridors to find needle and thread to sew it up again. Color is very rich and saturated (Eastmancolor to the max), and Ophuls fills the soundtrack with nostalgic, wistful waltz music again suggesting the passing of a much regretted epoch. Film is in a sense a commentary on the sad emptiness of romance; Lola seeks it outside the institutions of marriage, and her whole life is a path downhill toward obscurity, unfulfillment, and unhappiness in the circus under Ustinov's whip, where men may visit with her in the lion's cage for only a dollar. Perhaps the film is even more focused on the cult of celebrity: as Ustinov tells Lola in a flashback, "Le talent ne m'intéresse pas," he is interested in sex, beauty and scandal; people come to see Lola because she is so scandalous (like the time she climbed through the spectators' seats to give back to the wife the rings that a man had given her – he had told Lola he wasn't married), not because of her indifferent performance of the flamenco dance. Lola never settles for long, "For me, life is movement;" at the end when she escapes from Munich, she says "c'est tout fini." Romantic wistfulness a bit over the top, and film comes across as a bit light weight; but it has a great sense of style. (2007)

**Lola Rennt** 1998 Tom Tykwer (Germany) 3.0 Franka Potente cute, punky, and in good running shape with orange hair – starting from her parents house she has 20 minutes to find 100,000 DM to bail her devoted boyfriend out of trouble with the German mafia in Berlin; young Moritz Bleibtreu is waiting for Franka (Lola) in a phone booth outside a grocery store, which he threatens to rob unless she shows up with the money on time! Puzzling, dynamic, fast-moving film that does not appear to have a thematic point, but which presents alternative scenarios of fast-moving events. In each of three scenarios (20 minutes each – the film lasts only 80 minutes), Lola literally and indefatigably runs through several situations – (animated) encountering a man and his snarly dog on the way down the stairs, a meeting with her father, running in front of a car driven by one of her father's friends, bumping into a lady pushing a baby carriage, an encounter (perhaps) with the street person that lifted the money from Bleibtreu in the first place, crashing through a large pane of glass being carried by four workmen across the street, and then finally to the place in the city where the boyfriend is supposed to be waiting for her. The first time she arrives too late, he robs the store, and she is shot down by the police; the second time she arrives in time to stop him from going in, but he is immediately run down by an ambulance; the third time they both get a lot of money (he by chasing down the street person, she by winning two huge bets in a casino), the boyfriend pays off the hood, and the two walk off hand in hand to live happily ever after. Entertaining to run by or into a character and have a rapidly edited sequence show in a few seconds what the future holds in store for him, and to have that different for every scenario (e.g., does the lady with the baby carriage end up in an old folks home or does she win the lottery with her husband?). The film is full of surprises, playing with contingency – how little changes in events (e.g., arriving a few seconds later or earlier) can lead to radically different outcomes. About the only emotional hook is concern for the well-being of the cute, young couple – we are really sad when it appears that Franka or her boyfriend have been killed and we are delighted when they have little lovers' discussions about contingency in bed. (2009)

**Lolita** 1961 Stanley Kubrick (wr. Vladimir Nabokov) 2.5 James Mason as a suave but obsessed European Humbert Humbert; Sue Lyon as little vixen a couple of years too old to be a true nymphet; Shelly Winters in fine form and often over-the-top as the sex- and affection-starved mother of Lolita; Peter Sellers in incomprehensible role as Mason's nemesis, Clare Quilty, who is also in lust with Lolita. Very famous Kubrick adaptation of the Nabokov novel that has its good moments but fails overall because of its tonal inconsistency. It seems that Kubrick knew that the Hayes Office censors would butcher the film; so he secured from the author of the novel a screenplay that is not faithful to the original. To begin with, Lyon is too old to play the marginally pre-adolescent nymphet that Humbert lusts after in the novel; and the novel thereby loses some of its titillating, scandalous character – now it is about an (impossible) love affair between a teenager and an older man. In addition, while the film does focus on the disastrous development of the relationship, the sexual aspect of it is kept underground (the most titillating scene is the one in which Lolita gets out of bed and after playing with Mason's beard, suggests that they "play a game" she learned at summer camp), thus depriving the storyline of much of its power.

Much of the film's focus is satirical, some of which is amusing: the shrill, motor mouthed, sex-starved housewife; American social mores – the community dance, the police convention in a New England hotel, the moralistic prejudices of the neighbors, and the attempts of the school to put Lolita on the right track; the clean-looking lines of 50s architectural and commercial design. Sellars performance is often hilarious, particularly when the Quilty character disguises himself as a Germanic accented school psychoanalyst to manipulate Mason into allowing his “daughter” to participate in the school play (so that Sellars could seduce her). On the other hand, the character is too buffoonish and outlandish to make any dramatic – or even comedic – sense; every time he pops into view the story's development comes to a standstill, and the viewer is aware that he is just watching a comic shtick. The screenplay also places Humbert's murder scene at the beginning of the film apparently to let the audience know that in keeping with the strictures of the Hayes Code, that the immoral behavior that follows will not go unpunished. The first half of the overly long film (2.5 hours) is amusing and intriguing, but the second half, which focuses on Humbert's road to perdition, is tedious and repetitive despite Mason's constant look of pain and terror. When we encounter Lolita pregnant living in a modest home and we read that Mason dies of a heart attack after he kills Quilty, we are just glad the film is over. Some wonderful camera work, especially the scene in which Lolita runs up the stairs in her multiple petticoats to kiss Mason goodbye. The story needs more consistent focus – and more sex – to be successful. (2010)

**Lonely Are the Brave** 1962 David Miller 3.0 Kirk Douglas as Edward Abbey latter-day cowboy trying despairingly to maintain his freedom and individuality amid the busy highways of the modern West; Walter Matthau droll and sympathetic as the sheriff who has to hunt down Douglas; William Schallert as Matthau's competent but rather clueless deputy who operates his radio; George Kennedy as mean-as-a-snake deputy intent on doing harm to Douglas; Carroll O'Connor as big rig truck driver who runs Douglas down in the last scene. Rather predictable, black and white Kirk-Douglas-inspired film about a rootless cowboy who refuses to give in to the demands of the 1962 West (film takes place in New Mexico) and is ultimately destroyed by the modern world. Douglas, whose only real friend appears to be his often recalcitrant horse, goes to a saloon, gets himself drunk and in a nasty fight in order to be thrown in jail to see his good friend, who has been condemned for smuggling illegals across the border (draft-dodging in the Abbey book); he escapes from jail and is pursued by the authorities in the high mountains outside of town; he escapes his pursuers, but while mounted on his horse, he is hit by O'Connor's truck on a busy highway; the viewer assumes he dies in the hospital. The film is serious and heartfelt; it seeks the sympathy of the viewer for the tragedy of an individual – the free cowboy on the open range – who refuses to knuckle under to the requirements of the modern world – permanent residence, steady job, automobiles, no fences (he cuts through them when he rides across country), marrying and settling down (he had encouraged the woman he loves to marry his friend, since he could not give her what she wanted). The cinematographer takes wonderful advantage of the mountain terrain where Douglas makes his escape: rough country, interspersed trees, cliffs, sudden drop-offs, beautiful views into the distant valley – all photographed in crisp black and white. The film, which bears more than a passing resemblance to Walsh's 'High Sierra', perhaps suffers from easy predictability, and some of the sequences are hardly credible – e.g., that Douglas' friend would still be in the drunk tank of the local jail after he had already been condemned to two years in prison (and for breaking a federal law!). The film follows the progress of O'Connor's truck in several scenes starting in the Midwest until he hits Douglas, suggesting perhaps that the cowboy's demise is inevitable. Performances are good, provided the viewer doesn't object to Douglas' take-no-prisoners acting style; Matthau is particularly entertaining in his avuncular, off-hand humor combined with a grudging admiration for the man he is chasing. Elegiac tribute to the vanished West. (2011)

**The Long Day Closes** 1992 Terence Davies (Britain) 3.5 Impressionistic, meditative portrait of the influences on Davies' life as an eleven-year old in Liverpool in the 1950s. Leigh McCormick as Bud, the youngest child in a Catholic family in a working class district of Liverpool – obviously the stand-in for Davies. The film glides along without plot: many close-ups of reflective, brooding Bud, and then impressionistic episodes portraying the salient experience of that year in his life. Much focus on his mother, who supports and loves him, even in his love for movies: “Mah, can I go to the Pictures?”, and

sings plaintive English folk songs a capella about love and lost love. Many scenes with his brother and sisters – father absent (no reference to the family’s bitter experience when he was alive), but the kids are good-natured and good-hearted, the guys washing their faces, dating girls, the girls primping, sending Bud to fetch their cosmetics: all every day, normal occurrences that have little narrative significance. The main point appears to be the broadening, vivifying impact of music and Hollywood films – especially musicals – for a kid growing up in grey, limited Liverpool: it is raining in practically every scene; no indication that the family ever traveled, went to the country, etc. Songs by Nat King Cole, Judy Garland (from ‘Meet Me in St. Louis’), and the film’s pièce de résistance, Debbie Reynolds’s “Tammy” as the camera travels in bird’s eye along the street, from rear to front in a movie theater, the scene then switching to people sitting, kneeling standing in a church, the camera ending with the priest lifting the host at the consecration. Bud often experiences visions or flights of the imagination: a ship sails by as he sits at his school desk, Jesus is nailed to the cross through his hands and then lifted for all to see (rather masochistic image). Bitter, picturesque scenes of Bud’s Catholic upbringing: disciplined in school by being switched on the hand (bear the pain stoically), kneeling abjectly before the altar proclaiming your absolute submission to the Lord, confessing your sins to the crucifix, asserting your abject sinfulness. The film ends with lovely a capella rendition of Arthur Sullivan’s mellifluous “The Long Day Closes” as we watch the moon set (or is it the sun?). Despite its lack of a narrative thread, the film is captivating – beautiful, carefully conceived images, particularly a varied, evocative soundtrack mixing different musical styles and paying tribute to the power of Hollywood film. (June 2017)

**The Long Goodbye** 1973 Robert Altman 3.0 Elliot Gould as mellow mumbling, sometimes befuddled, sometimes proactive Philip Marlowe working in LA about 30 years after his time; Nina Van Pallandt as very neat Malibu earth mother; Sterling Hayden in bigger than life, perhaps John Huston-influenced, performance of Pallandt’s husband on the verge of insanity; Henry Gibson as a wimpish psychiatrist-crook; Mark Rydell as an over-the-top gangster played mostly for laughs; Arnold Schwarzenegger uncredited showing his huge pectorals toward the end. Sometimes hard to fathom update of the Raymond Chandler detective genre. Gould is alone; he has no girlfriend but cares only about his cat, whom he can never find; he is very laid back and perplexed by his surroundings, but he has a strong sense of honor and loyalty – he won’t give up in trying to find out what happened to his friend Terry, who apparently committed suicide in Mexico; but when he finds out that Terry is still alive in Mexico (nice con pulled off by Terry with the cooperation of the Mexican town authorities) and that he murdered his wife, Marlowe shoots him square in the chest and he falls backward into the water – end of film! The narrative meanders a lot in classic Altman style – we linger in an elite psychiatric hospital with the fatuous Henry Gibson, we find out a lot about Pallandt’s and Hayden’s relationship, we enjoy the goofball antics of Rydell’s goons (at one point he tells everyone to take off their clothes, but one of the strong men won’t because he has “too many scars”, and Rydell excuses him); and a possible defect of the script is that we don’t learn enough about the film’s key relationships – between Terry and his wife and the Pallandt-Hayden couple – to tease us as the story advances and to enable the flash of enlightenment at the end to be effective. It turns out that Terry and Nina have been plotting all along to get rid of his wife and Hayden so they can live happily ever after in Mexico. The LA scene in the early 70s is rendered with a lot of color and detail: Gould lives in a bizarre apartment complex on top of a hill near the Hollywood Bowl; his neighbors are a gaggle of five pretty lesbians (?) who eat hashish brownies and do yoga half naked on their balcony; the scenes in Malibu are bright, sunny, and relaxed. Filming and editing sometimes seem awkward and haphazard: Altman uses a lot of open long shots with minimal editing and too many zooms when he “should” have been using a tracking camera or editing; one has the impression that the film could have been cut about 10 minutes. Fun movie to watch; it is not one of Altman’s masterpieces. (2008)

**Long Life, Happiness and Prosperity** 2002 Mina Shum (Canada) 3.0 Sandra Ho charming and credible as single mother in Vancouver struggling to make ends meet; Valerie Tian totally adorable as her 12-year-old daughter, who is resorting to Chinese spells and magic to get her mother to fall in love with a man she works with; Ric Young as nerdy butcher, who can think only of his duties to his father and not “losing face”; Chang Tseng as older man Shuck who loses his job as a security job in a local

business. Sometimes charming film about the trials and travails of two generations of immigrant Chinese families living in Vancouver's Chinatown. It follows three story lines: the efforts of Tian to influence her mother – largely through spells and potions – to fall in love with and marry a man who is obviously smitten with her; Young as butcher who is imprisoned by the code of Chinese paternal respect and who is constantly pretending that he has a good and respectful relationship with his father who lives in Hong Kong; Shuck is happily married, but he can't make himself admit to his nice-looking, loyal wife (Christian Ma) that he has lost his job. The film script explores father-son relationships in Chinese-Canadian families (some of the scenes between Ric Young and his son, who is secretly studying to become a Buddhist monk, try one's patience); the difficulty of making a good life in the New World (primarily Oh's financial travails and Shuck's unemployment); rampant gossiping among Chinese women; the differences between the immigrant generation and their children born in Canada (primarily Young and his son). The film is also in part an engaging romantic comedy: the viewer is very pleased when Oh resists a nerd's marriage proposal and then drops her guard against her young, nice-looking restaurant co-worker – the last scene has mother, daughter and presumably future husband sharing a barbecue. A nice sense of humor in several places – e.g., when Tian's magic spell goes awry and two men fall in love with one another. The style is partly realistic and partly semi-magical realism. Many members of the community – including the determined Tian – resort to handbooks on Chinese magical spells; she finally turns to a woman, who for \$20 will give you a vial of liquid that is a powerful love potion. The film's attitude toward Chinese superstition is ambiguous, since some plot elements are resolved naturalistically and some as a result of magic, whose operation is accompanied by pixie dust music on the soundtrack. First part of film has one wondering whether it is incompetently serious or a comedy, but there are several charming scenes toward the end.

**The Lord of the Rings: the Fellowship of the Ring** 2001 Peter Jackson (New Zealand): based on the novel of J.R.R. Tolkien 3.0 Elijah Wood as Frodo Baggins – a young and innocent but dedicated Hobbit living in Middle Earth; Sean Astin as his friend Sam, who accompanies him on the quest; Cate Blanchett as ethereal good witch that seems to be on Frodo's side; Ian Holm cute and endearing as Bilbo Baggins, the first hobbit to get hold of the ring; John Rhys-Davies amusing, bluff as dwarf warrior accompanying Frodo on the quest (looks like Vercingetorix); Christopher Lee memorable as the all-white evil force Saruman; Ian McKellen memorably avuncular and wise as Gandolf the Grey; Viggo Mortensen masculine and charismatic as the human Aragorn, destined to restore independence to the country of Gandor. Very long and slow-moving, but exciting, thoughtful, moralistic, and attention-getting film version of the first third of the famous Tolkien book. Starting in Middle Earth, the band of heroes -- a coalition of humans, hobbits (particularly Frodo, who is usually in possession of the ring) elves, and a dwarf -- set out to return the evil ring to the cauldron (?) where it was forged so as to eliminate the powerful, evil force from the world. They experience many amazing adventures, particularly toward the end of the film, in which they confront terrible monsters in enormous underground caverns, struggling to get across a narrow stone bridge that is crumbling into the abyss; an unusually large number of special effects studios worked long hours to create the monsters, fantastic landscape vistas, and enormous hordes of Orcs (extremely ugly minions of Sarumon) that overwhelm the senses of the viewer through much of the film. Some viewers might tire of the long battles in which the heroes fight off huge hordes of foul adversaries. The narrative is based on the contest between forces of good (humans, hobbits, and elves) and the forces of evil, domination, and destruction; one wonders whether Sarumon and his throngs are references to the totalitarian forces that rocked Europe during the 1930s when the book was written. The ultimate aim is to defeat Sarumon and to reestablish the ancient human kingdom under the kingship of Mortensen, but since the producers had decided on a trilogy (yes, that would earn more money), the first, 3-hour film ends only as the survivors of the Fellowship prepare to enter Ssarumon's stronghold of Mordor. Tune in for the sequel. Full of Anglo-Saxon folklore and culture, references to ancient classical themes; the work owes much to Wagner's 'Ring of the Nibelungen' – the evil and powerful ring that promotes obsessive greed, scheming, and murder among all conscious beings, the broken sword that must be reforged into a whole to fight evil ('Siegfried'). Although more violent and disturbing, the film is sometimes reminiscent of Disney: the melodramatic opposition of good and evil

and the smiling niceness and cuteness of the characters (Gandolf, Bilbo and Frodo come to mind). Great show, but doesn't leave this viewer with a great desire to see the sequels. (2012)

**Lorna** 1964 Russ Meyer 2.5 Lorna Maitland as not very pretty, large-breasted newlywed in California Delta town, who is not sexually satisfied by her husband; Hal Hopper as the ugly, lustful Luther, who will taunt Lorna's husband if Luther can't have her himself; a cast of unknowns including actors who played the husband, Jim, and the convict rapist. Famous soft porn Meyer film masquerading as a moralistic drama. Story focuses on Lorna's sexual frustration; she is "liberated" by being raped by an escaped convict, and then obediently snuggles with her lover in her husband's bed until Jim, the husband, comes home. Not at all pornographic – no explicit sexual activity, and we see Lorna's famous body in only one skinny-dipping scene just before the rape. All the sexual longing and jealousy is overshadowed by moralistic forces throughout the film: it begins with the Man of God confronting us on a country road and quoting liberally from the Old Testament to denounce immorality; the film ends with a fight between the convict and Jim, which causes the death of the Convict and Lorna; and then the Man of God returns again to tell the viewer that sexual immorality will always end in destruction and suffering. Some of the black and white cinematography of Locke, California and natural surroundings is picturesque, and Meyer as usual uses a lot of distracting, aggressive cutting. Actors often show their lack of experience in film; Lorna herself is barely adequate. Interesting primarily for looking inside the mind of Meyer and the early 60s American males that he is appealing to: what matters in a woman is large, exposed breasts; all women are on the prowl for sexual satisfaction, and if a man gives it to them even through rape, they are awakened; Meyer will go to extremes to cover the true subject of his films (adolescent sexual yearnings) with moralistic judgments that seem ridiculous forty five years later. Excellent shots of Sacramento Delta towns, Walnut Grove and Locke in the early 1960s. (2006)

**Lorna's silence (Le silence de Lorna)** 2008 Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne 3.0 Longish, realistic drama about the tribulations of an immigrant in Belgium caught in a trap by Russian mobsters. Arta Dobroschi as the pretty immigrant in virtually every frame – focused, perpetual mobile, striving ahead with resolve – she never gets a break; Jeremie Renier as junkie husband she married to give him Belgian citizenship; Alban Ukaj as Arta's boyfriend, with whom she wants to use her savings to open a snack shop in downtown Liege; Fabrizio Rongione as small-time hoodlum working for the Russian gang that organizes the scheme to obtain Belgian (EU) citizenship through sham marriages. The film features the typical Dardenne techniques: minimal editing and camera movement, recording everyday movements, like crossing the street, brushing your teeth, walking down hallways, shopping in stores; at the same time however the narrative – the fate of Ana – always remains apparent. Now that she has Belgian citizenship, Ana is trying to move up in life by playing the marriage con game, saving the money, and then with the cooperation of her boyfriend, open a business so they can live a stable life, raise a family, etc. The cards however are stacked against the poor immigrants. She is trapped with her drug-using "husband", who she nevertheless has some feelings for (seems out of pity, but then in a rare sudden movement she strip off her clothes and embraces him passionately and has sex with him); she also supports him through a short rehab. But she is surrounded by negatives: the Russians kill Renier because of his drug-addled unreliability; negotiations to marry a Russian mobster mark time because Ana becomes convinced that she is pregnant, although the doctor says she is not; when she is pressured to "have an abortion", she refuses to go along. As a result, the Russians decide to murder her because of her undependability; an enforcer drives her into the countryside; realizing what is happening, Ana escapes, wanders through the woods, breaks into a hut, and as the film ends she is lying shivering on a cot talking pathetically to the fetus that probably does not exist. It is hard to imagine that she has any future. Despite (or perhaps because of) the low-key filming technique, the film has a certain visceral punch – feeling for the hopelessness of the poor, a sentiment surely enhanced by the prettiness of the main subject. (November 2017)

**The Lost City of Z** 2017 James Gray (Britain) 3.0 Fascinating, although probably fantastic account of Percy Fawcett's obsessive quest to find a putative lost civilization in the Bolivian-Brazilian jungle. Charlie Hunnam as Percy Fawcett, British army officer obsessively devoted to exploration in

Amazonia; Robert Pattinson perhaps the real star of the show as Henry Costin, Fawcett's aide-de-camp and enthusiastic supporter; Sienna Miller as Fawcett's wife, harbinger of women's rights; Angus Macfadyen as explorer James Murray, the traitorous "pig-headed (irony!) weakling". Based on a hero-worshipping, best-selling 2009 book, the film follows Fawcett's quest from around 1902 when he is still a mid-level British Army officer stationed in Ireland to his disappearance in the company of his son in 1925. He starts as a surveyor commissioned to establish the border between Brazil and Bolivia, but he soon moves to the status of explorer in his search for the lost city that he calls "Zed"; in the meantime, he is severely wounded in the Battle of the Somme. The film indulges several critiques of British (western) culture: it contradicts its own values in the epic destruction of the World War; it focuses on the snobby British insistence on class status, as seen in the early scene when the Minister of War declines to invite Fawcett to dinner because of his "unfortunate choice of ancestors"; it is environmentally friendly in its insistence that explorers must not harm the jungle or its native inhabitants; it also criticizes the patriarchalism of British society depicted in the person of Fawcett himself when he insists that his wife stay at home. The central scenes in the jungle are compelling: moving slowly upstream on rafts; attacked by native tribesmen who rain slender arrows on the boatmen; when toward the end attacked by hostile warriors, Fawcett and son are rescued by another tribe of beplumed fighters. Hunnam is perhaps too low-key for the role (the comparison with Klaus Kinski inevitably comes to mind), but he convincingly portrays a man obsessed with his goal, courageously standing up to a rollickingly contemptuous crowd of National Geographic Society members. His attitude toward his wife is ambiguous: while it is obvious that he loves her (and she – a conflicted harbinger of women's equality – him), he does not hesitate to leave her with the children for long periods of time while he gallivants through the wilds; when she visits her wounded husband in the hospital, he seems most chagrined by the prospect of not being able to return to his beloved Amazonia. Gray refuses to embrace the most obvious conclusion to the film: instead of abandoning Fawcett and his son to their fate in the last scenes and thus suggesting that he failed, he has father and son subjected to a disquieting native ritual, and then have his widow (?) carry on in her faith in her husband's mission and her conviction that he is still alive. Good film weakened by its ahistorical basis. (August 2017)

**Lost Horizon** 1937 Frank Capra 2.5 Ronald Colman as British wise man who is kidnapped and brought to Shangri-La, hidden in the midst of the snowy wastes of the Himalayas; H.B. Warner as Chang, a soft-spoken, wise-acting top official in Shangri-La; Sam Jaffe as the noble ancient High Lama, who always speaks leg crossed yoga style to the accompaniment of soft music; Thomas Mitchell as wiseacre American con guy, who decides to stay in Shangri-La; Edward Everett Horton, his usual annoying persona with his blank, clueless stares and open-mouthed double-takes as an archeologist equally happy to stay in the ideal kingdom; John Howard as younger brother of Colman – he is forever dissatisfied thinking only of getting out of Shangri-La back to the hustle and bustle of civilization; Isabel Jewel as cutey pie that seduces Colman aiding in campaign to get him to stay. Famous film dealing with the discovery of a utopia in the middle of the snowy mountains of central Asia, where all is serenely perfect. Chang and the High Lama explain endlessly that it is a place of quiet, satisfaction, lack of ambition, where the fevers of the civilized world don't apply; people age much more slowly (the High Lama seems to a couple of hundred years old), and all conduct their affairs in pure happiness and harmony; everything is to be taken in moderation, even happiness; pleasure should be pleasure of the mind and the arts – beautiful music and art are being preserved until the rest of the world needs them. Shangri-La is a fertile oasis isolated by vast expanses of snow, ice and steep mountains; temperatures are moderate, fountains flow, cattle graze, children sing cute songs; the architecture is gentle 30s modernist with clean lines, wide-open spaces and flowing fountains, and everyone is dressed in vaguely Tibetan or Mongolian costumes. When a native character speaks, he is usually accompanied by quiet, noble Dmitri Tiomkin music. There is virtually no tension in the film until the end, when the High Lama tells Colman that he has chosen him to succeed him; then Howard convinces Colman and his own girlfriend to attempt to escape from Shangri-La. The attempt ends in disaster: Colman escapes death, but then – as described by a British friend back in London – he moves mountains to return to Shangri-La, which he does in the last shot as he stumbles down a snowy slope. The film lacks dramatic character in most parts: endless, tedious sequences describing the (boring) nature of Shangri-La's society and showing the shallow,

contented life its inhabitants lead. The omnipresent question in the viewer's mind is who would really want to live in such a place, where there is no passion, no intense emotion, no disappointment, no ambition, no striving after accomplishment, personal or otherwise. No doubt that this is a well-produced version of the extremely popular best-selling novel that perhaps expresses the world's desire for peace and security in the age of Hitler and Stalin. (2008)

**Lost in Translation** 2003 Sofia Coppola 3.0 Bill Murray, Scarlett Johansson. Slowly paced but beautifully shot film about loneliness and isolation while two Americans are visiting Tokyo. Murray is has-been actor with a fading marriage (wife stays at home and calls him about rug samples and the children), who has come to Japan to do commercials for a Japanese whiskey; Johansson is very young wife (she is supposed to be about 24, but she thoroughly looks her true age of 18), who is already alienated from her young photographer husband, who abandons her and pays no attention to her. The two of them are mostly idle – absolutely nothing to do – and they eventually strike up a friendship. Murray's performance is understated and mostly effective; Johansson ok (very cute but always reminds one of a teenager). Basically about human alienation; neither one of the characters relates to anyone, nor do they even have much to say to one another. The screenplay is very laconic: no speeches, no inner revelations, mostly limited chitchat, moving through pachinko parlors and drug/karaoke scene of glitzy Tokyo, and sitting together and staring into space; this leaves viewer a bit starved for information about the characters, who seem to have virtually no prior life. Pretty hard on Japanese culture: constant pictures of steel, glass, and flashing neon lights of downtown Tokyo; Japanese are very polite; much humor at their expense – for example, they can't pronounce the letter 'r' (hysterical prostitute begs Murray to 'Lip (rip) my stockings'); they are always imitating some lifestyle and trying to be cool; some outrageous characters such as the PeeWee Herman-like talk show host, etc. Tension attempted to be built through movie by perennial question – will man in his 50s and young woman have sex together; hard to believe that they would stoop so low! They don't, but Murray whispers something in Scarlett's ear at the end that takes the pain out of their faces and somehow engages them. Perhaps a nice ambiguity, but one is left questioning what it possibly could have been – are they going to get together? Did he give her his phone number? Some philosophic words of wisdom? (2005)

**Love Actually** 2003 Richard Curtiss (Britain) 2.5 Hugh Grant, Emma Thompson, Liam Neeson, Bill Nighy, Alan Rickman, etc. Potpourri of romantic comedy bits all pasted together with people in love getting fulfillment; beginning and end image – people meeting their loved ones at Heathrow. Usually quite corny with lots of scenes that just don't work – corny, strained, etc. E.g., all scenes with Liam's son, Colin Firth with the Portuguese maid, Alan Rickman in all his scenes. ET as pretty stuffy and a bit miscast although she has one good cry that is convincing. Bill Nighy pretty hilarious as washed up rock star recording cynical Christmas song, and then falling in love with his manager ("Tubby"). Good soundtrack of typical hits, especially Joni Mitchell. Hugh Grant probably the best as bemused prime minister, who gets his girl (a personal assistant) and the cheers of the British by finally standing up to a boorish U.S. president played by Billy Bob Thornton. (2004)

**Love and Friendship** 2016 Whit Stillman (Ireland) 4.0 Delicious, talkative, beautifully produced adaptation of early Jane Austen novella that takes place in the privileged English countryside, circa late 18th century (or is it early 19th century?). Kate Beckinsale clever, devious, ambiguous as scheming widow, Lady Susan, looking for husbands for herself and her daughter, Frederica (Morfydd Clark); Chloë Sevigny as cynical American friend that receives the confidences of Lady Susan; Xavier Samuel, good looking scion of the DeCourcy family – he is one of the objects of Lady Susan's attentions; Tom Bennett outstandingly funny as the fatuous Sir James, another marital target; Emma Greenwell and Justin Edwards as the sensible married couple looking out for the best interests of the young folk. Film has characters in lovingly executed costumes (the ladies' hats!) conducting witty conversation in spectacular manor houses surrounded by perfectly manicured shrubs and lawns. As usual in Austen's fiction, the subject is marital politics guided by the dominating women but with little of the romance of Austen's more famous works. Men are often treated like ciphers that the women plot to get hold of and dominate to assure a proper standard of living. The conniving Lady Susan first cultivates a close

relationship with the young DeCourcy (much to the horror of his honorable, conservative parents, who state that they never go out in society nor expose themselves to the fetid air of London), but in a surprise move at the end of the film she instead captures and weds Sir James, thereby leaving DeCourcy to make an affectionate match with Federica. Justin Edwards is also described as a willing accomplice of the designs of his sensible wife. The narrative is dominated by Lady Susan, who ends the film occupying the field of marital battle with her marriage to Martin – the film affords no moralistic lessons despite her often unscrupulous manipulations. Bennett is a comic inspiration: hilarious disquisitions on the name Churchill (or is it Church Hill?) and on his apparent discovery of the existence of green peas while at the Vernon dinner table; he ends the film as cluelessly as ever standing beaming innocently next to his wife and her lover at the final wedding reception, while De Courcy celebrates the virtue of his own bride – a delicious cuckold joke thus dominating the last two scenes. Excellent dialogue featuring rapid enunciation of formally structured sentences (sounds just like the novelist) and the cynical epigrams of Lady Susan – e.g., empathizing with Seigny about her 50ish husband, who is “too old to be governed and too young to die” (i.e., to inherit from). One wonders why it took Stillman, the chronicler of the foibles of the American upper classes, so long to discover Austen, his perfect British match. (2016)

**Love and Mercy** 2015 Bill Pohlad 2.5 Paul Dano as the young, tortured Brian Wilson in the 60s trying to make the transition from the beach sound to more serious, personal music; John Cusack as the older Wilson perhaps ten years later barely living under the domination of his psychologist, the disturbed, ill-tempered Paul Giamatti; Elizabeth Banks as his toothy, goody-two-shoes girlfriend appearing on the scene to rescue Brian from the monster. An attempt to tell the story of the genesis of Brian Wilson’s mental illness and his rescue and return to good health by his future wife. The film bears many signs of being an official, feel-good treatment of the genius composer. It is divided into two parts that – for some reason – are intercut several times throughout the movie, leading to some confusion and discontinuity as the viewer is jerked between Wilson’s 1960s struggle with the onset of schizophrenia-like delusions and his (seemingly endless) attempts later to break free from the smothering domination of his psychologist. Viewers hoping for exposure to Brian’s music will probably be disappointed. ‘Good Vibrations’ represents a mini-comeback for the troubled Brian in the late 60s and the film ends with a moving performance of ‘Love and Mercy’ by the real Brian, but the film remains steadfastly focused on Brian’s mental health. The first (and better) part emphasizes Brian’s progression toward mental disturbances: his dad’s tyrannical rule over his sons’ band; Brian’s fear that his musical inspiration might disappear from his head; the pressure he feels to write hits when he is trying to break away from his Beach Boys sound to something more personal; LSD use (which he claims is revelatory and mind-altering); the criticism he receives from his older, bearded brother; the results of which are illustrated by shots of sounds plunging down through his auditory canal. The second (and duller) part is half Brian haltingly suffering under the domination of Giamatti, and half Banks, the Cadillac saleswoman turned knight in shining armor, battling to the limit to free Brian from Giamatti and to convince him that he is whole and capable of living a happy life. A postscript declares happily ever after: Brian is declared not to be suffering from paranoid schizophrenia, the two marry, they have five children, and Brian performs soulful renditions of some of his songs, e.g., “Love and Mercy”. The film has a few interesting and moving moments, but the failure to address Wilson’s musical inspiration (cf. ‘Amadeus’ for Mozart, ‘Topsy-Turvy’ for Gilbert and Sullivan, and ‘Impromptu’ for Chopin) and the ennui and facile optimism of the last part of the film keep it from being effectiveness. (2015)

**Love Before Breakfast** 1936 Walter Lang (Universal) 2.5 Carole Lombard sparkling, smart, effervescent, fast-talking, and charming, but still has a good cry when she thinks her fiancé has abandoned her; Cesar Romero for whom work matters most – it is even worth taking a job in Japan for two years (he is miscast; what happened to the toothy seducer who cares only about women?); Preston Foster as persistent, suave, dynamic big businessman, fast-talking but without much charm. Muddled love quadrangle – Romero cares about his work and is willing to leave his fiancée for two years; Foster, who sent Romero to Japan, wants to marry Lombard; Lombard is engaged to Romero; and the Countess wants to marry Foster. A sort of screwball comedy set in upper middle class business and society circles in New York – riding in the country, costume balls; dinner dance with champagne sparkling; sumptuous interiors



mixing Art Deco and Chinese; cruises on yachts. Foster pursues Lombard relentlessly, showing up wherever she is; impossible to discourage him: nowadays his behavior would qualify as stalking! Unusual example of battle of sexes, as older very rich businessman tries to replace much younger man on the make. Good gag – Lombard has Preston and a southern Belle girl at the costume ball yelling at one another because she has told both that the other is hard of hearing. Another: Lombard agrees to marry Foster strictly, it seems, for money (?); when she accepts she runs off with the three engagement rings he offers her. Characters show inconsistent motivation – e.g., after getting Lombard to agree to marry him, Foster decides suddenly to bring Romero back from Japan for a test, because he doesn't want to marry someone who doesn't love him. Lombard then hangs out with her fiancé even though she doesn't seem to like him, one supposes waiting for Foster to come after her. The two principals, mad as hornets at one another, end up on Foster's yacht. The film ends in a mad, completely improbable screwball sequence: Foster and Lombard shout and fight until they agree to marry; during the wedding ceremony, they start arguing again about whether Lombard is going to obey her future husband and the ship's captain proclaims them man and wife, while Lombard's mother continues to rub Lombard's feet that are soaking in a tub. The message is that women are willful and spoiled, and that they need a strong man to whip them into shape! Film is hard to watch except for Lombard. (2007)

**Love Finds Andy Hardy** 1938 George Seitz (MGM) 2.5 Mickey Rooney bow-legged, slang-slinging, hyperactive, impulsive, optimistic, permanent smile rictus, girl crazy; Judy Garland as plain, unpretentious teenager smitten with Andy; Lana Turner as formidable, glamorous teenage girl; Lewis Stone handsome, good-humored, fair-minded, distinguished, paternal, wise father of Andy; Fay Holden as sweet, submissive wife that the Judge calls 'Mother'; Cecilia Parker as pretty, spunky sister of Andy; Ann Rutherford as Andy's number-one girl. Sentimental, generally cloying, well produced family drama typical of MGM fare in late 30s and early 40s. Because of being girl-crazy, Andy is involved all sorts of little problems with the three girls: Rutherford is his preferred girl, but he has to pretend he is dating Turner to help a friend; and recently visiting next door is the plain Garland, who looks like she is 12 and who is infatuated with Andy; she spends most of the film mooning over Rooney, singing (three songs, the only memorable one being perhaps "In-Between"), and helping Andy out of his social jams and finally settling with getting him back together with Rutherford and indicating to the audience that she is going to wait until she is 18 to face the complexities and ambiguities of dating. Dating is of course just clean fun – kissing and perhaps holding hands; Andy is much more excited about showing off a glamorous date at the ball than he is in sex. The family is the bedrock of Andy's stability: his mom is loving, clueless, and subservient to the dad; the dad is Andy's confidant with whom he can have an intimate conversation about sex, money, and relationships whenever he wants; the problems the family encounters are small ones (like family TV programs of about 1960), all of which can be solved by loving solidarity and willingness to talk through the issues. Full of outdated expressions – "I'm cooked!", "grub", "swell", "I'll catch it" (get in trouble), refusal to take money from a woman, etc. Rooney is a bit much to take – almost superhuman quantities of grimacing, mugging, leaping about the set, and generally overacting. Film has few saving characteristics aside from being a document illustrating its time. (2012)

**Love is News** 1937 Tay Garnett 3.0 Tyrone Power cute with his cowlick and dark eyebrows, but not entirely convincing as comedic lead; Loretta Young toothily pretty and vivacious as wealthy society girl; Don Ameche irascible, wise-cracking city editor, talking as fast as Rosalind Russell three years before "His Girl Friday"; Stepin Fetchit slurring his words shiftlessly as Power's chauffeur and then skadoodling as soon as authority shows its face; Rochester in five-second cameo role; George Sanders a bit ridiculous sporting foreign accent as Young's effete, foppish former fiancé looking for money; Elisha Cook, Jr. as reporter; Walter Catlet as sarcastic humorous reporter; Slim Summerville as rustic judge obsessed by slot machines. Fairly typical, well-produced screwball comedy doubling as romantic comedy, in which Young announces her engagement to newspaperman Power to show him what it is to be hounded by hyperactive newspapermen slaving for a story. The audience is constantly invited to laugh at the antics of the rich. Perhaps the most memorable section is the jailhouse scene presided over by a rustic judge (played by Summerville): Young is in jail for speeding; the judge is distracted by slot machines, cell doors fall off their hinges to the floor with a loud clatter; friends in tuxedos and evening

dresses visit Young in her cell; her butler prepares her a luxurious breakfast, while Stepin Fetchit is chased off by the irascible judge (there don't seem to be police officers around). Ameche is quite funny with his running jokes saying "Yes, Mabel" while his wife yaks on the telephone; or his constantly changing intercom orders that someone be taken off or put back on the payroll. As usual in 30s movies, newspapermen are depicted as loud, hyperactive, wise-cracking, hard-drinking, with a raucous sense of humor, disreputable and caring only that they get the scoop. Despite the antagonism of the lovers, there can be little doubt that they are meant for each other. Toward the end the plot's momentum becomes breakneck, unpredictable, and extremely complicated. The film ends with Power on the phone getting back on the payroll, reporters crowding around getting the story, and the two in an (incredible) embrace. The film has star power and is intermittently amusing. (2010)

**Love Laughs at Andy Hardy** 1946 Willis Geldbeck 2.0 Mickey Rooney short, hyper-active, impulsive, expressive, obsessive, motor-mouthing, cute smile and hopelessly in love with Kay; Lewis Stone as his distinguished judge dad, benevolent and filled with good advice and low-key understated humor (Father Knows Best?); Bonita Granville pretty, young, enthusiastic eyes, well-spoken for a teenager; Fay Holden as slightly scattered, but well-intentioned and affectionate mom; Lina Romay as little Latina who performs two short South American songs; Dorothy Ford very tall and also filled with good advice for her buddy (e.g., girls grow up faster than boys, and when they hit 20, they are already young women ready to confront the responsibilities of life). A late installment of the classic MGM series. Takes place in a small town where everyone knows one another and is pretty decent; everyone is white, even the manual workers; wives stay at home and look to their husbands for guidance; kids and parents basically get along; although it takes place right after the war, it doesn't seem to have had much effect; boys and girls court one another, but they are most interested in dancing and planning for marriage; college kids wear ties and sport coats and often little multi-colored beanies on their heads; barely a smooch, and certainly no making out or sex. Plot is very slight: Andy loves Kay, but when he finally sees her, she has decided to marry an older man; he has a hard time getting over it, has a few minor adventures, and in the presence of his ubiquitous father, he swears off women at the end. Some low-key humor from Stone's off-hand ironies, Mom's well-meaning bumbling confusion, and the contrast between Rooney's short stature and the tall Ford (a couple of feet difference!). Warm, secure family atmosphere: no matter how confused and loony Andy may get, his family will stand beside him, and things will turn out.

**Love Me Tonight** 1932 Rouben Mamoulian (Paramount) 4.0 Maurice Chevalier as tailor who invades the land of royalty trying to collect a debt, Jeanette MacDonald as princess who wistfully pines for a true love, Charlie Ruggles as amusingly daffy Count of Paris who owes Chevalier a lot of money for his clothes, C. Aubrey Smith a senior Duke, who at one point delightfully raises his head from his pillow and sings a reprise of "Mimi," Myrna Loy as horny, man-crazy denizen of chateau, Charles Butterworth as confused suitor of Jeanette who doesn't stand a chance against the sincere, suave Maurice. Absolutely delightful, imaginative, ground-breaking early 30s musical based on a script rejected by Lubitsch and executed in a far more flamboyant style than the master would have used: abandoning the stationary microphone, Mamoulian uses editing and dubbing to create a movie that is completely informed by musical and rhythmical values. Score and lyrics of Rogers and Hart are delightful and form the backbone of the film with delightful, corny music, rhythmic editing, conversational pieces, etc. Opens with a symphony of rhythmic Paris morning activities in the street that introduce us to Maurice's hat, then Maurice, who has a sort of recitative with one of his customers, and then film launches into "Isn't It Romantic?" The song is delightful, and it progresses by editing from Maurice depicted in triptych tailor's mirror, to a taxicab, a ride in a train with French soldiers singing in chorus, and then to soldiers marching across (the obviously Southern California) countryside, to a mysterious violin in a gypsy encampment, to finally the chateau, where Jeanette comes to the balcony to deliver an operatic rendition of the song – the point being of course that the two future lovers are fated to be together before they have ever heard of one another. 'Mimi' has close-ups of the over-the-top corniness of Chevalier singing in campy fashion to Jeanette. The doctor's rhymed, rhythmic conversational song as he diagnoses Jeanette's lovesickness is naughty and delightful. The title song

(“Love Me Tonight”) has Maurice and Jeanette in a split screen each in their separate bedrooms with their heads on the pillows dreaming the song (their lips do not move) and suggesting perhaps satisfaction after having sex. Film has certain class consciousness, as it has petty bourgeois Chevalier invading the rarified atmosphere of French pretended royalty (Jeanette had been married to a 75 year old man because of his proper lineage; he died when she was 19) and teaching her what is really important (“You know too much about hunting, etiquette, tradition. You know nothing about style, charm, love.”) and that his being a tailor is not the essential fact. Film is very naughty – double entendres, Jeanette appearing often in her slip, Maurice saying in “Mimi” that what he wants is to have a son by her (despite this being their first meeting), the doctor always asking if Jeanette’s discomfort and restlessness occurs at night, etc. – but all in a good cause, i.e., true romance with marriage in the end and living happily ever after. Chevalier’s performance is emblematic – smiling with his slightly curled lower lip, jaunty carriage, delightful corniness, romantic directness, energetic stride through the chateau, etc. Hard to find a movie more delightful – charismatic stars, great tunes, imaginative score, ingenious direction. (2005)

**The Love Parade** 1929 Ernst Lubitsch; music by Victor Schertzinger (Paramount) 4.0  
 Lubitsch hits the jackpot with his first musical: slyly sexy, frank, delightful musical score, equally delightful and clever sense of humor, dialogue suggestively punctuated and rhythmic; although originality and pace falter a bit toward the end. The film takes place in the usual fake Central European location – everyone is uniform, fabulous palace, elaborate ceremonial, regal music. Narrative deals with playboy Chevalier settling down and marrying the Queen; then he is treated imperiously as only the Prince Consort (vide Prince Albert), who must obey his wife in all fields; he threatens to leave for Paris, she caves in, promises that his wishes will always be respected, and the curtains to their bedroom are drawn. Some satire of unbending royal etiquette, idleness of the rich. Royalty is impossibly restricted in its behavior and customs. Some class consciousness – servants, masters and dogs do things differently. Maurice Chevalier is charming, childlike, mugging, boyish, broad engaging smile, acts embarrassed, appealing awkwardness, corny as hell, pouting when he is bored; Jeannette MacDonald is pretty, a bit wooden, lovely operatic voice, shapely legs, sexy looks, and has great chemistry with Chevalier; Lupino Lane as vaudevillian, acrobatic servant Jacques often taking pratfalls; Lillian Roth down-to-earth, very sexy, and a bit awkward; Eugene Pallette as gravel-voiced minister. Most of the good musical numbers are toward the beginning. 1) Jacques “I’ll lay the dish here” short, rhythmic, and peppy as he sets the table for his master \*\*\*; 2) Chevalier (and then Lupino and a couple of dogs) “Paris, Please Stay the Same” – corny but engaging tribute to the beautiful women of Paris \*\*\*\*; 3) MacDonald and her ladies in waiting, “Dream Lover” extremely lyrical, purely and beautifully sung yearning for finding her true love\*\*\*\*; first interview between MacDonald and Chevalier quite risqué – Queen is supposed to be scandalized by the Count’s philandering, but she thinks it very fun and is smiling all the time, while Chevalier acts like embarrassed lovesick adolescent; 4) The two in a duet “Anything to Please the Queen” – indirect lovers’ conversation, lilting, flirtatious \*\*\*1/2; the first interview between the two is reported by gleefully curious onlookers; 5) Chevalier and MacDonald “Eyes of Grisette, Smile of Mignonette... You are my love parade” followed by lengthy kiss – nice letting go of the last reserve before falling in love and deciding to get married\*\*\*; 6) Lupino and Roth, “Let’s Be Common, and Do it Again” – very cute, acrobatic, battle of the sexes, lively dancing with idea that common people can be more frank and have more fun \*\*\*1/2; 7) MacDonald and chorus – early morning patriotic song with soldiers acting as chorus; pure operetta a la Herbert\*\*1/2; 8) Chevalier, “Nobody’s Using It Now”, complains about that he’s not getting any love; pretty smarmy\*\*1/2; 9) Lupino, Roth, and servants’ chorus, “The Queen is Always Right”, a sort of rap song with sexy virago Roth manhandling Lupino\*\*1/2; 10) Short reprise “Dream Lover” as MacDonald bemoans the departure of prince Consort; 11) Corps de ballet performance while royal lovers have discussion “Beg Me”; 12) Ends with short reprise of “Grisette”. (2007)

**Lovelace** 2013 Rob Epstein, Jeffrey Friedman 2.5 Amanda Seyfried very pretty, wholesome and innocent as Linda “Lovelace”, respectable girl that gets snookered into doing porn; Peter Sarsgaard as her husband, Chuck, self-centered, exploitative, abusive, and repulsive, the guy who teaches her how to “deep throat”; Sharon Stone virtually unrecognizable as Linda’s uptight, although well-meaning mom;

Robert Patrick as gentle, clueless dad; Chris Noth as sleazy, although sometimes avuncular porn movie investor; James Franco charming and charismatic, although way too young, as Hugh Hefner; Hank Azaria and Bobby Cannavale as greasy, although good-humored porn producers. Well-intentioned, often sentimental, not particularly lurid biopic of Linda Lovelace that buys her story of exploitation published in her 1980s autobiography “Ordeal”. The first part of the film depicts her introduction to the world of porn and lurid oral sex as voluntary, promoted sensitively by her husband who presents himself as an apostle of free love, and more or less a bit of innocent fun. The script then shifts to six years later, where Linda is taking a lie detector test at the behest of her prospective publisher, who wants to know whether she is telling the truth. “The truth” turns out to be an alternative version of her story: Chuck is a crazed monster who beats her, threatens her with a pistol, and sells her to a gaggle of guys for rape-like group sex; Linda gets practically none of the money earned by her famous film (the first pornographic film with a true script), Hefner is reimagined as a heartless seducer, and her husband falls deep into debt to his backers due to the failure of Linda and him to make a sequel to her big hit. The third act is another six years later, where Linda’s book is published and her ordeal is recognized (although the film never references the feminists that made her a kind of feminist hero for a while). The film finally wants us to recognize Lovelace as a woman exploited by the developing porn industry, but who has the courage finally to tell her story, to hold her head high with her husband and child in the suburbs of New York, and to be reunited joyfully with her parents. One cannot help but compare the film to the psychologically penetrating ‘Autofocus’, the recent film about Bob Crane that generates lurid, scandalous sex scenes, that vividly evokes American popular culture of the 1950s, and that even adds a whodunit bit at the end of the film. Seyfried is virtually the only reward of viewing this sentimental film. (2013)

**Lovely and Amazing** 2001 Nicole Holofcener 4.0 Catherine Keener as daughter of Blethyn – formerly a homecoming queen in high school, she is in a bad marriage and with an anger problem; Emily Mortimer as another daughter aspiring to be an actress and with grave doubts about her body and her talents; Brenda Blethyn as equally neurotic mother with a weight problem, but she adores her daughters (“Lovely and Amazing”); Raven Goodwin as adopted black 8-year-old, who also has a weight problem; Jake Gyllenhaal as pretty adolescent kid who seduces-falls for Keener; Dermot Mulroney as self-involved movie star who has an affair with Mortimer. Outstanding slice-of life comedy drama about a mother and her three daughters. All four women are imperfect and more or less neurotic, and yet the director and the audience harbor affectionate feelings for them and care what happens to them. The characters are extensively, believably, and warmly delineated: Blethyn is lonely, decides to have liposuction surgery (which causes a lot of medical complications), and she imagines groundlessly a developing flirtation with her doctor; Mortimer has serious self-esteem issues about her physical appearance and her skills as an actress, and even goes to the extent of asking Mulroney to critique the details of her body as she stands displaying herself in full frontal nudity (the extreme display is appropriate for the subject matter); Keener, who knows her husband is having an affair with a friend of hers, is angry and unfulfilled, strikes out at people by calling them names (e.g., she calls the woman who rejects one of her miniature chairs as “bitch”) and ends up having an affair with a 17-year-old; little Raven is self-indulgent especially in her eating, rude to her aunts (“fuck you”) and heedless of their worry about her when she goes to MacDonald’s to pig out, very loyal to her mother, and she wonders about having the only brown-colored skin in the family. The narrative ends inconclusively with Blethyn returning home after a longer than expected stay in the hospital fairly content with her slimmer profile, Mortimer ironically having her lip bit by a dog she is trying to rescue, and Keener, who has been arrested for statutory rape, being released and moving back to her mother’s house to get away from her snarky husband (Clark Gregg). The film is almost exclusively focused on women’s issues – lack of self-esteem (Mortimer), obsession with body image (Raven, Blethyn and Mortimer), loneliness (Blethyn), difficulty in finding the right man (all three adults). All the men in the film are inappropriate or unapproachable: the distant, sarcastic husband, the adolescent lover (!), the handsome middle aged doctor who couldn’t care less about you, the narcissistic movie star who wants you for his ego and for sex. The film’s tone is uniformly gentle and humorous all the way through, from the use of harsh language (accepted as a matter of course by the women), the sarcasm of Keener toward her husband, Blethyn’s self-deception about her doctor, Mulroney’s unconscious hypocrisy, Raven’s insistence that she isn’t going to eat all the MacDonald’s junk food in

front of her, but she is just going to eat the one that tastes the best. A wonderfully sunny, although real, treatment of American life. (2011)

**Loves of a Blond** 1965 Milos Forman (Czech) 3.0 Short, black-and-white, low budget film about loneliness and the awkward search for a romantic connection in Communist Czechoslovakia. Factory girl Andula (Hana Brejchova) works in a factory staffed mainly by girls and lives in a dormitory; she has a brief fling with a musician from Prague, Milda (played by Vladimir Pucholt); she arrives unexpectedly with her suitcase at his parents' home in Prague; the parents don't know what to do; the girl returns to her factory town, where she lies to her girlfriends about how nice the parents are and the last scene has her back to work painting shoes in the factory. Film has New Wave-style, spontaneous feel throughout, where camera kind of glides where it feels like it (following the soldier's ring rolling across the dance floor and under the table of the three girls who suddenly close their legs) and the actors, many of whom are amateurs, appear to be improvising their dialogue (the three soldiers at the mixer dance talk among themselves interminably about whether they should approach the three girls at the table, how to approach them, etc.; later in Prague musician's mother is motor mouth about her resentment at son's girlfriend showing up invited and unannounced at her house). Perhaps the film expresses the desire for freedom under a repressive (Communist) regime – the freedom exteriorized through sexual relations since political freedom is impossible (an important theme in “The Unbearable Lightness of Being”). The film seems to focus mostly on loneliness and the desire of young people to connect with one another, although their attempts are farcically inept; Andula pursues Milda without thinking it through, sits passively as the parents argue and try to figure out what to do with her, and somewhat hopelessly returns to her factory town, where she continues to pretend, perhaps to hope, that she will find true love and fulfillment; (but on the other hand, all the adults seem overweight and settled into dull lives; so what so the kids have to look forward to?). Film is so improvisational and pedestrian that sometimes it bores; but it has droll, low key humor and generates compassion for the young people trying to find hope and a future. (2009)

**Lucky** 2017 John Carroll Lynch 3.5 A late life tribute to Harry Dean Stanton: moving tale of nonagenarian's evolving attitude toward life and death. Harry Dean Stanton as loner Lucky, living in very small town set in Sonoran Arizona; David Lynch in eccentric performance as local man disturbed by the departure of his pet tortoise; Ron Livingston mustachioed as local lawyer on the receiving end of Lucky's laconic sarcasm; Ed Begley Jr. in small role as the town doctor who diagnoses Lucky after he takes a fall in his house, telling him he is in remarkably good mental and physical health for a man his age; Tom Skerritt as ex-Marine with whom Lucky shares a few minutes of friendly conversation. Stanton's daily repetitive schedule in the little run-down desert town is broken when he experiences an inexplicable fall at home; this event sets off a kind of existential search about the meaning of life. As he repeats several times, Lucky is a “realist”, accepting things as they appear and rejecting a religious or even spiritual understanding of human existence; when he enters the café, the owner calls him “nothing”, and in a conversation in the bar later in the film, he asserts to a stunned company that they are all “nothing” and that nothing of any of them will persist. After an initial period of rudeness and rejection toward his compatriots, he then has experiences with fellow human beings that move him toward an acceptance of his mortality and even a certain joy in it. He has camaraderie with his buddies in the bar (he orders a bloody maria every night) and with people he meets in the town café, including Livingston, toward whom he had at first been insolent, and especially Skerritt, who draws him into fond remembrances of his service in the Navy during World War II. Lynch exhibits a kind of Zen acceptance when he finally announces that he has stopped worrying about and looking for his escaped tortoise. He also is invited by a café waitress to attend a Mexican fiesta, where he notices the joy that family members derive from one another and he even sings a mariachi song in excellent Spanish. The ending is priceless: Lucky walks alone (as always) into the desert, admires a grizzled old saguaro cactus (like himself, he must be thinking), takes a long, searching look at the camera as if to say “I'm okay” and shuffles off; thereafter, the tortoise walks into camera range, alone and happy with its condition. Life has certain pleasures and satisfactions, even if you are a grizzled old coot who has no family; enjoy them the best you can; just don't expect too much. Slow moving, but emotionally moving little film offering a life lesson for the viewer. (February 2018)

**Lucy** 2014 Luc Besson (France) 2.0 Scarlett Johansson as Lucy, normal American girl working in Taipei, who goes through the brainpower roof when she accidentally ingests some granules of a new super-drug; Choi Min-sik hard-nosed as Korean drug kingpin, who becomes Lucy's object of revenge; Morgan Freeman boring our underpants off with his careful, snail-paced explanations of the scientific background to brainpower enhancement; Amr Waked as sloppily dressed Paris plain-clothes detective, who somehow manages to protect Lucy and her associates from the hail of automatic weapon gunfire from the Koreans. A potentially exciting sci-fi thriller that has a pretty good start, but soon descends into depths of absurdity so bad that you wonder if Besson was trying to make a send-up of the genre. The conceit – explained in exhausting detail by Freeman – is that humans use only 10% of their brain power, and when Lucy takes a brain-enhancing drug, she can pump it up much higher and obtain all sorts of higher power – moving objects, paralyzing bad guys, taking over TV and radio frequencies; she develops a taste for higher knowledge that in the absurd final sequence she somehow develops by building a futuristic computer (performed grotesquely with all sorts of black and grey writhing worm-like connections), and when she hits 100% she disappears and informs her policeman friend that “I am everywhere”. Whenever the narrative flags, the film cuts away to brilliantly colored, impressionistic scenes reminiscent of a Malick movie – to the accompaniment of loud music, imagined interior pictures of arteries and neurons, swirling interspatial matter suggesting the origins of the universe, in Times Square historical regression from the present all the way through four Indians sitting on horses to a Tyrannosaurus charging madly at the camera. What this all means is elusive at best. Underneath the scientific veneer is non-stop violence and gunplay: when Lucy first ingests the blue stuff, she rampages through the hotel where she was imprisoned killing scores of Korean; afterwards, she is pursued to Europe (a picturesque Paris) by another large group of Korean hoods wearing black suits and ties, virtually all of whom are transported by Lucy up to writhe helplessly on the ceiling or gunned down by her and her police confederates; the last sequence is an orgy of violence while Lucy builds her computer to the amazement of the mute scientists standing around. The proceedings include a high-velocity drive through Paris that leaves the city littered with wrecked cars. The film is intermittently entertaining, and Scarlett Johansson is always fun to watch, but its surfeit of silliness and absurdity outweigh its modest virtues. (2015)

**The Lunchbox** 2013 Ritesh Batra (India) 3.5 Irrfan Khan as middle management accountant on the verge of retirement in an Indian company; Nimrat Kaur as attractive housewife, who sends a lunch intended for her inattentive husband to Khan by mistake; Nawazuddin Siddiqui as eager, talkative young accountant assistant, who adopts Khan as his father figure. Slow-moving, heart-warming, light-hearted, rather melancholy film about the development of a pen-pal relationship between Kaur and the older Khan. The vehicle of communication is the well-known Mumbai lunch delivery system that delivers stacked packages of meals to workers throughout the city; when Khan receives his first lunch in error, he sends a note back to Kaur, and when she replies, a friendship begins. The situation is ripe for developing a romantic relationship, since Khan is a lonely widower and Kaur's husband is distracted and -- it turns out -- is having an affair with an unseen woman. The relationship develops slowly, as Kaur experiences increasing disillusionment (her father dies and her mother shares her “disgust” for her husband in his final days) and Khan, basically a loner, develops a more cordial and trusting relationship with his sweet-tempered assistant, who shows him the pleasures of a good marital relationship. In the end, Khan decides to move to Bhutan, where he can have some peace and quiet away from the hustle-bustle of Mumbai (depicted graphically and believably in the film), and Kaur -- in a surprise to the viewer -- decides to sell her jewelry (!) and use the proceeds to join Khan in his new home far. The film ends rather ambiguously: the two coming together is not a triumph a la romantic comedy, but is tinged with second thoughts and some regret. Kaur's lot will be difficult no matter what she decides: to leave her husband and family and live with an older man far from home, or sacrifice her relationship, and stay at home with an inattentive and unfaithful man. Even in modern India the position of a woman is difficult. Nevertheless, the mood of the film is light-hearted, affectionate, and often whimsical: Kaur chatting through her kitchen with her unseen “auntie”, who is taking care of Kaur's elderly uncle; Khan's attempts to elude the attentions of the assiduous Siddiqui; when Khan is sexually stimulated by the correspondence, he imagines that someone

is touching his private parts on the (very crowded) bus (it turn out to be someone's briefcase); two times toward the end younger men on the bus address him as "Uncle" asking him whether he wants to take their seat; when Kaur reproaches the lunch delivery man that he sent the lunch to the wrong address, the latter objects that such is not possible since the Harvard Business School studied them and reported that mistakes were impossible. Three wonderful, believable actors. True to life, the film leaves a gentle poetic aftertaste in the viewer. (2014)

**Luther** 2003 Gill (Britain) 3.0 Joseph Fiennes, Bruno Ganz, Colin Firth, Claire Cox, Peter Ustinov, Alfred Molina. Lavishly mounted and photographed biopic of Luther from the strike of lightning until the Confession of Augsburg; international European production, apparently at least partially dubbed in English, with a preponderance of German actors. Fiennes badly miscast as Luther (young, cute, dewy eyed, and often glamorous!), but he tries hard with the Angst; his romance with Katherina is afterthought and laughable; they both are making lovey eyes and kissing sweetly and frolicking decorously in bed in the 1530s! Other actors are good, particularly Ustinov, who is a kind of second hero as Frederick the Wise – wily old fox, decent at heart, sensible and loyal man who will not give up his dear professor; also Firth as the intransigent Aleander, and the cynical and inattentive Leo X. Broadly historical, but lots of liberties taken with chronology and actual content of events to make interesting for viewer. Movie clearly takes side of Luther, who seems to stand for religious liberty (sort of true), the modern masses, and a humane liberal view of God as the loving Father, against the cruel, sadistic God of the Catholics and the obscurantist, authoritarian privilege of the corrupt Roman curia. Ideology of the sides seems rearranged to fit 20<sup>th</sup> century issues: e.g., it's a good thing to strike for religious liberty, but not to spill blood over it (the many mangled, bloody bodies of the Peasants' War)! Good on recreating the culture of indulgences (Alfred Molina excellent as Tetzl!), and Luther's confrontations with Cajetan and the Emperor at Worms are convincing and interesting. (2005)