

## GSC Films: M-R

**Ma saison préférée** 1993 André Téchiné 3.0 Catherine Deneuve, Daniel Auteuil. Beautifully photographed and meditative film about family relationships, loneliness, inability to communicate and establish and maintain relationships in southwest France. Focuses on Deneuve, reserved, disciplined and attractive matron, who has unspoken, reserved relationship with her husband, is standoffish with her children, and who struggles with her neurotic relationship with her brother (Auteuil). Their mother is a widow; she is strong, independent and rather blaming, always finding fault with her children; the issue is whether they will take her into their house, or send her to a retirement home; she has a massive stroke and dies in the end. Brother and sister have deep, enduring relationship that is sometimes harmonious and loving, and often antagonistic, even violently so; there are hints of incestuous feelings, but neither allows to go further. Movie often reads like a play, but the exquisite photography of nature (rivers, countryside, beginning in winter and proceeding into spring and summer) is cinematic, as are the ambiguous events – mother having stroke in orchard with camera's focus on cherries, mother kills her chickens before she is taken off to retirement home, Deneuve having erotic encounter – almost a rape -- with young man in park (fantasy?), Auteuil jumping off balcony, but (intentionally?) only hurting his ankle and not killing self, etc. Subplot involving younger generation (adopted Lucien is obsessed with sex, Anne plays easy Bach pieces and is as stand-offish as her parents) that seems rather aimless. Mother announces the theme as her husband wanting their two children to be “moderne;” success, one becomes a notaire and the other a medical neurologist, and yet they are alienated, unhappy, and generally unable to maintain life-giving relationships. The theme is underlined by director shooting conversations with machines roaring in the background – trucks passing on the freeways, planes passing overhead, traffic in the city streets, etc., all of them interfering with the words that mediate communication. Film opens with painting of Siamese twins – eternally connected, tied to one another; it closes with Deneuve reciting beautiful poem about the poet's connection with a force or person as mediated through nature. Deneuve's and Auteuil's relationship is hardened and falsified by conditions of life in the modern world? Anti-modern film? Does it try too hard? (2006)

**Ma vie de courgette (My Life as a Zucchini)** 2016 Claude Barras (France); writer Celine Sciamma 3.0 Touching little comedy drama about a child (nicknamed Courgette) sent to an orphanage after the death of his alcoholic mother. Stop-motion animation is a bit crude, although effective: jerky motion; minimalist sets; puppets have large round-ball faces with large expressive eyes (Keene style) that appeal opening and closing and rolling right and left, and little pucker mouths; the flattened red noses are unattractive; Courgette has distinctively blue hair. Courgette accidentally kills his mother when he slams a trap door on her; he meets the kind Raymond, the cop, and is then ferried to an orphanage, where he is at first lonely, but soon warms up to the fraternal camaraderie of the children, who support and love one another in the absence of their parents. Courgette has his ups and downs until he meets the sad, sensitive Camille, who begins to give him a sense of family; the counter movement is provided by her cruel and unpleasant mother (tight bodice), but since she is the only bad guy in the film, happiness triumphs with the support of the other children and the decision of Raymond, who becomes the foster parent of Courgette and Camille; the three will live happily ever after. The animation is distractingly primitive compared to Anglo-American stop motions such as ‘The Corpse Bride’, ‘The Nightmare before Christmas, and ‘The Fantastic Mr. Fox’, but this little film (less than an hour long) evokes genuine feelings of sympathy for children deprived of the love of family – parents and siblings – but who are able to find surrogates in the love of fellows in the orphanage and eventually of adoptive parents. Sunny atmosphere seemingly meant for children while also appealing to adults. (June 2017)

**Maborosi** 1995 Hirokazu Kore-eda 2.0 Makiko Ezumi Very slow moving film about woman – Yumiko -- who has to learn to accept loss: she loses her grandmother when a child; her first husband commits suicide; then she has to learn to accept the loss (why did he do it when they were so happy?), and accept her new husband and stepdaughter in a very provincial fishing village. Movie is at times touching, especially when milking the personal loss angle. Editing is done at extremely slow pace (I 2x fast forwarded through much of the movie) and would be generally unbearable to a western

audience. Almost all shots are medium long or long shots with few cuts. Often camera would run on a scene with no one in it, the characters would enter, and perhaps eventually leave, with camera running whole time. Extreme attention to color balance and mise-en-scene, making each shot much like a painting or tableau vivant; not many bright tones, but mostly dark, with a fair amount of symbolism (e.g., the condition of the bicycle that Yumiko shares with her first husband). Obvious debt to Ozu, but doesn't seem to generate as much emotion, perhaps because self-consciously arty. (2004)

**The Machinist** 2004 Brad Anderson 3.0 Jennifer Jason Leigh as sensitive, vulnerable prostitute that would like to settle down; a scarily emaciated, mentally tortured, loner paranoid insomniac Christian Bale, who is Trevor, a lathe operator in a factory; Aitana Sanchez-Gijon as sympathetic, pretty waitress with a child who has seizures; John Sharian as big, bald-headed, smirking nightmare guy pursuing Bale. Nightmare-style thriller, psychological horror film about a haunted machine operator so miserable that he has not slept in a year (he says). He has many horror-movie-style visions that even in the beginning the viewer takes as subjective manifestations of his Angst: blood pouring out of his refrigerator, post-it notes in his kitchen providing clues to something and threatening him with death, a fellow worker (Sharian) that follows him around threateningly, a friendship with a waitress (Sanchez-Gijon) who turns out not to exist. Bale's psychological condition and hallucinations recall Catherine Deneuve in Polanski's 'Repulsion' or Gene Hackman's toilet boiling over with blood in 'The Conversation'. Bale's physical appearance – 60 pounds lighter, bulging, haunted eyes, emaciated face with bones protruding, skin-and-bones chest – is very disturbing, so much so that it becomes distracting: the viewer focuses on Bale's weight-loss feat and his sickly appearance rather than on the psychology of the film's character and the progress of the narrative. The mystery deepens as the film progresses and is then cleared up in the final scenes: Trevor had killed a child in a hit-and-run accident occurring about a year ago (we see it happen with Bale at his normal weight); after running from the accident scene, his intense guilt led to the paranoid hallucinations; at the end of the film Bale, who now finally understands what is happening to him, turns himself in at a police station for the hit and run. The film, while effective and often gripping, is dreary and oppressive – shot in a dreary blue-gray palette with the camera lingering on Bale's scary face, dark shadows, decaying images, etc.; not to be viewed for entertainment! The narrative and the psychological observations are effective, but the film would probably have worked better if the lead was not played by a (good-looking) star actor who has been so dramatically and scarily transformed and if the writer had focused more on narrative clarity. (2013)

**Machuca** 2004 Andrés Wood (Chile) 4.0 Matias Quer as Gonzalo, shy and somewhat passive 11-year-old upper middle class kid from Santiago – he is the story's point of view; Ariel Mateluna as Machuca, a kid from the wrong side of the tracks living in shanty town – he receives a scholarship to the English-language school that Gonzalo attends; Manuela Martelli as pretty, flirtatious Silvana, cousin (?) of Machuca; Ernesto Malbran as Father McEnroe, the liberal (Liberation Theology?) headmaster of St. Patrick's school; Aline Kuppenheim as Gonzalo's free-spirited, affectionate mother constantly hugging Gonzalo while conducting a love affair with an older man. Moving film set in Santiago, Chile in last months before the coup of 1973 based on the experiences of Wood in the Catholic school headed by Fr. Whelan, a CSC priest from Detroit, Michigan; we follow the fortunes of an upper middle class family and a poor one living in the Santiago favela; boys from both families become friends in the elite private school they attend (Machuca receives a scholarship from the "radical" priest); their friendship is tested by the social and political divisions leading up to and following the coup; the military goons take over the school and Silvana is killed by the military when they round up people in the favela; the ending has all the principals separated by events. Political tensions are painted in the background in the beginning of the film, but go center stage as film progresses, culminating in newsreel footage of the coup and then the brutal clearing of the favela by the military. Amusing scenes depict coming of age: Gonzalo's sister is boy crazy and her boyfriend is obnoxious personally and politically; Gonzalo, Machuca, and Silvana form a kind of 'Jules et Jim' triangle experimenting innocently with sexuality – drinking cans of sweetened condensed milk and then kissing one another enthusiastically to suck the milk from one another's lips. Very sensitive film: particularly Gonzalo's face registers confusion, emptiness, and loss on several occasions. The two boys are depicted doing things together that childhood friends

love including selling political paraphernalia to both sides in their rallies, and then they are dragged apart by their class differences: Silvana calls Gonzalo “snob”; wealthy kids at the school pick on Machuca; they spend less time together and miss one another. The film does not explicitly favor one side over the other, although it elicits our sympathy for the poor by its depiction of their misery living in the slums. It focuses on the class divisions in Chile and how the innocent attachments of childhood are rent asunder by these differences. An honest and moving account of the director’s experiences as a boy in a time of crisis. (2011)

**Madea’s Big Happy Family** 2011 Tyler Perry 3.0 Tyler Perry hilarious, insulting, foul-mouthed as Medea the materfamilias, whose solution is to “beat the hell” out of anyone that misbehaves; Cassi Davis equally funny and fast-talking as Bam, Medea’s pot-smoking sister; Loretta Devine as Shirley, Bam’s soft-spoken, Christian daughter who is dying of cancer; Shannon Kane as Kimberly, Shirley’s hostile, high-falutin’ daughter carrying around huge anger against her family; Isaiah Mustafa as good-looking, well-meaning husband of Kane; David Mann as slapsticky son (?) of Madea; Bow Wow Moss playing straight as Byron, Bam’s youngest child (turns out to be her grandchild); Natalie Desselle as Bam’s other, more sweet-tempered daughter; Teyana Taylor as Sabrina, Byron’s extremely loud-mouthed ex-wife constantly shrieking for child support from Byron. Extremely funny, entertainingly manipulative film about life in the African-American middle class world. The main focus of the film is the in-your-face humor of Madea as she confronts the fools, prima donnas, layabouts, and potential crooks in her and Bam’s family. A very large, late middle age Black woman wearing muumuus with her large breasts flopping around inside, Madea has a peculiar way of pronouncing certain words (“Praise the Lerd!” “Hellér”) and reels off insult tirades to hilarious effect; she cannot abide foolishness in her family. Perry paints stereotypically negative pictures of Black characters: Byron has already been in jail for pushing dope and David Mann is an ignorant do-nothing who stands on his manhood to object to a colonoscopy. Perry is however much harder on his female characters: while the older ones are at least well-intentioned, the three younger ones are loud-mouthed ball-breakers who constantly belittle and undermine the men in their lives; the worst is perhaps Kimberly, who counters her husband’s attempts at understanding with hostile cuss-words, or perhaps it is Sabrina, who prevents anyone else from talking by emitting a continuous shouting-buzzing noise. Otherwise, the film is a conformist Hollywood-style movie. Perry pulls on our heartstrings through Shirley’s soft-spoken character, her quiet death toward the end of the film, and her funeral that is filled with stirring gospel music. And the confluence of Madea’s tirades and Shirley’s death finally brings some sense to the family: Madea addresses her family after the funeral and under threat of giving them a good beating she tells them to forgive one another, reconcile with your spouse, no longer deal drugs and get a job, take care of your children and quit trying to get back at your ex-husband through the child you had together. With a hilarious sequence from the Maury Povitich show in which half of what outraged Medea says has to be bleeped out, the film ends with the condition of the family much improved by their willingness – finally – to be honest with one another. Perry’s movie is much better than his reputation – reasonably well plotted but standing or falling on the humor. (2012)

**The Madness of King George** 1994 Nicholas Hytner 4.0 Nigel Hawthorne gloriously dominating the film with his comic/dramatic/pathetic/immensely entertaining portrait of the eccentric George III battling with insanity for six months in 1788; Helen Mirren svelte, youngish, attractive, reserved (after 15 children!) and yet devoted to her beloved George; Rupert Everett as effeminate (although thoroughly heterosexual), effete, sometimes underhanded and plotting, sometimes submissive Prince of Wales who would like to have “something to do” and perhaps his independence as Regent; Ian Holm as sly, stubborn, rather priggish, and ultimately successful psychiatric parson who helps George recover from his bout of porphyria; Amanda Donohoe as charming and sexy lady-in-waiting to the Queen who “sacrifices” her virtue to the handsome Greville, aide-de-camp of the king (a handsome, tho toothy Rupert Graves), in order to secure an interview of the Queen with the King. Gloriously entertaining high-quality British film that had this viewer either crying, laughing out loud, or fascinated with the issues in the screenplay. Beautifully filmed in bright, blazing color using traditional English backgrounds (although not the actual royal palaces or the Houses of Parliament)and smashing period costumes. The

music of Handel adapted for the film provides the musical color, the drama (The Coronation Anthem 'Zardoz the Priest!'), the pomp and circumstance that match the milieu. Hawthorne's performance is a wonder of nature -- blustering and aggressive on the surface while winking out in merriment (the sparkling eyes, the arched mouth) from underneath, capturing our affection with his (supposedly un-English) enthusiasm and love of life, and yet evoking our pity and almost horror at the degradation to which he is subject while in his spell of madness and at the suffering from the isolation he experiences while in the care of Ian Holm. Strong political subtext -- Prime Minister Pitt (the Younger played as an up-tight bean counter by Julian Wadham) stands to lose his position to the opposition of Fox (the true political good guys since they were committed to 'Reform'), if the king is displaced by his n'er-do-well son. The film includes comment on the primitive, indeed ridiculous practices of contemporary doctors, who are interested more in the color of the king's feces and urine than in ways to help him recover from his madness. Everything in the film sparkles like a precious stone -- from the costumes, the language of the screenplay, the music, to the performances, including especially Hawthorne. The narrative follows the Hollywood curve: our affection for the king and his family is effectively enlisted (how would it be possible not to like the king and his wife!), and we hiss at the Prince of Wales and his entourage; the conflict becomes tense with the king's confinement and treatment; the tension is ratcheted up by the bill in the House to declare the Regent; the king's recovery is confirmed during a dramatic reading of 'King Lear', in which he reverts to some of his sane linguistic conceits, e.g., "What. What?", and praises the Lord Chancellor for his interpretation of Lear's daughter; his appearance outside the House defeats the plots of the Prince of Wales; and the film ends with the family waving to crowd on the steps of St. Paul's Cathedral -- the king to the Prince "Wave. That is what we are paid for." A happy ending that does not take into account the king's future frequent bouts of madness and his final collapse into incompetency in the last ten years of his reign. Nevertheless, this film makes a permanent impression. (2010)

**The Magdalene Sisters** 2002 Peter Mullan 3.5 Geraldine McEwan in brilliant performance as Sister Bridget, the sadistic mother superior of the convent; Eileen Walsh as pathetic, retarded, victimized inmate in the convent; Anne-Marie Duff as girl raped by a drunken cousin and dispatched by her parents to the convent; Nora-Jane Noone as pretty brunette Bernadette sent to the convent because she flirted too much with boys in her orphanage; Dorothy Duffy as sweet Rose, who had her baby taken from her by her stony-faced parents before she was sent to the convent. Moving and horrifying semi-fictional film about the abuse heaped on inmates of the Magdalene convents -- young women in puritanical Ireland who had offended against the strict sexual code by having babies out of wedlock or even just being too much of a flirt! The convents are workhouses where the girls are made to do heavy manual labor washing laundry; some who are supported by their families succeed in leaving after a few years, but others with no outside support spend the rest of their lives with the good nuns. Movie fits into the prison genre with roiling resentment among inmates, sadistic prison guards, foiled attempts at escape with harsh punishment dished out when they are returned, etc. Several exciting and humorous scenes: Noone lifts her dress and pulls down her knickers to tempt a delivery boy to help her escape; Duff puts some sort of irritant in the abusive priest's clothes that causes him to go crazy and rip all his clothes off while he is saying mass; Noone and Duffy fearlessly escape at the end, successfully confronting Sister Bridget in her office, stealing the key to the door, and running to "safety" in the beautiful Irish countryside. Living conditions in the convent are not that bad -- plenty of food, a pleasant building, mattresses and sheets; and most of the nuns are fairly benign. But not the mother superior as played in McEwan's dazzling performance: she is humorous and attentive with a soft face (one even feels a little sorry for her when she is defeated by the girls escaping in the end), but she is greedy (she gloats over the money the laundry collects and has an emotional meltdown when she can't find the key to her safe), vindictive and violent (when she catches Noone after an escape attempt, she chops off her hair with a sharp pair of scissor covering her face with blood); and it is apparent that the motive for her heartless oppression of the girls is burning religious enthusiasm (the girls must repent, recognize their worthlessness, and do lifelong penance in order to earn salvation in heaven) and not just run-of-the-mill sadism. Film is perhaps unfair to nuns in general, many of whom were kind and did valuable humanitarian work; and the Magdalene program did provide a home and sustenance for many destitute girls. But movie makes a convincing case that too many of the

convents (laundry factories!) were hypocritically cruel and oppressive. Even though three of the girls managed to escape, we are left with the unforgettable sight of poor Walsh babbling incoherently in an isolation room of the local insane asylum. (2011)

**Maggie's Plan** 2015 Rebecca Miller 3.0 Breezy, kind-of New York romantic comedy, in which the right partners don't necessarily end up with one another. Greta Gerwig as New York single, pretty, plain, charming, having difficulty making the right decisions; Ethan Hawke as "ficto-critical anthropologist," who wants to write his Great American Novel; Julianne Moore as uptight intellectual academic married to Hawke (how did that happen?!) – they have two children; Bill Hader as Gerwig friend, enthusiastic dad; Maya Rudolph as his somewhat cynical, wise-cracking wife; Travis Fimmel as sperm donor that runs a successful pickle business. The film is a kind-of romantic roundelay with no clear destination. Gerwig falls in love with Hawke and marries him, even though she has decided to be artificially inseminated by Fimmel; Hawke is an emotionally dependent academic, who needs a muse aside from his self-obsessed wife to help him write his novel; Gerwig drops the insemination plans. Three years after their marriage and the birth of a daughter, Gerwig and Hawke are in trouble: Gerwig is very attached to her daughter (much as she had been to her own mother) and impatient with Hawke's narcissistic personality and his inability to finish the already lengthy novel. Gerwig develops a plot to reconnect Hawke with Moore, which works in the predictable off and on manner. She intends to stop trying to mess with "fate" and "destiny" and just not be attached to a man and to focus on communing with her daughter (much giggling, squealing, and laughing). Clever last shot of the film, however, has stop motion close-up of Gerwig's face – Fimmel is approaching her and it seems that she is observing him and already revising her autonomy resolutions; or perhaps she will resist the temptation. It is wonderful having another writer-director focusing on life in New York without the repetitive philosophical obsessions of Woody Allen; Miller promises to become a worthy partner of Noah Baumbach. Greenwich Village New York is presented pleasingly and picturesquely. It is difficult to follow the author's ruminations about not interfering with the workings of fate, but they seem at least a recommendation to remain flexible and open to new romantic experiences. All the acting is first-rate, particularly Moore's machine-like academic brain and Gerwig's almost pixie-like, innocent charm; and then Moore becomes more reasonable and open to change toward the end of the film. The satire of American academics is often delicious – the use of Latinate jargon, the easy, but impenetrable abstractions that appear to refer to nothing, the distraction from the important things in life. (2016)

**Magic in the Moonlight** 2014 Woody Allen 2.5 Colin Firth as sarcastic, cut-and-dried skeptic, who is also a show biz magician that makes elephants disappear; Emma Stone open-faced, callow, innocent as American medium that Firth is determined to unmask; Simon McBurney as another magician that enlists Firth in the anti-Stone campaign; Eileen Atkins the most interesting thing in the film as Firth's insightful, well-spoken aunt; Marcia Gay Harden, Jackie Weaver et al. wasted in insignificant, underwritten minor roles. Self-deprecating comedy about a cynic that sets out to debunk a pretty medium (still popular in the 1920s), but ends up falling in love with her; after momentarily converting to credulity and stoking some faint hope in the viewer that Allen is modifying his lifelong skepticism, he reconverts to his original misanthropy by the end. Film has some entertaining aspects: the performances of the principals; the stunning cinematography of the luxurious properties and the views on the Côte d'Azur; and a couple of moments in the screenplay – in the first part of the film where in Firth's cynicism Allen seems to be mocking himself; and toward the end Atkins' monologue, where, while protesting constantly to the contrary, she plants in Firth's head a conviction that he is truly in love with Stone and not with the allegedly "perfect match" to whom he is already engaged. Otherwise, the screenplay is repetitive and trite. How many more times will we trusting but unsuspecting fans be subjected to the same debate between agnostic skeptics who are convinced that this is all there is and characters with spiritual convictions? In Allen's canon, belief in God, a soul, and an afterlife seems to make people happy and fulfilled; and in every film in which the issue is raised, the hopes turn out to be hollow and the character has to accept that love, family, and professional success are the only real consolations. The plot creaks audibly, especially when the campaign to discredit Stone turns out to be a trick played by McBurney and Stone on him – she declares that McBurney unmasked her as a phony a long time ago. The hackneyed

romantic comedy narrative cannot be saved by the final trick, when Stone lets the hesitating Firth know that she loves him by knocking once in the adjoining room, just as the supposed spirit had done in the film's two séances. Allen's obsessive use of 20s tunes is sometimes distracting. Allen should relax his film-making schedule; this script should have been shown to a professional and gone through a couple of rewrites. (2014)

**Make Way for Tomorrow** 1937 Leo McCarey (Paramount) 2.5 Overrated sentimental drama about the fate of an elderly couple separated when their home is repossessed by the (supposedly friendly) bank. Victor Moore in a fedora hat as granddad with a quavering voice; Beulah Bondi (age about 45) playing a grandma of about 75, who mostly sits in her rocking chair; Thomas Mitchell as the son with a heart that welcomes his mother into his prosperous New York apartment; Fay Bainter as Mitchell's wife, who frets about the unpredictable behavior of her daughter, Barbara Read, who because she can't have friends over with grandma hanging around, gets in with the wrong crowd; Porter Hall as an unsympathetic son-in-law; Minna Gombell as a daughter; Louise Beavers as Mitchell's maid – her life is much changed by the presence of Bondi. The film is divided into three parts: the initial family meeting where it is decided that the elderly pair will be separated since none of the five children can accommodate both; the middle part where Moore gets on his host's nerves especially when he develops a bad cold and Bondi alienates Bainter and Read despite Mitchell's efforts to smooth things over; and the ending, where Bondi and Moore have a last date dancing in their honeymoon hotel (everyone on the dance floor admires the cute old couple) before Moore boards the train for another relative in California (better for his health) and Bondi is off to an old folks' home. Their last goodbye on the train platform is a well-executed piece of smarm. McCarey does a good job pulling at the heart strings while not going over the top. The film presents most of the children as well-intentioned, but reluctant to take in their parents and impatient and resentful when they are living with them; Mitchell is the exception, but he is pressured by his wife and can't do much. If the old couple's social security were established, they had some savings and the children pitched in financially.... The most irritating aspect of the film is the passive, immobile, powerless aspect of Moore and Bondi: they spend most of the time sitting in rocking chairs (Bondi), complaining about their fate (Moore), and generally getting in the way. They don't have hobbies, friends, they don't take the initiative; they are victims of their condition – since they are poor, old, useless people that no one wants around, they both accept that they will part and never see one another again. Moore tells Bondi in front of the train that it sure has been a pleasure knowing her all these years. Orson Welles thought the ending was devastatingly sad. Is this what it meant to be 70 in 1937? (2017)

**La mala educación** 2004 Pedro Almodóvar 2.5 Gael García Bernal as young stud Juan who willingly sells himself for whatever advantage; Fele Martínez as young successful director Enrique. Rather bitter and complicated Almodovar film about life amidst homosexual relations and about the results of childhood abuse of boys (in a boarding school) by a predator priest. The setting is 100% gay: a lot of bare buttocks, a flaming queen who wears her artificial breasts exposed and who is blackmailing the ex-priest for money so she can complete her sex change, etc. Narrative construction is very complex: the present has Martínez, the obvious stand-in for Almodovar in the 1980s, meeting whom he thinks is his childhood friend Ignacio with whom he had had a tender boyhood relationship (not so innocent since they masturbated one another in the movie theater); the film that he makes about the relationship and its aftermath including the murder of Ignacio (the film is based on a story written by Ignacio); and a flashback toward the beginning of the film to tell the story of the two boys and the priest, Fr. Manilo. A couple of nice surprise jolts that help hold the viewer's interest – we find out that the young fellow presenting himself as Ignacio is really his brother, and then much later we discover that he had a hand in the real Ignacio's murder (and then he used his identity to promote his career!). Narrative is very complicated: the viewer is so busy trying to figure out what is going on that he doesn't have the energy to focus on themes, aesthetics, etc. The plot has tragic consequences, since Ignacio, who has become a flaming queen, is murdered by his younger brother (!), Juan and the laicized priest; and then in the postscript the priest is murdered by the irrepressible Juan. The film is melodramatic and moralistic. The priest is evil – pervert, blackmailer, and murderer. Juan, who had nothing to do with the original corruption in the boarding school, is perhaps even worse – he is willing to sell his body for an acting job

(screwing Enrique) and for money (screwing the priest) despite not being a thorough-going homosexual, and he participates in the murder of his brother. The only character to escape from the carnage is Enrique, who is devoted to his art and who (in the postlogue) “is still devoted to” making films. Almodovar only slightly cuts back his normal florid style: e.g., still plenty of eye-catching design and the murder plot is hatched in the presence of ranks of lurid full-featured masks. Although the movie is supposed to be something of a tribute to film noir, Almodovar cannot deal with that style’s muted, shadowy aesthetic. The film ends very abruptly when Enrique throws out Juan after finding out that he played a role in the murder, and the rest of the plot developments are recounted in title cards. Film is self-indulgent, and despite many good Almodovar touches, just doesn’t hang together. (2007)

**Magic Mike** 2012 Steven Soderbergh 3.0 Matthew McConaughey, alpha male with ripped body as sleazy but effective entrepreneur, head of a male strip joint in Tampa; Channing Tatum, a charismatic beefcake guy named Mike, an excellent dancer who wants to go into business, but he is not getting any younger (“you’re a bullshit 30-year-old male stripper!” = Horn); Olivia Munn very pretty as psychology student who likes casual sex and threesomes until she decides to get married; Alex Pettyfer (British) as the nerdy, immature, clueless fledgling dancer Adam; Cody Horn as Adam’s straight-arrow sister, maternally concerned about the fate of her brother and potentially interested in Mike. Generally entertaining, existential-style drama about what you can make of your life when caught in a disreputable, dead-end profession like male stripping. The film opens by thrusting the viewer into the hedonistic strippers’ world. A lot of exposure to the girls-night-out male soft core stripping scene, where the customers scream and shriek with delight like teenagers as the guys peel off their clothes and thrust their pelvises at the audience to the accompaniment of strobe lights and very loud rock music; and then some of them meet the guys afterwards for casual sex. The strippers are depicted as mostly modest and vulnerable guys trying to make a buck; one backstage shot has one of them reinforcing his G-string with needle and thread. The seductive draw of the lifestyle is shown through the fate of Adam, who becomes gradually addicted to his new life, to the point that at the end of the film he is delighted that he has money, a steady income, and he can “fuck any girl he wants”. The magnetic Mike – approaching the end of his useful life as a stripper – however moves in the opposite direction. He is attracted to straight girl Horn, who at first is concerned only with protecting her brother (good luck!), but who is soon making eyes at Mike. Mike is confronted with the choice of continuing in the business and “moving to Miami” with McConaughey to set up an even bigger club business, or quitting the racket and hooking up with Horn. He becomes disillusioned with the dishonest and venal McConaughey, uses his life savings to bail out Adam from a drug debt, and then drops the entertainment business altogether and stays in Tampa. The last scene has the previously reluctant Horn holding hands with Mike over her breakfast table and the two of them speculating what they will do with “the next seven hours” in her apartment until the restaurants open for breakfast. The film turns out to be a romantic comedy: although Mike’s future is uncertain, at least he and his newfound girlfriend have a life together. Entertaining environment, beefy guys, and sexy girls in a pretty good redemption story. Tatum is convincing as the blustering hedonist with a soft heart underneath. (2013)

**The Major and the Minor** 1942 Billy Wilder (co-writer Charles Brackett) 3.5 Ginger Rogers smart, sassy, cute, and rather sexy masquerading most of the film as a 12-year-old; Ray Milland as laid back, smiling, good-humored army officer who takes Sue-Sue under his wing; Rita Johnson effective as Milland’s aggressive fiancée; Robert Benchley amusing as lecher who comes on to Rogers in the beginning of the film; Diana Lynn as wise-cracking sister of Johnson – a would-be Madame Curie who can’t stand her sister. Well-written, well directed, amusing and even touching romantic comedy that jump started Wilder’s career as a director. Rogers dominates throughout, appearing in every scene. She is a working girl in New York disgusted by the come-ons of the men she meets; she decides to return to small-town Iowa, but when she discovers she doesn’t have enough money for the ticket, she disguises herself as a 12-year-old for the half fare; she has numerous age-related adventures on the train and at the military school afterwards; Milland, who is engaged to Johnson, takes Rogers innocently under his wing; she sleeps in his train bedroom and then moves in with Johnson’s sister, Lynn, who plots with her to scotch the planned marriage with Johnson; Rogers is feted by the boys at the school, thus indicating that

she has more sex appeal than her disguise is supposed to reveal; somewhat improbably, all turns out well in the end – Rogers returns to her mother, a hesitant Milland arrives on his way to his new posting, and the two meet and kiss on the railroad platform heading for California where they will get married just before he ships out. There are some psychologically improbable moments, chief among which is Milland's apparent cluelessness about the real age of Rogers until the embrace at the very end; and the long sequences in which cadets buzz around Rogers like moths to the flame become a bit boring. Overall, though, delightful and witty until the end. A good line is Benchley's come-on: "Why don't you step out of that wet raincoat into this dry martini?" Rogers is pretty and charming as both a grown woman and as the pre-adolescent in disguise; her sex appeal through her disguise is apparent in several scenes, mainly the charming one in which Milland gives her a lecture on proper behavior and then squinting and looking at her through his bad eye, exclaims, "Sue-Sue, you're going to be a knock-out someday!" and the scenes in which the boys, stammering and blushing, flock into her presence. Rogers doesn't look much like a 12-year-old, but it is fun watching Rogers toying with the masquerade. Wilder plays well with McGuffins – Milland's squinting, which of course he repeats in the final scene in which he suddenly discovers her appeal on the railroad platform, and the image of the moths and the light bulb which is repeated in the penultimate sequence to witty effect. Despite all, the final scene is persuasive: the two principals show convincing chemistry as they recognize one another and embrace passionately. We are genuinely happy they are together and will live "happily ever after". Much superior to "Sabrina", another Wilder romantic comedy. (2011)

**Male and Female** 1919 Cecil B. DeMille 3.5 Gloria Swanson, Thomas Meighan. Admirable early feature length silent film showing DeMille attention to detail and an expert silent/visual narrative technique that carries story through convincingly; shows that innovations of Griffith have been quickly assimilated? Narrative pace is quite slow compared to talk movies, requiring patience from contemporary viewer. Acting very good without too much pantomime type exaggeration. Great to see GS and compare her to 'Sunset Boulevard.' Theme is relation/battle between true love, which can reach across social barriers, and social structure that compartmentalizes. Crichton is admirable organizer when shipwrecked on island; the upper class folk seem usually foolish and completely useless with their irrelevant Oxford educations. He becomes kind of king that is compared to an ancient Babylonia potentate. When rescued by British ship, things return to normal. Class appropriate couples pair off despite the persistence of intense love feelings between Mary and Crichton; Crichton and the servant girl go off to America (home of social equality) where they work a farm together and seem quite happy; Mary finally agrees to marry her society boy. Swanson is very cute and young; she is very sexy getting in and out of the bath toward the beginning; the little servant girl is also cute and flirtatious. Titles are wonderful: some dialogue, but also author's commentary on action, and quite a bit of effective poetry. Very effective movie with emotional and dramatic impact. (2005)

**Malena** Italy 2000 Giuseppe Tornatore 2.0 Monica Bellucci. Another sentimental, nostalgic filled and glowing movie from the maker of *Cinema Paradiso*. Score by Morricone goes by more or less unnoticed, except for a little annoying solo oboe (?). Coming of age movie taking place during World War II with lots of jokes on sexuality and masturbation. Dramatic emphasis is impact of 13-year-old's obsession with the stunning Monica Bellucci. Pretty good on the unbending sexual and marital code of small Sicilian town, resulting in vicious revenge once the Germans leave. Happy ending is forced – why would villager women suddenly give Monica respect, even if she has her husband on her arm? (2005)

**The Maltese Falcon** 1941 John Huston (Warners) 4.0 Humphrey Bogart as private eye Sam Spade who never gets over the murder of his partner, Mary Astor as the terminally duplicitous Brigid O'Shaughnessy, Peter Lorre as the effeminate, nervous and ineffectual Joel Cairo, Sidney Greenstreet as the cultivated obsessive fat man after the Falcon, Lee Patrick as good natured secretary to Spade, Walter Huston in unbilled cameo as ship captain who delivers falcon to Spade and then dies, Elisha Cook, Jr. as sour, pipsqueaky hood who is at best marginally competent, Ward Bond as police detective friendly to Spade. Classic private eye flic that set the standard for its successors, influenced film noir style with moderately shadowed cinematography and the femme fatale, who however does not succeed in destroying



the hero; he sees through her wiles and delivers her to the police for at least a life sentence. Fate seems to take a back seat to individual will and effort, as Spade sets out to solve the crime in order to save himself from being incriminated by the police and to avenge the death of his partner. The plot, although not as difficult to follow as 'The Big Sleep,' is extremely twisty, since everyone is adept at lying and prevaricating in order to position himself better to get the Falcon (supposedly worth at least hundreds of thousands of dollars). The plot turns mainly on whether Astor is telling the truth (she never does), and what role she has played in the two deaths at the beginning of the film. The thieves – four of them – are constantly in and out of alliance as they maneuver and double cross one another. Astor is a bit over the top, but very enjoyable as overacting, manipulative, and stylishly dressed, although in a matronly way. Lorre is classic – he smells of gardenias, is very effeminate and emotional (oscillating between giggling and fits of anger), nervous, afflicted with an ineffectual bad temper – whenever he pulls a gun on Bogart, the latter disarms him. Greenstreet as the leader of the gang impresses with his heft, verbal elegance, and sophistication; probably also homosexual; one supposes he has a sometimes liaison with Lorre. Bogart is an interesting character, although hard to figure out. He is tough, cynical, intelligent and witty, with good verbal skills; he can lie along with all the others; for a while it looks as if his main motivation in going along with the crooks is to get money from Greenstreet, and he has sexual liaisons with two women in the film, one of them married to his own partner! but in final dramatic confrontation with Astor, he shows – with a slight trembling jaw – that he is outraged at her murder of his partner (this is a question of honor), and for that he will turn her over to the police. The issue is love or loyalty (combined with a bit of self-preservation), and he chooses the latter with some sadistic enjoyment of the punishment that she will suffer for her actions. In final scene the elevator closes on Astor as the police take her away; Bogart looks at her with little emotion and then walks down the stairs. He clearly has some integrity, but it is often upstaged by his moral faults. Some lines: Greenstreet to Wilmer: "If you lose a son, it is always possible to get another. There is only one Maltese Falcon." Sam to Effie: "You're a good man, Sister." Spade to the obnoxious Wilmer: "The cheaper the crook, the gaudier the patter." Spade to Cairo: "You're gonna take it and like it." Spade on Falcon: "Stuff that dreams are made of." (2007)

**The Mambo Kings** 1992 Arne Glimcher 3.0 Armand Assante as brother César, constantly talking, cackling laughter, hyperactive, coarsely good-looking ladies' man who is devoted to his brother, Antonio Banderas as Nestor, his quiet, sensitive brother, who is hopelessly in love with a woman that he lost in Cuba, Cathy Moriarty as good time party girl, worldly wise, who hooks up with Armand for some good times, Desi Arnaz Jr. plays his father realistically on television. Set in early 50s with the brothers fleeing Cuba to try their luck at the big time in New York when mambo was king. First half or so of film is riveting – drive forward toward success in the New York concert scene having to confront and overcome obstacles; the revelation of the intense love and solidarity between the two brothers. And most of all the intense, driving rhythm and instrumental color of the mambo music – Tito Puente himself leading his orchestra on at least a couple of occasions, and the exuberant Celia Cruz (what a mouth, what rhythm in her swaying body!) singing about three numbers, the best being a montage of the boys playing third-rate gigs like bar mitzvahs and Russian weddings (Cossacks dancing!) and working in a meat packing factory with Banderas beating the beef carcasses to the rhythm of Cruz's song. The group's big break comes with an invitation from Desi Arnaz to be on the 'I Love Lucy' Show, where the two boys clown in black and white with Jr. playing his dad and Lucille Ball appearing in real cuts from her show. The second half of the film stagnates a bit into soap opera territory: although he marries a beautiful woman, Banderas still can't get his first love out of his mind, and he ends up ruining his relationship. He then dies in a car accident (hits a tree!), and film ends with Assante recalling his time together with his beloved brother. The fire and exuberance of the mambo go out with a whimper, but we leave with the rhythms of Celia Cruz in our bones. (2010)

**The Man From Nowhere** 2010 Jeong-beom Kim 2.5 Bin Won, good-looking, taciturn guy with a mop of hair that covers his eyes (he resembles a cute pop star) -- he becomes very attached to...; Sae-ron Kim, a 10-year-old kid orphaned by her mom's heroin habit and her subsequent murder by gangsters. Gritty Korean action movie focusing on the organ-harvesting racket in contemporary Seoul. The film is long on expertly staged fighting, and killing, and not focused enough on narrative clarity,

theme, and character development. The promising beginning has depressive-acting pawn shop owner Bin acquiring paternal feelings toward the little girl; it then focuses on Bin's campaign to rescue Sae-ron from the gangsters, who kidnap her and imprison her in an attic with several other waifs waiting for their turn to be murdered and have their marketable organs removed. After he shaves off most of his hair in ritual preparation, he beats up and kills what seems to be the majority of the gangsters in Seoul, while the incompetent, buffoonish police follow unhelpfully at a distance; this picture of the police force seems to be a pattern in South Korean movies (see 'Memories of Murder', etc). The viewer learns from a mostly incoherent investigation by the police that Bin is a former elite military agent with astounding combat abilities and that the root of his depression and his attachment to Kim is the death of his wife in an auto accident (or was it an assassination? -- hard to tell). No doubt that Bin is a fabulous fighter and that the hand-to-hand King Fu-type of combat is well staged, but the film is intended for martial arts enthusiasts. It has a happy ending since Sae-ron turns up surprisingly alive and then tugs at the viewer's heartstrings hugging her savior and repeating several times "You came to save me!" Well done, but limited in its appeal. (2014)

**Man From Reno** 2014 Dave Boyle 3.0 Ayako Fujitani as Japanese mystery writer, Aki, tired of writing and going into hiding in San Francisco; Pepe Serna as Paul Del Moral, paternal, downhome Latino sheriff of fictional, rural San Marco county (her detective seems inspired by both Sherlock Holmes and Maigret); Kazuki Kitamura as good-looking Japanese guy, Alias Akira, who kicks off the film having a one-night stand with Aki and then leaving with no warning; Hiroshi Watanabe as the "Running Man", who kicks off the San Marco part of the story when the sheriff encounters his abandoned car on a foggy night. A noirish, detective yarn that fascinates at the start, but becomes impenetrable about two-thirds of the way through. The film is set in San Francisco and the surrounding region – filmed in SF, Petaluma, San Juan Bautista with excellent evocative shots of the Majestic Hotel in Pacific Heights, the streets of San Francisco, small towns of Central California, rolling green hills dotted with live oaks, etc. The film has a dual narrative in the beginning – the sheriff looking for the identity of the Running Man, intercut with Aki's experiences with Akira, her discovery of suggestive clues (e.g., a head of lettuce) left behind by her erstwhile lover, and threats to her well-being. The narrative makes some progress explaining the apparently priceless turtles in the toilet tank, and the relation of the Running Man to the Akira alias (the real one is found dead), but when the sheriff journeys to San Francisco to question Aki, things become suddenly opaque. The ending is pessimistic and confusing: when Aki returns to her hotel room, she is shot and killed by Alias Akira (?); the sheriff then finds him, but allows him to escape; the last scene has him chatting with a stranger (?), giving the impression that Akira is a con man preparing for another sting of some sort. It would seem that the plot behind the surface of the narrative is an attempt to smuggle priceless turtles through customs into the USA; this leads to violence and murder of the real Akira, but Alias Akira attempts to horn in on the profits – apparently to no avail since he confesses at one point that he set the turtles free in San Francisco Bay. The plot is so convoluted and the ending so impenetrable that one assumes that the film is in part a satire of film noir. The cinematography is stellar, Aki is a sympathetic character to follow through the plot, the atmosphere is consistently picturesque, and it is pleasant to try to untangle the "what's going on" clues dropped by the screenplay. However, the screenplay teems with unanswered questions – turtles worth \$50,000 a piece? Why did Alias Akira set them free? Why did he murder Aki in cold blood? The last third of the film however needs to be rewritten for additional clarity and some sort of resolution. (2015)

**Man Hunt** 1941 Fritz Lang (wr. Dudley Nichols; 20c Fox) 2.5 Walter Pidgeon as easy-going, laconic big game hunter, who gets into trouble when he appears to intend to assassinate Hitler; Joan Bennett as rather mindless, emotionally needy teenager sporting a pretty good cockney accent; George Sanders natty and suave as razor-sharp Gestapo officer wearing a white uniform and a ceremonial dagger; John Carradine as intermittently menacing German agent that dies in the London Tube. Definitely lesser Fritz Lang effort that begins well and has good action sequences, but that declines precipitously as the film progresses. Impressive beginning in a Bavarian forest with assassination attempt against Hitler foiled by Pidgeon's hesitations and finickiness; after his arrest we discover through his conversation with Sanders that he is a big game hunter, admired by Sanders, and he has penetrated the

Führer's most closely guarded preserve; he explains he was engaged in a "sporting stalk" of the biggest game on earth, i.e. a powerful human, and had no intention of trying to kill Hitler. Supposed psychological depth is provided in the end when Pidgeon realizes noisily that subconsciously he was planning to assassinate Hitler, but throughout the film he had not admitted it to himself. Exact and detailed rendering of local scenes, e.g., after the long sequence in the Bavarian woods, the docks in a German port; the docks in London where Pidgeon meets Bennett; the final cave sequence in which Sanders and Pidgeon play macho one-upmanship is long, hokey, and dull – Pidgeon emerges the victor when he shoots Sanders in the eye with a home-made bow and arrow (!). Pidgeon's relationship with the teenaged Bennett strains the viewer's patience; he develops a wise-cracking avuncular relationship with her, but she appears to be hurt when he doesn't seem interested in having sex with her; she is finally captured and murdered by Sanders (a bit hard to understand why), and film ends with Pidgeon parachuting lone wolf into Germany intending to assassinate Hitler before the end of the war! Lightly amusing satire of class divisions, especially in encounter of Bennett with the snobby, easily shocked wife of Pidgeon's benefactor. Almost everything in the film strains credibility. (2014)

**Man of the World** 1931 Edward Goodman, Richard Wallace (Paramount) 2.5 William Powell as featured actor, his usual suave and ironic self; Carole Lombard as society girl who gets serious when she falls in love with Powell; comparatively thin Guy Kibbee plays the rich uncle of Lombard; he is in Paris to have a good time with girls thus opening himself to blackmail. Early Paramount talkie that starts off as kind of romantic comedy – Powell is a blackmailer that runs a scandal sheet in Paris who falls for one of his marks – Lombard – and then ends as a kind of drama in which Powell realizes that he can't go through with the sting, and he goes off to South Africa with a woman he doesn't like; ends in subdued, anti-climactic way with Powell tearing up the check that Kibbee has given him and Lombard returning to Pittsburgh on a separate ship with the guy she doesn't love. Love is doubly unrequited. Film is fairly well written by Herman Mankiewicz who gives Powell some good, witty lines. Powell fairly interesting as con man who is subject to true love; Lombard is much less consistent, going from giggling society girl to broken-hearted woman settling for second best. A pre-Code movie that doesn't exploit the freedom of these years – no sex, no double entendres, no really serious crimes to punish, etc. Most fun to watch Lombard looking so young and flapperish that she is virtually unrecognizable, and to watch Powell in one of his many 30s roles. (2008)

**The Man Who Knew Too Much** 1934 Alfred Hitchcock 3.0 Edna Best, Nova Pilbeam, Peter Lorre, Leslie Banks. Good Hitchcock British period, but does not have the consistency and emotional punch of the remake (although Doris Day's singing breaks the mood!) and the available print (2011) is fuzzy and scratchy. Dialogue seems garbled British blabber, and the leads are pretty bland, making it difficult for us to get really involved. Script does not seem to focus on the development of the characters and their emotional states. Manipulation of mise-en-scene in the interest of suspense is excellent, however. Good scenes: the assassination scene in the dance hall in Switzerland is understated and intriguing; the visit to the dentist is amusing with its impish sense of humor, although a bit protracted; the sun worshippers service is also amusing and intriguing (with ironic organ music), although quite protracted and sometimes wandering; the Albert Hall seems to have been virtually copied in the 1956 version, although the climax – cymbal crash and foiled shot – not treated as dramatically in 1934; the finale – drawn out gunfight ending more or less happily – is probably superior to the '56 crooning of Doris Day. Edna Best as assertive female character who ends policeman's dithering and shoots the bad guy dead as he prepares to push her daughter off the roof. Sometimes hard to follow the plot, perhaps because of the muttered dialogue or plot inconsistencies. Question – did original screenplay intend to use the mother's shooting abilities to kill the statesman? Very amusing for Hitchcock lovers. (2008)

The revised version of 'The Man Who Knew Too Much' (viewed 2016) has much greater impact because of the marked superiority of the print – all visuals are crisp and the dialogue is comprehensible. 3.5 It is obvious that Hitchcock is interested in imagining scenes to manipulate, surprise, and shock his audience. The only theme that he occasionally references is the independence of women (Best's shooting of the villain at the end to save her daughter), but even that is inconsistent (Banks sets off on his

independent investigation with the company of the clown Cline but without his wife); the acting is generally adequate, but the only character worth noticing is Nova Pilbeam's obnoxious, bratty girl; and the narrative is somewhat disjointed, e.g., the dentist scene and the sun worshippers scenes don't really advance the plot. However, the set pieces are intriguing and delightful: the humorous, somewhat ghoulish scene with the dentist (the model of the big teeth is humorous and the contest over who will get to use the ether). The understated assassination in the first sequence, when the sound of a broken window and a small, neat stain on the shirt signals that the agent has been shot; he then falls over and dies in understated way (British stiff upper lip?). Memorable also is the sun worshippers scene with the disturbing lady that delivers the sermon, the old lady that unexpectedly sticks a pistol in Banks' ribs, and Banks and Clive speaking to one another while to the tune of the church hymn. And then the well-executed Albert Hall foiled assassination scene with the buildup of suspense through the grand music of the symphonic orchestra and the large male and female chorus; the scene might have been enhanced by slowing down the editing (show the gun barrel more? Show us the music score at the conductor's podium? etc.) and by cuing a louder, longer scream by Best. Very entertaining show, especially for Hitchcock fans; his first personally characteristic film. (2016)

**The Man Who Knew Too Much** 1956 Alfred Hitchcock (Paramount) 4.0 Masterful remake of the 1934 thriller, this time combining 50s gloss (Vistavision, Technicolor, top stars) with theme (how to upset the American middle class), psychological credibility, and memorable editing (Albert Hall scene). Jimmy Stewart aggressive and dominating as doctor (referred to constantly) on vacation in Morocco; Doris Day close to histrionic and possessed of the film's primary McGuffin – her voice and the song “Que sera, sera” – relentless in her campaign to find her son; Brenda de Banzie as Lucy Drayton, one of the kidnappers with a mother's soul, who averts any harm to the kidnaped boy; Bernard Miles as her innocuous, rather incompetent husband; Daniel Gelin as the Frenchman that passes the secret to Stewart. The film is better than the 1934 original in almost every way. It follows the pattern of the 1934 version, substituting an overlong, colorful episode in Morocco for the original Switzerland, an irrelevant, amusing sequence in a taxidermist's shop for the original visit to the dentist, and a slightly more realistic Ambrose Chapel for the original Tabernacle of the Sun. The Albert Hall sequence is a remarkable improvement on an already outstanding original: the remake lasts 10 minutes instead of the original 5.5; tension is ramped up not only by Doris Day's tearful emotionalism (she is not nearly as pretty as Edna Best, beautifully photographed in the original sequence), but by the Vistavision embrace, the punch of the high fidelity recording, and the extra attention to musical references such as the kettle drums, the energetic conducting by Bernard Herrmann, and the focus on the cymbals; Day's scream at the climax is louder and longer than Best's little truncated shriek. The film ends with the well-known sequence in the foreign embassy, in which Day uses her McGuffin voice and song to communicate with her son and break the tension (despite its competence, the shootout sequence in the original seems rather tacked on). The film deals trenchantly with the assumptions of the American middle class in the 1950s: their feelings of superiority toward Third World countries and the British and French authorities (they beat the French inspector in Morocco into submission) and their possessive parenting. Stewart and Day insist on their superior status as an American medical family; bull-headed Stewart runs over any well-meaning policeman trying to solve a mystery (Morocco) or to help (Britain); secure in his masculinity, he patronizes Day, even insisting she take a tranquilizer before telling her about the kidnapping of their son; although sometimes over the top, Day delivers a convincing performance as an overwrought mother always on the verge of tears – she needs a steady man to calm her down. An underappreciated masterpiece showing a bravura Hitchcock at the height of his powers. (2016)

**The Man Who Never Was** 1956 Ronald Neame 2.5 Clifton Webb clipped, precise, and relentless as counter-spy Ewen Montagu, who hatches diabolically clever plot to hoodwink the Germans about Allied invasion plans after the fall of Tunisia; Gloria Grahame as young woman with repulsively shiny face and brightly painted lips – she gives a marginally competent emotional performance; Robert Acres as Montagu's hunky sidekick; Josephine Griffin blond and innocuous as Montagu's secretary and Grahame's roommate; Stephen Boyd as German spy with an armoire of quizzical expressions. Often enjoyable World War II spy thriller about British counter-intelligence agents who concoct a caper to fool

the Germans into thinking the Allied attack will come in Greece (and Sardinia) rather than Sicily. (Recent historical research indicates that the Germans did not need to be fooled, since Hitler and some of his assistants were convinced already that the Allied attack would come in Greece.) They find a dead body, disguise it as an intimate of British General Alexander, and then dump it from a submarine into the waters off the coast of Spain, where it would presumably be found by the Spanish authorities, and the information would then be given to the Germans). The first part of the story, in which the principals invent the ruse and get permission from their stick-in-the-mud superiors (including Churchill himself, whose voice is a perfect imitation) and figure out how to get hold of a cadaver, is entertaining and convincing. The second part, which involves the attempt of German agent Boyd to confirm the existence and identity of the dead man and the rush of the British to keep him from telling Berlin that it is a fake, is much more questionable. The scene in which Grahame emotes about her dead man doesn't work well, since she appears to be mourning the loss of her flyer husband and not the person that Boyd is interested in. In any case, it would have been more exciting to expend less effort on this side story and more on how the faked information got from the Spanish authorities to Berlin. The film ends with a trite animation of arrows showing the Germans moving units out of Sicily, and then more arrows of a different color showing the successful Allied invasion. A big budget Cinemascope British studio production that relies too much on romantic subplots and marginally gifted starlets. (2010)

**The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance** 1962 John Ford 4.0 John Wayne, James Stewart, Vera Miles, Andy Devine, Woody Strode, Lee Marvin. Outstanding latter day John Ford adult western shot in nostalgic black and white. Story told as flashback by Senator Ransom (Stewart), when he returns to Shinbone to attend the funeral of his friend Tom Donaphon (John Wayne). The film focuses on how Stewart got his legendary name "The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance," which was presumably the source of much of his success as a politician. But the legend is undeserved, since the bumbling (true to type) Stewart did not get close to killing gunslinger Lee Marvin, but the latter was shot with a rifle by Wayne from the shadows. Marvin a bit over the top with his sadistic, malice-dripping performance as the evil gunslinger. The setting is again the civilizing of the West, as the sodbusters south of the line push for statehood against the cattlemen (for whom Liberty works), who want the territory to remain that way so they can keep the ranges open. Alternative constantly framed as the rule of the gun and violence vs. the rule of law, literacy, school, the freedom of the press, working out your differences by discussion rather than violence, etc. Flashback ends with a political convention in Capital City, where the farmers, organized behind Stewart, triumph over the cattlemen and push toward statehood. Wayne not really the central hero, since he supports Stewart in his drive to bring justice to Shinbone against Valance and he never reveals to the world that he was the one who shot Liberty Valance. Legend, although untrue, triumphs over truth, since at the end even the newspaperman who hears Stewart's story refuses to print it for fear of ruining the latter's reputation (the press nowadays would never keep such a story quiet). Wayne a kind of tragic hero – the tough, although good-hearted gunslinger, whose day (the law of the gun) is past, who loses the girl, Vera Miles, to the lawyer, and who then turns to drink (like several other main characters in the story such as the newspaper editor). Pace of movie is quite slow in beginning, as Ford develops the domestic, interior aspects of the story (life in Shinbone, the characters), but picks up as the showdown nears. Tom's revelation that he shot Liberty is a big surprise, and it causes several things to fall into place. Vera Miles good, in fact better than most Ford female characters, as the love interest, although secondary. A true adult western with searching theme, memorable characters, excellent drama. (2006)

**The Man Who Would Be King** 1975 John Huston 4.0 Michael Caine as ultimate roguish, trickster Peachy with the ready tongue and fertile imagination – he also narrates intermittently; Sean Connery as Danny, his companion, who is usually subordinate to Peachy and somewhat more weighty but still funny and ungrammatical in his speech – "God's holy trowsers!"; Christopher Plummer as Kipling, to whom an old, disfigured Peachy recounts the story in flashback; Shakira (Caine's wife) appearing briefly as Connery's beautiful native love interest; Saeed Jeffrey amusing, snappy and outspoken as Billyfish, ex-soldier in the British army who acts as interpreter for the pair. Wonderful adventure film based on Kipling's short story made by Huston in his Renaissance period; the story is told in flashback

when a hideous Peachy appears to Kipling in his study and tells him the story. Peachy and Danny are con men retired from the British Army in 1890s India; largely under Peachy's leadership they decide to travel to mythical Kafiristan, where they will pull their ultimate confidence trick – gain the confidence of the locals through military prowess, make themselves rulers, and then abscond with a fortune. All goes well until Connery is declared a god and made king; to Peachy's chagrin, he takes his role seriously dispensing sensible, impartial justice and deciding to marry the beautiful Roxanne; this however scandalizes the locals since a god should not be consorting with mortal women, and when the bride Shakira bites Connery on his cheek drawing all-too-human blood, the natives revolt and they execute Connery in the famous scene in which he falls to his death from a rope bridge; Peachy survives much disfigured to tell the story to Kipling (who presumably writes it down for us!). Danny, who is subordinate to Peachy in the first half of the film, thus emerges as the major character manifesting a sense of duty and martial courage; Peachy survives to tell the story. The film, which does not seem to have serious thematic intent, is terrifically entertaining. Caine and Connery play their roguish characters to perfection (Caine as the mischievous leader and Connery a bit more stolid, both uttering profane, colorful phrases) convincingly portraying the intimate male camaraderie so dear to Huston. The film, which was filmed in Morocco, is quite exotic (the towering Atlas Mountains, a cast of hundreds of locals with their heads shaved [they appear to be speaking whatever language they know, provided it doesn't sound a bit like English], convincing props of the mountaintop castle where Danny reigns, etc.); the viewer would benefit from seeing the film on the big screen. Much ado is made about the natives thinking that Danny and Peachy might be descendants of Alexander the Great, who had ruled the area and married the original Roxanne, and about the Masonic connection, which binds the tricksters to Kipling and which is responsible for Danny being declared a god and then made a king (but why would Buddhist-looking monks in Central Asia be using Masonic symbols?). The ending, in which Danny falls from the rope bridge (very convincing special effects!) singing the Scottish-sounding ditty, "A glorious band, the chosen few", is heroic and moving. Huston's final statement of adventure, deep friendship among men, and overstepping your destiny and facing it with courage. (2010)

**Man with a Movie Camera** 1929 Dziga Vertov (with brother Michael Kaufmann as cameraman) (Russia) 3.0 Famous non-narrative film representing the quick-editing Soviet style left in the dust by narrative Hollywood-style film at the beginning of the sound era. Vertov begins by saying that he is making a "pure film" that has no script, no decors, and no further relationship with the theater or literature. He photographs numerous random scenes throughout the city (Moscow?), adds a few staged ones, and then leaves it to his wife to edit them into some sort of whole. The first part of the film has the city waking up; afterwards numerous shots of the busy city – streetcars criss-crossing through the streets, shots of a cop directing traffic with a hand-operated mechanical sign, workers toiling with heavy machinery, a lot of shiny, well-oiled machines turning as in 'Berlin', people strolling and hurrying in the street, etc.; then a slow-moving section emphasizing leisure activities, lying on the beach, exercising in unison, etc.; and finishing with a shorter fast-moving section that builds to a frenetic climax. The whole is accompanied by a colorful and appropriate orchestral score in highly rhythmic, minimalist style composed in the 1990s. With the exception of the central section, the emphasis is on rapid motion: the human subjects move fast, the vehicles in the streets move fast, and the editing pace is correspondingly dizzying, probably three or four times the edit pace of Griffith-style film. The viewer's attention is constantly called to the film-making act by having the cinematographer appear several times either taking pictures with his hand-operated camera or riding or performing dare-devil stunts with his camera over his shoulder. Although there is no reference to politics aside from a de rigueur shot of a portrait of Lenin, the film seems to have a political subtext: in the prosperous postwar year of 1929 the Soviet city is just as prosperous, hard-working, and glamorous as any western city: the girls are pretty and even have their hair cut on camera and their make-up applied in a couple of scenes; there are many shots of bright-eyed children looking confidently into the future. The devastated Russia of 1917-22 seems very far away. The film is undeniably entertaining and ingenious. Rhythmic drive and picturesque images of a new city dominate, but the traditional filmgoer can't help but ask what happened to the narrative; what is it all about? (2012)

**The Man With the Golden Arm** 1955 Otto Preminger 3.0 Frank Sinatra intense and natural showing that he sure can act; Arnold Stang as his amusing comic-relief buddy Sparrow; Darren McGavin sporting a mustache as neighborhood drug dealer always ready for Sinatra (if he has the money); Eleanor Parker playing Sinatra's extremely annoying, whiny, supposedly wheelchair-ridden wife who is desperately in love with him and frantic to keep him from going to Novak; Kim Novak as Sinatra's beautiful girlfriend (she looks just like she did in 'Vertigo'), although he tries awfully hard to remain loyal to his wife (this is the 1950s). Film by Preminger about drug addiction; shocking for the time in its frank portrayal of the effects of addiction (it was refused a seal of approval by the MPPDA and was distributed anyway earning enough to be called a success). Suffers somewhat from being filmed all on a sound stage and backlot -- there is an artificiality about the locations that undercuts its commitment to brutal realism. Film seems too long, perhaps because of its lingering in the same locations; it often comes across as an adapted play (which it wasn't; it was adapted from a novel). As usual, gracefully photographed; Preminger's moving camera and long takes, however, tend to undercut the grittiness of the subject matter. The saving point of the film is Sinatra's performance. He is, as usual, his natural self, looking like he was born to act in front of the camera; he is very convincing in his harrowing portrayal of a strung-out addict and the hell he has to go through in withdrawal. Ending of film is a bit artificial: the withdrawal experience seems to last only a day; after, Sinatra seems reborn; he breaks with his wife (who is arrested for a sort of murder); and leaves town for a better life, one presumes with Novak. Well-known, meandering and often irrelevant jazz score by Elmer Bernstein that won an Academy Award. Interesting for students of 50s movies and for the gradual breakdown of the power of the Hayes Code. (2009)

**Manchester by the Sea** 2016 Kenneth Lonergan 4.0 Beautifully written (AA), touching realist drama about the impact of family traumas on a depressed Massachusetts handyman. Casey Affleck (AA) beautifully inhabits the leading role in understated style; Kyle Chandler as his loyal brother, who dies of congestive heart failure at the beginning of the film; C.J. Wilson as good friend George, who helps the brothers take care of their commercial fishing boat; Gretchen Mol as Chandler's alcoholic wife; Michelle Williams in small supporting role as Affleck's ex-wife and mother of his three children; Lucas Hedges skilled as Affleck's troubled teen nephew. With many shots of the sea, the shore, the impeccably groomed white wooden buildings, the wintry landscapes, the well-maintained roads, the film is firmly situated in a seaside New England town. The film is essentially a straightforward narrative following Affleck dealing with the death of his brother. Affleck is psychologically damaged: he has little motivation and no ambition; he has a non-responsive affect; he doesn't know how to carry on conversations and he doesn't respond to attempts by attractive women to come on to him; he breaks momentarily out of his passiveness when he drinks to excess in the local bar, twice picking fights for no reason with other bar patrons. The sources of his emotional problems are brought out in unexpected flashbacks, which show Affleck's affectionate relationship with his nephew, his poor relationship with his wife, the embarrassing alcoholism of his brother's wife, and – most shocking – his burning down of his own house and killing his three children (after being interrogated by the police, he attempts to commit suicide by grabbing the gun of a policeman). He takes under his wing Chandler's ill-tempered son, Hedges, who is now without mother or father; much of the humor comes from Hedges' obsession about his dad's body having to be put in a freezer until the ground thaws enough to bury him and his pursuit of sex with two girlfriends who don't know about one another; the main narrative knot comes from Affleck's refusal to accept responsibility for Hedges' guardianship. The narrative comes to an end in typically quiet fashion, when Affleck finds a way for Hedges to stay in Manchester (adopted by George), while Affleck works in another town. He admits to “not being able to get beyond it”, and the two sit side by side at the seashore thinking about an uncertain, but not hopeless, future. The film starts quietly and takes a while getting used to. Its poetic, elegiac tone comes through the tasteful slow movement, the quiet, effective editing, and not least from the director's selection of lyrical excerpts from classical music. The potentially melodramatic death of Affleck's three children is somehow transmuted into genuine dramatic horror by the director's magic. There are no villains or even bad people; the viewer can identify with the issues and dilemmas of all the main characters. The blockbuster moment of the film is the exchange toward the end between Affleck and his ex-wife Williams, in which the latter apologizes with heart-rending emotion for having blamed him for the death of the children. Everyone has their sorrows;

we have to forgive; we must all continue to move ahead with our lives. Eloquent, memorable film. (2017)

**The Manchurian Candidate** 1962 John Frankenheimer 4.0 Frank Sinatra, Laurence Harvey, Angela Lansbury, Janet Leigh. Gripping political thriller playing on the Communist threat, actually mentioning Korean War, and playing with the idea of who are the patriots – the right that screams continually about the anti-Communist menace, or the left. The professional patriots are the scoundrels; Lansbury starts as a political manipulator, but in a startling discovery she turns out to be the tool of the Communist plotters! Takes seriously the activity of Communist agents inside the USA, but reverses tables to claim that the right are the real Commie dupes; so this is a liberal Cold War film. Performances are all excellent: Harvey is cold and robotic (he does come off artificial when he was waxing eloquent about his love for the Senator's daughter); Frank Sinatra is believable and gripping, compelling as the good guy trying to figure out what happened and then preventing the assassination at the end; Angela Lansbury doesn't chew the furniture as much as Streep in remake, but she is convincingly cold, heartless and absolutely unrepentant! Handling of McGuffins and surprises much better than in remake: the solitaire and red queen gimmick works great, and quite a shock when mother says to son "why don't you play a little solitaire?" and later when girlfriend shows up in Queen of Diamonds costume. Ending very gripping and even noble. It turns out that Raymond has been deprogrammed by Sinatra, although the audience is not sure. Surprise when Raymond shoots his mother and stepfather, and then when Sinatra bursts into the room, he puts on his medal of honor and shoots himself in the head – he has committed murder and matricide and there is no way out but death, and yet he has done the honorable thing. Is moving a bit like a Greek tragedy – very noble. The filming style is straightforward laying out the story in matter of fact fashion, which sets us up nicely for surprises. A superior thriller, rarely equaled. (2006)

**The Manchurian Candidate** 2004 Jonathan Demme 3.0 Pretty good remake of 1962 thriller with D. Washington, M. Streep, Liev Schreiber, Miguel Ferrer, etc. Updates by making threat multi-national corporations using state of art chip implants to control robots; works pretty well. Strength is serious internal Zerissenheit of Shaw and Denzel, both of whom have decent internal selves struggling against their chips. Streep great as amoral mother, who even gives her son to the multi-nationals; plays the part as kind of riff on Hilary Clinton! Movie has terrible ending that 1) seems confused, and 2) apparently copping out suggesting that somehow U.S. government has cracked the ring; this is a betrayal of the paranoid genre and mentality that permeates the entire film! Demme's style is as usual pumped up, loud and very pop (beginning scene in troop carrier!). Schreiber's internally torn performance is very good; Denzel has to play both the external search and his internal anguish. Numerous changes from original, none of which seem to me to be better; e.g., DW character has to carry too heavy a burden as projected assassin; original worked better with Sinatra acting as a kind of outside investigator. Still, decent job! (2005)

**Manhattan** 1979 Woody Allen 4.0 Woody Allen in his usual neurotic, sex-obsessed, unsure of himself Jewish character; Mariel Hemingway as his 17-year-old girlfriend, the only character in the film that understands her own feelings; Diane Keaton as strong opinioned girlfriend who is like oil and water with Allen; Meryl Streep in one of her early roles as Allen's vindictive, lesbian ex-wife who is writing a tell-all book about their marriage; Michael Murphy as Allen's very Anglo best friend. Perhaps Allen's best comedy drama, providing the discerning moviegoer with lots of good laughs and also analyzing the nature of romantic relationships in contemporary America. Film is a love letter to a New York that exists only in the mind of Allen – most famously it begins with a montage of scenes from New York (a few annoying ones, but most of them sublime) to the accompaniment of Gershwin's 'Rhapsody in Blue'. Later is the usual mix of show tunes and big band music. Gordon Willis' cinematography is one of the greatest achievements of American cinematography – wonderful interplay of light and shadow, great expressive detail, mood shots of Mary and Isaac sitting in silhouette facing the Hudson River at dawn, the two of them strolling through the Hayden Planetarium. Hemingway is firm in her conviction that she loves Allen, and she resists his encouragement to go off and live her life with a man over twice his age; Murphy cheats on his beautiful wife; Keaton and Allen have an adversarial relationship (she



constantly contradicts him even denouncing Ingmar Bergman!) that finally defeats their connection; in the moving finale, Allen seems to realize that Hemingway is the one for him, but he meets her in the famous finale scene in front of the elevator where she explains to him that he was right, she has to strike out on her own and go to Britain for her education. Since the film is obviously autobiographical, one can't help but notice Allen's confession that he is attracted to very young women. The film is similar to the more light-hearted 'Annie Hall' and perhaps 'Hannah and Her Sisters'; 'Crimes and Misdemeanors' and 'Husbands and Wives' is more serious. One of the great achievements of American cinema. (2009)

**Manhattan Murder Mystery** 1993 Woody Allen 2.5 Diane Keaton (looking downright middle-aged) back in an Allen film after more than 10 years getting a chance to play Nancy Drew; Woody Allen playing his negative, neurotic self on a more tiresome note than usual; Alan Alda as family friend who makes no secret about his continuing attraction to Keaton and who helps her with her amateur investigation; Angelica Huston as writer who spices up things a bit for both Alda and Allen and helps solve the mystery. Minor Allen film that doesn't rise to the interesting or delightful level. Keaton and Allen are a married couple with a departed college son; they live next door in their Upper East Side apartment to an elderly couple; when the wife dies of a heart attack, Keaton is not so sure, and she launches her own investigation though constantly challenged by an eternally whining Allen; Alda joins the fun, and later Huston contributes to untying the knot of the mystery in an entertaining scene in a café where the four sit around a table and discuss various theories that may or may not fit the known facts; when the four finally solve the mystery, there is a final confrontation scene in an old theater that with its multiple reflecting mirrors is derivative of the famous finale in Welles' 'Lady from Shanghai'. Romance is served: since Alda is now showing inclinations to hook up with Huston (although he has just had sex with the perpetrator's love interest); and Keaton and Allen seem pumped up by the adventure and to be having more fun together (Allen actually laughs at a joke at his own expense as the two walk into the entrance to their apartment building). Film has few interesting elements. The unstable, handheld cinematography (often panning rapidly back and forth between interlocutors) is annoying and distracting. Woody Allen's famed one-liners rarely evoke more than a smile, or at most a chuckle. Allen's whiney, nebbish personality grates on the nerves, since he repeats essentially one thing throughout the film – we shouldn't get involved because we might get hurt, be arrested, etc. Luckily Keaton usually pays no attention, but the two seem to waste a lot of screen time. The development of the not-very-interesting plot and the unraveling of the central mystery absorb a lot of energy. There seems to be a lot of historic film debts: aside from Welles, there are references to 'Double Indemnity' and the mysterious hotel in 'Vertigo'. The script seems inspired by the 'Thin Man' series, but without the humor and charm. (2011)

**Manuscripts Don't Burn** 2013 Mohammed Rasoulof (Iran) 3.0 Actors are not identified to protect them against government reprisals. Slow-moving political film denouncing the campaign of the Iranian government to eradicate about 80 dissident intellectuals during the 1990s. The film follows the movements of two hired hit men, the bearded Khosrow, and his clean-shaven boss Morteza, as they drive in and out of Tehran pursuing, torturing, and killing dissident intellectuals. The film begins with the men running from an assassination scene – no indication of who was killed or why. Another long sequence has them taking an unidentified hooded man into the country to murder, but they are told at the last minute to abort and to return to the city (implication that Morteza may have killed a little boy who saw what they were doing). The scene shifts to an educated, middle class type (name never given?) who is a censor and a security officer with neat hair and glasses – he pursues and threatens two writers – one of them handicapped – who have copies of a manuscript that chronicles his botched attempt to murder 21 writers by driving a bus they were in off a cliff. Then the security officer and the two subordinates come together to murder the two writers – one by poisoning him through a suppository, and the other by suffocating him and stabbing him repeatedly in the gut. The two assassins are clumsy and inexperienced (they don't seem trained); Morteza doesn't seem to have any qualms about what he is doing; the script however spends a lot of time on Khosrow's financial problems (he owes money to the hospital taking care of his son) and on his occasional moral misgivings that come from his wife's conviction that their son's health problems are caused by his sleazy work. Perhaps the most disturbing character is the officer – neat, middle class, a former dissident, seemingly educated, and yet without the slightest compunction about

“disappearing” the people aware of his role in the bus affair. Everyone’s explanation for their crimes is either national security or they are serving Allah and protecting the sharia; the real motivations seem to be self-preservation and money. The settings are dark, wintry, dirty, littered streets filled with traffic and abandoned buildings where a man can be quietly murdered; none of the poetry and light one sees in Kiorastami. Although the film holds the viewer’s interest, the color palate is washed out and the editing is sluggish – lots of shots of cars moving in the streets, being parked, of men walking down the street or between rooms in an apartment. Rasoulov doesn’t seem to care about cutting to continuity or editing efficiency. (2015)

**Margaret** 2011 Ken Lonergan 2.5 Anna Paquin as precocious, hyper-verbal, intense, prickly, rage-filled Upper West Side teenager; J. Smith-Cameron effective as nervous, distracted actress mom who is losing patience with her snarky daughter; Mark Ruffalo in almost cameo role as the bus driver who kills a woman when he runs through a red light while flirting with Paquin; Jeannie Berlin as angry, confrontational friend of the killed woman -- she wants revenge for her death; Jean Reno in questionably relevant role as sincere Columbian businessman wooing Smith-Cameron; Matt Damon in decorative role as Anna's sensible Geometry teacher (they have sex!); Matthew Broderick in equally decorative role as Anna's English teacher, whose main function is to read literary excerpts to the kids that suggest (perhaps) Lonergan's themes; Lonergan plays Anna's divorced father living, it seems, aimlessly in Santa Monica. Often unfocused film concentrating on the moral education of an angry and disoriented teenager. The film makes great effort to situate the narrative in New York -- long takes of pedestrians crossing streets, traffic in gridlock, hanging out in Central Park, scanning the city's skyline in the upper West Side, two lovingly photographed trips to Lincoln Center. Paquin is partly responsible for the death of the woman Ruffalo runs over; although she initially exculpates Ruffalo by telling the police that the light was green, she soon has serious conscience qualms and embarks on a campaign to punish the driver by initiating a civil action against the bus company. In the meantime, she takes steps to lose her virginity to a cool-acting friend (she also seduces Broderick, and then informs the audience at the end of the film that she has had an abortion -- the father of the fetus is uncertain), with Berlin's help she engages a lawyer to pursue the lawsuit, they establish contact with some venal relatives of the dead woman that are interested only in the money, and she pursues ongoing combat with her mother; the film ends with the success of the lawsuit (although the bus company refuses to fire the driver), and when Paquin attends (reluctantly) the opera ('Tales of Hoffmann') with her mother, she breaks into sensitive tears, and the film ends with her and her mother locked in a tearful embrace in the middle of the opera crowd. It appears that since Paquin has fully recognized her part in the responsibility for the death, she is now open to the beauty of art and to the fidelity of maternal love.... The acting in the film is generally good, particularly in the snarling, profane confrontations between mother and daughter. Aside from the ambiguity of the narrative line, however, the viewer is often bemused by the unrelated variety of scenes and themes presented: What to make of the vicious screeching of the girls about American foreign policy in the high school classroom? Why does Berlin kick Paquin out of her apartment when the latter calls her "strident"? What does the Reno-Smith-Cameron romance have to do with Paquin's coming of age? Why all those loving (?) shots of Manhattan? Why spend so much time detailing legal strategies and the contract disputes of the New York MTA? It is remarkable that all the female characters in the film are nervous, strident, and aggressive, and the men are calm, kind, attentive, and patient. And one cannot but notice the ellipses arising from the studio-imposed cuts – e.g., the side plot of Paquin’s sexual initiation. The film is full of interesting stuff but it can't escape its own anarchy. (2012)

**Margin Call** 2011 J.C. Chandor 4.0 Kevin Spacey working in an investment firm as the trading supervisor with something of a conscience; Paul Bettany as a British mid-level executive – very able, percussive, and with a foul mouth; Jeremy Irons snake-like and cadaverous as cold-hearted businessman at the head of the company; Zachary Quinto as lower-level employee working in Risk management under Stanley Tucci, the manager who is fired at the beginning of the film; Simon Baker, the unlikable “boy wonder” upper-level executive who takes the problem to Irons; Demi Moore as the only woman in the upper executive positions – she is fired at the end of the film. Riveting thriller-style film dealing with 24 hours in the history of an investment firm (obviously based on Lehman Brothers) dealing

with the impact of the news – discovered by Tucci before he is terminated – that the hundreds of billions of dollars worth of mortgage-based assets the company trades in are actually worthless. Beginning with Quinto, the news makes it up the corporate ladder until it reaches the top; the top executives then make a decision to sell off the securities before their customers find out about their worthlessness, an action that would undermine the credibility of the firm, damage the careers of everyone participating in the skullduggery, and (at the least) occasion enormous instability in the financial markets. Virtually none of the leaders has a problem with the strategy – the oily Irons does a great job of pursuing and justifying it with the argument that what is happening is out of the company’s control, they just take advantage of the opportunities to the best of their ability, and all they are trying to do is to ensure their own survival (and their multi-million dollar profits). Bettany seems to have reservations, but he does not voice his objections to his superiors. The main hold-out is Spacey, who is depicted as a lonely, fatherly and emotional man (brought out mainly in his grief at the death of his dog); the proposal, that he considers immoral and unpalatable, demonstrates that despite his 34 years of working at the firm, he has achieved nothing of importance; he opines that digging a hole to bury his dog is a more memorable accomplishment than anything he has ever done in his job. Nevertheless, because he “needs the money”, he knuckles under at the end and motivates his traders to do the dirty deed. Although the film often has a neutral feel, it is nevertheless highly critical of the greed and egotism of the firm’s executives: they all collect salaries in the millions of dollars (Bettany admits that he blows tens of thousands of dollars on prostitutes), they pay exorbitant sums to buy the silence of fired employees (Tucci calculates that he is getting almost \$200,000 an hour to sit in Moore’s office), they promise their traders as much as \$2.5 million to sell the worthless securities, and their final strategy reflects their priority – strictly their own self-interest. The film is very suspenseful as the news makes its way up the ladder – what will the bosses decide, will they succeed, what will be the impact on the financial markets and on the nation’s economy, who will they fire next. All the acting is first-rate. Even more impressive is the dialogue and direction that moves the narrative along with efficiency, clarity, and excitement; not an ounce of “fat”. Hard to believe that this film was Chandor’s first. (2012)

**Maria Full of Grace** 2004 Joshua Marston 3.5 Catarina Sandino Moreno as Maria, the "mule" recruited by Colombian drug merchants to transport drug pellets (about 60 of them!) in her intestinal tract to the USA, Giulied Lopez who dies from pellets bursting in her intestines. Documentary like film (filmed matter-of-factly with no fancy shots, long takes, informal camera, etc.) about the mules of the drug trade. The film involves us thoroughly in the main character, a simple pretty girl working as a thorn remover in a rose factory near Bogotá, brings her into the drug trade since she needs money, gives us a step-by-step demonstration of what it is like to be the mule, and then observes Maria mature and make independent decisions once she gets to New York. Moreno is extraordinarily effective as Maria – pretty, simple, sincere, and able to convey emotions of confusion (what will she do with her life), fear and uncertainty (on the plane and during the drama in New York), strong emotion (when she has crying and screaming match with Lucy's sister when the latter discovers that Lucy is dead), and quiet joy (when she sees her baby/fetus on the monitor). Scene on plane where four mules are flying to New York is masterfully filmed and edited to show fear, tension, and suspense as Lucy begins to experience symptoms of an overdose (one of the pellets has broken in her gut), and Maria has to excrete several pellets, wash them, and reingest them in the restroom. Scene with customs officials in New York airport is equally tense as we wonder whether they will arrest Maria; the officials are decent people just doing their job, and Maria is saved since they discover that she is pregnant and policy forbids x-raying a pregnant woman. The hoods that pick them up at the airport are more petty and vicious than the Colombians at the other end; at one point they rip open the gut of Lucy to get the pellets out of her (she has apparently died), leaving the bathroom in the cheap hotel a bloody mess. Film has an optimistic ethic: it much admires the close-knit and self-sacrificing Colombian community in New York; Maria has many close calls, and she makes some stupid decisions (why did she and Blanca take the drugs with them when they fled the hotel room!), but she always seems to escape – e.g., the American hoods don’t harm or kill them when they come finally to get the drugs. One wonders about the Catholic religious images – Maria is with child (saves her from the x-ray machine), as a simple maiden like the original Mary she reduces the suffering of Christ by picking thorns from the rose stems, and she has the grace that makes improbable good things

happen. In the end she matures and takes responsibility for herself – she and Blanca go to the airport, and in a surprise she turns at the gate and walks back into the airport to raise her child and cope with life, since it is too dangerous to return to Colombia, and her child would have no future there. She will probably do well since she is "full of grace." (2006)

**El Mariachi** 1992 Robert Rodriguez 3.0 Carlos Gallardo as the pretty-faced mariachi arriving in a small Mexican town; Consuelo Gomez as the sexy, long-faced would-be girlfriend of the gang chief Moco – she progressively falls for the mariachi; Peter Marquardt as the gringo gang chief Moco. Legendary cheap budget film reportedly that was made for \$7000; it was a success at the independent film festivals in the USA and Canada, and was then picked up by Columbia Studios, reworked for a modest sum, and then had a limited and successful release. The narrative rests on the trick of mistaken identity: Gallardo goes into Mexican town; because of identical guitar cases, he is mistaken for a gang member that has just escaped from a local jail and who is bent on revenge against his ex-associate Moco (lounging around a swimming pool being attended to by a pretty girl in a bikini); the mariachi kills perhaps a dozen Moco henchmen who come after him and develops a flirtatious relationship with Consuelo; a final showdown at Moco's compound ends in the death of Moco and the girl (much mourned by the mariachi), who then mounts her motorbike, picks up her letter opener, straps her pit bull (?) to the back, and takes off for parts unknown, vowing to return to exact revenge (against whom though is the question, since practically everyone is dead). One quickly tires of the metallic clank of firearms being cocked, the body count, and the blood spouting out of the victims, but the viewer admires the director for making the most out of extremely limited resources. There are some cute twists, mostly associated with the confusion of guitar cases that sometimes contain a guitar and sometimes is full of deadly weapons (the one owned by the hood who escaped from jail). Action sequences create considerable tension due to intense and dynamic editing. Nice bits of humor, such as the mariachi "band" in the bar that actually consists of one guy playing a polka on a moog synthesizer and Consuelo threatening the mariachi with a knife underwater while he is taking a bath (castration?). Nice little touches that are more or less irrelevant to the plot: a turtle crosses the road in front of Gallardo when he enters town and when he leaves; when in Consuelo's apartment, many brief cuts to her deadpan dog, who accompanies the mariachi out of town at the end of the film. Rodriguez has an instinctive expertise in devising a simple, compelling narrative and in constructing "pure" exciting action sequences. A hundred times better than the big budget follow-up, 'Desperado', that features Hollywood stars (Selma Hayek and Antonio Banderas) and just overwhelms the viewer with clamor, automotive weapons, mangled corpses, and pools of smeared blood. (2011)

**Marie Antoinette** 1938 W.S. ("One Take") Van Dyke 3.0 Norma Shearer sometimes a bit smarmy and grandiloquent in the biggest role of her career; Tyrone Power in semi-cameo role provides the romantic eye candy as Marie's lover (?), the Swedish Count de Felsen; John Barrymore interesting and amusing as the pleasure-loving Louis XV firmly under the thumb of Mme. Du Barry; Robert Morley outstanding in his premier Hollywood role as the dim-witted, indecisive, and not always manly Louis XVI; Joseph Schildkraut picturesque, sly, insinuating, absurdly made up as the treacherous Duc d'Orléans ("Philippe Égalité"); Henry Stephenson a familiar old Hollywood face as the avuncular Austrian Count de Mercey; Gladys George glamorous, blonde, competitive, sardonic as Mme. De Barry, Louis XV's last mistress. Huge budgeted Hollywood epic meant from its inception by Thalberg as a vehicle for Norma Shearer. The film follows the heroine from her girlhood betrothal to the Dauphin, through her crazy party stage, her love affair with Power (although the Hayes Code of 1938 makes it difficult to know whether they had sex), her anguish during the French Revolution until her guillotining in 1793. Shearer is convincing and moving as an immature, affectionate, pleasure-loving teenager who giggles a lot (and she actually looks like a teenager), but somewhat over-the-top with the beaming happiness with Felsen and the hand-wringing and teary eyes when confronted with the tragedies of the Revolution. She matures into a somewhat harmless woman, who doesn't seem to understand what is happening to France nor does she ever plot against the Revolution, and she goes to the scaffold with dignity and a knowledge of her innocence. The strongest point of the film is the art direction in the first half: magnificent interior shots of columned ballrooms with numerous courtiers swirling about to music, sumptuous costumes, particularly

the impossibly wide dresses of the queen, the queen's elaborate, tall coiffures filled with curls and other flourishes and capped by rococo headdresses with feathers fluttering in the breeze. Any real feeling or sense of tragedy is undermined by the ingredients of the Hollywood style – the over-the-top acting, the hand-wringing, the superficial handling of the love relationship between Marie Antoinette and Felsen (she dashing madly down the magnificent, broad exterior stairs under picturesque twilight skies), the crushing presence of the sets, the homogenization of the story so that Marie Antoinette becomes a harmless woman who basically never hurt a fly and who may not even have had sex with her lover. The attention-getting actors include Morley, whose slowly growing affection for his wife is touching, and Schildkraut, whose leering cunning is entertaining every time he appears on the screen. Shearer's second-to-last hurrah is a quintessential big-budget MGM movie. (2012)

**Marie Antoinette** 2006 Sofia Coppola 2.5 Kirsten Dunst charming, juvenile, pretty empty-headed as Marie Antoinette, who arrived in Versailles to marry the French Dauphin; Jason Schwartzman pretty dull as the rather weak-willed, weak-minded, and sexually distracted dauphin; Judy Davis with extra sinews in her neck as the extremely uptight Comtesse de Noailles always concerned with protocol; Molly Shannon as one of Marie's playgirl friend. Astoundingly beautiful but empty film about Marie Antoinette's experience from about 1770 to the time that she and her family are transported by the mob to Paris in 1789. Focuses on the pleasures of spoiled rich LA Valley Girls that have somehow been transported to Versailles at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Lots of outrageous, colorful shoes, beautiful fabrics made into fabulous dresses, elaborate, beehive hairdos piled two feet up on their heads, accurate period furniture, extremely bright-colored, luscious candies and cakes consumed carelessly by the girls sprawled on chaises longues; beautifully photographed in bright, somewhat pastelish colors that make the social environment jump vividly off the screen. Much of film actually done on location in Versailles with location shots of the chateau, the gardens, the Petit Trianon, etc. Film is not contemptible mainly because of the performance of Dunst, who shows us what it is like for an adolescent (14 years old!) to be thrown into a strange and bizarre environment, and then grow up surrounded by luxury with nothing to do; and we mustn't forget her unresponsive husband, who for some unexplored reason does not have sex with her for seven (!) years and thus seriously delays making an heir to the throne. So, she plunges into shoes, parties, operas, flirting, and finally a love affair with the Swedish count; she is a fond and attentive parent running with her children through the flowered fields of the Versailles park and removing shit-covered eggs from the 'Hameau' chicken coop, all according to the principles of Rousseau. Film comes across as extremely shallow: lots of surface eye candy, but negligible, hollow dialogue (all the courtiers do is gossip about one another and talk about clothes), with little interest in issues and relationships. (2008)

**La mariée était en noir** 1968 François Truffaut 3.0 Jeanne Moreau dominates the film as a woman fanatically bent on revenge after the accidental (?) death of her bridegroom on their wedding day; Michael Bouquet, Claude Rich, Jean-Claude Brialy and Michael Lonsdale as various of her five victims; Charles Denner as an intense, woman-chasing artist who falls in love with her while she poses for him – this of course does not save him from being murdered. Sometimes interesting attempt by Truffaut to make a *hommage* to his idol Hitchcock (just a couple of years after he published his interview book with him). Plot takes interesting turn: for about a half an hour we see Moreau mechanically going about her business of revenge with two of her victims before we find out more or less what was the origin of her campaign. After that comes the most interesting part of the film: Denner, who has Moreau posing for him as the huntress Diana (virgin for a skirt-chaser and wielding a bow and arrow; remember that the man who saw her naked was killed), falls in love with his model; Moreau seems to have an ambiguous reaction, as if it isn't appropriate to kill a man who is in love (perhaps her tribute to the affection of her bridegroom and herself); but she ends shooting him dead with an arrow as she poses for him. She then leaves on his wall a stunning full-length nude portrait of herself that he has painted; that leads the police to her, and she is able thus to enter prison to kill the one remaining man with a knife thrust (which we don't see, but hear only his scream after a long held shot of the prison corridor). The methods used to kill the men are appropriate to the location and often humorous: one man is pushed from the balcony of his luxury high rise on the Cote d'Azur; Bouquet is poisoned – rather grotesquely; Lonsdale, a lecherous

aspiring politician, is immured in a small closet and suffocated; and of course the arrow and the knife. The first half of the film is especially awkward: one gets the impression that Truffaut was using his informal *Nouvelle vague* filming techniques (e.g., zooming in and out and searching for objects with the camera) to make a high style Hitchcockian Hollywood film. Moreau is mostly a statue with a blank face; one supposes she is supposed to be an ineluctable nemesis, but the viewer yearns for some understanding of why/how she is so ruthless in her vengeance. The film has little psychology. It satirizes men who spend most of their waking hours thinking about women and seducing them. (2009)

Rewatching the film in 2016 yields about the same impression: interesting at times, but fundamentally mechanical without the humor and the surprising twists that pepper a true Hitchcock film. The interesting Diana sequence seems mutilated: the realization of Denner's friend that Denner must have been murdered is not prepared, and one wonders what happened to Denner's portrait of Moreau that she was cutting out of a painting just before the murder; and there is no shot of the murder, just the picture of a man lying on the floor with an arrow sticking out of his back. The subtext of Moreau's resentment of womanizers (at least two of her victims are *cavaleurs*) should have been developed more explicitly. Lots of missed opportunities. (2016)

**Marius** 2013 Daniel Auteuil (France) 2.5 Daniel Auteuil plays paterfamilias Cesar in the first installment of the Pagnol trilogy; Raphael Personnaz adequate, perhaps too pretty boy (always a little black scarf around his neck) as the son Marius, stricken by the pull of the sea, but gradually falling in love with Fanny; Victoire Bélézy as the dark-haired beauty, Fanny, only 18 but forward in her pursuit of Marius; Jean-Pierre Darroussin as the kind-hearted Panisse, good but not pulling out the stops like he does in 'Fanny'; Marie-Anne Chazel as Fanny's mercurial, temperamental mother, Honorine. Rather low-key, acceptable new version of the first part of the Pagnol trilogy. The screenplay focuses almost exclusively on the developing romance between the handsome, reluctant Marius and the eager Fanny, who pursues her flame with her beauty and effervescent personality. Marius initially has a cool attitude toward his childhood friend, and would much rather join the crew of one of the ships he sees in Marseilles harbor. His father and, to a lesser extent, Honorine would like to see the two married. Fanny's seduction is initially successful, leading Marius to a nuit d'amour, but when the three-master Malaisie is set to sail, Marius cannot resist – give up the dream of his life to settle down forever as a shopkeeper living in his father's bedroom? And in any case Fanny sacrifices her relationship by encouraging Marius to leave. A labored, somewhat touching finale has Fanny covering for her lover in her talk with Cesar; her fainting and Cesar's cry for help when he takes her in his arms provides the transition to the first scene of 'Fanny'. The film has some choice scenes, especially the amusing, gently confrontational dialogue in the card game in Cesar's bar. However, the story of Marius and Fanny is just not that interesting, and the film lacks the dramatic permutations of its successor. Useful mainly for setting the stage for 'Fanny'. (2015)

**The Mark of Zorro** 1920 Fred Niblo 3.5 Douglas Fairbanks Sr., Noah Berry Sr., Marguerite De La Motte. The original swashbuckler. Set in late colonial California with the whole province subjected to the tyranny of the corrupt governor, Captain Ramon, who also nearly rapes Lolita twice, the comical Sergeant Gonzalez (Noah Berry Sr.), and their men. Zorro is the alter ego of the effeminate Don Diego, who has a house with lots of secret passageways so he can change his identity when he needs to ride off and rescue the oppressed. Diego walks around slumped, he is always tired, he takes snuff, he plays with wall shadows made with his hands, he performs magic tricks, he doesn't believe in violence, and he makes love weakly, indecisively and limply to his beloved Lolita. When trouble arises, he turns into the hyper-masculine Zorro with the black mask, the black cape, and his handy sword. A very good swordsman, he has no trouble besting his opponents; he leaps around acrobatically and athletically, running circles around the Governor's men, laughing and mocking their feeble attempts to defeat him, and often smoking a cigar or eating a meal between bouts of fighting; interesting that no pistols are fired, not one person loses his life, and at the end the soldiers cheer Zorro and join him, while Gonzalez and Ramon are instructed to leave the country. While Diego limps around Lolita, Zorro (same person!) pursues her aggressively with manly poetry, hand kissing, and finally a full kiss in final frame. The oppressed include all the Indians (most of whom seem painted white actors), the Franciscan friar, the "unprotesting soldier of Christ" who is whipped by the tyrants and then rescued by the good guys, and

eventually all the noble families, who turn against the government. Movie rather justifies rebellion against injustice and oppression – motto repeated several times is “justice for all!” Nobles (“caballeros”) and commoners (“peons”) join together behind Zorro to oppose repression, much in the tradition of the American Revolution. Interesting for getting acquainted with Fairbanks screen person and for understanding the man that Mary Pickford married. The film represents an effort by Hollywood producers to appeal more directly to a male audience. (2005)

**The Mark of Zorro** 1940 Rouben Mamoulian (20cFox) 3.0 Tyrone Power as Zorro; Linda Darnell as beautiful, young and pure senorita bent on breaking away from tyrannical mother (one presumes the Code keeps her from kissing too passionately and justifies her differences with her parents by their foolishness and unreasonableness); Basil Rathbone as evil captain (and the power behind the throne of the governor) who is pierced neatly in the chest at the end after exciting sword fight with Zorro. Similar exercise to the original Fairbanks Zorro (1920), but less fun. Pure melodrama with Power fighting for justice and freedom for all against evil ably personified by the sneering Rathbone teleguiding the comically cowardly and incompetent governor. The “radicalism” of the script is diluted compared to the 1920 original. Darnell is beautiful, pure and fetching, but Power does not have the effrontery, panache and acrobatic athleticism of Fairbanks; the script focuses less on mocking the opposition and more on the handsome hero’s romance with Darnell. The production is set bound, although very detailed and believable; direction by Mamoulian is sometimes expressive and individual e.g., in the scene in the town square with the first arrival of Zorro and his impact on the sleeping peons whose sombreros rise and fall with the passing of the dashing horseman; and photography is shadowed and expressive. The ideology clearly reflects the age (1940) with its defense of the common folk (the caballeros [wealthy Americans] and the Mexican peasants [working class Americans] unite) against exploitation and tyranny of the dictator and his soldiers – the references to Hitler and Stalin are not to be missed. An obviously studio product that perhaps does not deserve its classic status. (2007)

**Marnie** 1964 Alfred Hitchcock 2.5 Tippi Hedren way over her head with endless screen time as kleptomaniac woman traumatized by a childhood event; Sean Connery glamorous and reasonably convincing as businessman who adopts a ‘thing’ for Marnie (perhaps much like Hitchcock for Tippi Hedren); Diane Baker sly and pretty as Connery in-law, but her role peters out; Louise Latham effective as Marnie’s Bible-thumping, unaffectionate mother, who carries serious secrets in her breast. Perhaps the most trite and long-winded of Hitchcock’s major movies. The story is hackneyed and spun out way too long. It is a psychological/psychoanalytic drama in the style of *Spellbound* but without the star power of Gregory Peck and Ingrid Bergman. Tippi Hedren is too cold and wooden as an actor to carry the role and to make the romance convincing; Connery, who reminds one inevitably of Bond, is also cool and calculating, not at all the over-the-top romantic like Jimmy Stewart in *Vertigo* (has he ever been a convincing romantic lead?). Hedren is so blank and impassive and so perfectly turned out like a Barbie (always perfect hair, perfect make-up, and artificial looking costume that are supposed to look glamorous) that it is hard to care about her or to imagine that she is suffering like neurotics; it is also hard to imagine that Connery cares so much about her that he decides to burn his bridges and to marry her with the apparent intention of curing her of her behavior! The suspense is marginal: it is dragged out way too long (how many close-ups of Hedren and lengthy conversations with Connery can we tolerate?); the psychoanalytic clues – the hokey color red, Marnie’s fear of storms – are heavy and obvious; and the psychoanalytic ease with which Marnie’s problems are resolved – simply recalling her accidental murder of the sailor (Bruce Dern) attacking her mother – is almost laughable. The artificiality of the shooting is also distracting: the painted backdrop of Baltimore harbor in the scenes outside of mother’s row house is at least picturesque, but the awkward back projections in Hedren’s riding scenes – including the point-of-view shot of her horse’s head approaching the wall – are ridiculous and distracting. Some good dialogue lines; some good editing expressing surprise between the two principals; a couple of good Hitchcockian sequences – the camera’s obsession with Marnie’s alligator purse in the first scene, and the little suspense sequence about the cleaning lady in the office where Marnie is robbing the safe. Overall, very disappointing. Hitchcock seems to have allowed his obsession with his actress to cloud his artistic judgment. (2008)

**The Marriage Circle** 1924 Ernst Lubitsch 3.0 Monte Blue dull and not at all funny but funny-looking as a happily married doctor; Florence Vidor as his respectable, faithful, and slightly gap-toothed wife; Adolphe Menjou suave, serious, and ironic as an unhappily married professor; Marie Prevost as flapper bad girl wife of Menjou, who sets her sights on Blue; Creighton Hale as dull as dishwater colleague of Blue – he has a serious infatuation with Vidor. Comedy melodrama set in wealthy houses in 1920s Vienna about a merry-go-round of almost love affairs. Prevost goes aggressively after Blue, who is tempted to respond; Menjou though is cynically interested only in finding proof to secure a divorce with his wayward wife (he shows his habits with his telling glance to a pretty housemaid at the end of the film); meanwhile Hale begins an awkward pursuit of Vidor and even succeeds in kissing her “by accident”. Some good comic moments derived from Lubitsch’s sparkling wit and light touch: the opening scene in which Menjou’s bad relationship with his wife is shown strictly by visual means and editing (a hole in his sock and his wife’s taking his shaving mirror just when he needs it); the little scene with the egg and the cup of coffee that shows the director’s light touch in evoking the affectionate relationship of Blue and Vidor – “the Lubitsch Touch”; the scene of chattering and gossiping when Prevost and Vidor first get together – the director picks up the editing pace to show their gaiety; toward the end Menjou’s visit to Blue in which a tense conversation (told again through inventive editing) is lightened by Menjou’s ironic attitude (he always seems to be laughing and being polite). The Lubitschean silent grammar is brought out painstakingly – using close-ups to replace sound effects (e.g., a picture of the doorbell with the resident’s name above it to take the place of the doorbell ring); relying heavily on facial expressions and body posture to show the emotional content of a conversation – we always seem to be looking a Monte Blue looking pained and guilty and then slumping away. Misunderstandings abound leading to many plot twists. But the film remains inside the pre-Code standards: the individuals are tempted but no adultery is committed. In the end, the married couple are reunited after Vidor arranges it to have Blue *think* that she has had a flirtation with Hale; Menjou casts the meaningful glance at the parlor maid and goes off to his club to enjoy his reestablished single status; Vidor has sternly broken off her friendship with Prevost; and the crestfallen Hale meets Prevost in the street – they flirt, then he runs to her car in the last shot (but could such a milquetoast be happy with the free spirit?). A step toward a screwball comedy of morals in an era dominated by slapstick and exotic dramas of passion. (2007)

**The Marriage of Maria Braun** 1979 Rainer Werner Fassbinder 3.0 Hanna Schygulla “splendid and mysterious” as Maria, who loses her husband in the war and struggles to survive, Klaus Löwitsch as her husband Hermann, George Boyd as the sensible and sensitive black American sergeant that she has an affair with until she kills him when he gets into a fight with her returned husband, Ivan Desny as the French (?) industrialist that Maria later teams up and prospers with. A very carefully made film set in occupation Germany in the late 1940s laden with vivid period detail, as the country makes the transition from the war years to the consumer years. Begins with a hilariously violent scene in which Maria and her bridegroom are married under a rain of highly destructive Allied bombs – such it is to live and survive in country undergoing almost total annihilation; one perhaps can best understand the rest of the film (less than ending) if one sees it as a (black) comedy with epic overtones (Germany’s survival after the utter destruction of the war years). Maria refuses to believe that her husband is dead, and although she works as a prostitute in a brothel catering to American servicemen (“a girl has to do what she has to do to survive in Germany”) and has affairs with various men, most of whom she uses guiltlessly for her own good, she always insists that she really loves only her husband. When the husband returns from a Russian POW camp, he volunteers to take responsibility for the murder of the Sergeant and goes to prison; meanwhile she rises in the ranks of a corporation run by a suave Frenchman she meets on a train. After the death of her industrialist boyfriend, she reunites with her husband and they live well for a while, until the film ends with a soccer game and a scene of Armageddon issuing from a gas explosion; it is very difficult to find sense in the ending. The film is funny, and yet has a strong underlying sardonic current about Germans were willing to do (had to do) in order to make it through the nightmare years. GSC did not enjoy it as much as most reviewers. (2006)



**Married to the Mob** 1988 Jonathan Demme 2.5 Michelle Pfeiffer is good as outrageously clad and coiffed mafia wife who wants out of the family after her husband is whacked, Alec Baldwin, the "Cucumber" who is iced by his boss when he catches him fooling around with his girlfriend, Dean Stockwell very convincing as the tough, Jersey-talking boss, Tony the Tiger, who gets the hots for Pfeiffer and continues to pursue her when she moves to New York; Mercedes Ruehl is commanding as Tony the Tiger's tall and terminally jealous wife; Matthew Modine as mugging FBI agent, a bit dull and dorky but very funny when he attempts to disguise himself in dorky costumes (with fake moustache). Generally entertaining spoof of the mafia movie from the housewife's point of view -- Pfeiffer wants out and is given the opportunity to escape from all the stolen goods piled in her house when her husband is murdered. Satirizes many aspects of mafia movies -- Pfeiffer contradicts the resigned and long-suffering wife living her separate life; the men have their floozy mistresses; lots of killings, which are not that funny, especially at the end when one of Tony's bodyguards goes down reproaching Mercedes for shooting him. Especially entertaining in the beginning as we look at the stolen goods piled up in Pfeiffer's house (how many boxed microwaves in the kitchen?), we visit the son who is cheating neighborhood kids out of their parents' money, the gladiator theme sex room in the local party motel with "Veni, veni, veni" inscribed over the bed; and the end when all parties (who are still alive) converge on Miami, and just when it seems that Tony has the upper hand on Modine, in pops the wife, who terrorizes the cowed Tony and with Modine's help shoots most of the other guys. Hardly a classic comedy, but entertaining for someone a bit tired of gangster fare. (2006)

**Mars Attacks** 1996 Tim Burton 2.0 Huge all-star cast – Jack Nicholson, Annette Bening, Natalie Portman, Rod Steiger, Paul Winfield, Jim Brown, Joe Don Baker, etc. Bizarre send up of 1950s sci-fi movies. Big budget movie that satirizes nothing in particular, but it does have some funny moments. Special effects look pretty expensive, but they have a cheesy look that is part intentional. Touchstones: 50s sci-fi pics, *Dr. Strangelove*, *War of the Worlds*, Ed Wood's terrible flying saucers, etc. Martians are sometimes amusing (all they say is "Ack; ack!"), but their bodies are clichés, and one gets sick of watching their brains explode into green goo inside their helmets. Funny item is that Martians, who are brainlessly aggressive (just seem to be having fun), are finally defeated by bad music – Don Ho-like Hawaiian music played by the Kansas grandmother. (2005)

**The Martian** 2015 Ridley Scott 3.5 Crowd-pleasing "bring him home" space movie about rescuing an astronaut mistakenly left behind alone on Mars; interesting change for Scott, whose space movies are usually pessimistic. Matt Damon as spunky, resourceful, good-humored all-American Ph.D. stranded on Mars; Jessica Chastain decisive and competent as the commandant of the mission of the spaceship *Hermes*; Michael Peña as equally competent, good-humored crew member; Kate Mara as another crew member (navigation?); Jeff Daniels as the NASA head – realistic matter-of-fact but essentially caring; Kristen Wiig as NASA team member; Chiwetel Ejiofor as passionate director of the Mars (Ares) missions; Sean Bean as NASA official that defies Daniels (Daniels says that he will fire him, but the viewer never sees it happen); Donald Glover as whiz kid, nerd astrophysicist at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory that comes up with an ingenious rescue plan while disrespecting Daniels. Well-made, compelling space rescue film that recalls 'Apollo 13'. Much of the film takes place on Mars, which is pictured much like to American Southwest and Jordan (red mesas). Damon spends the first part of his stay growing potatoes ingeniously so that he can survive until the next Ares mission, but as soon as radio communication is reestablished with NASA, rescue plans and operations begin. The NASA crew in Houston and the JPL geeks in Pasadena are heroic in their determination to spare no expense or effort to bring Damon back safely preempted by the autonomous decision of the *Hermes* crew), and then enlisting the Chinese space agency to send a resupply rocket to Ares as it rounds the earth before heading back to Mars (a good marketing decision given the potential market for the film in China). Extremely tense rendezvous between *Hermes* and Damon's vehicle as the former rounds Mars (at high speed); successful of course and the mission sets off for its second return toward earth. Convincing visuals on Mars; realistic special effects on and outside traveling spaceships. Damon is excellent: competent, impish sense of humor breaking into foul language when frustrated; heart-warming solidarity and affection between Damon and the *Hermes* crew, especially since the latter feel bad about having left their buddy behind.

Wonderful film – visually enchanting combined with the presenting of the exploration of the solar system as an adventure worth making; nice invocation of international solidarity with China (wouldn't that be nice). (2016)

**Marty** 1955 Delbert Mann 3.0 Ernest Borgnine as kind, shy, 34-year-old bachelor, Marty, who is constantly asked why he isn't married; Betsy Blair as Plain Jane schoolteacher, Clara, that meets Marty in a dance hall and falls in love with him; Joe Mantell as Marty's buddy, Angie, who is possessive of Marty's friendship and constantly asking him to "go to 72nd Street" (one assumes you will find prostitutes there); Esther Piletti as Marty's loving, but controlling mother. Sentimental, often moving simple story about a lonely bachelor, who finds a woman he loves and, despite the underground resistance of his buddies (they all call Blair a "dog") and his mother (she's a nice girl, Marty, but she ain't very pretty), he finally makes the key telephone call to his anxiously waiting girlfriend in the film's last frame. The film is set realistically in a working class and lower middle class section of the Bronx in the 1950s – Marty works in a butcher shop and has plans to buy it from the owner, people walk in the streets, Blair lives in 50s-decorated middle class home, Marty and his mom in darker working class flat, the guys go to the movies and dance halls for entertainment on the weekend, the guys are always cruising for easy girls who will do what the guys want after a few drinks. Marty is different – he would like to do what he is supposed to do – get married – but he is "short and heavy-set" and has pretty much given up hope – "I just don't have what women want." "Marty, why aren't you married? You oughta be ashamed of yourself." "What do you wanna do tonight?" "I dunno. What do you wanna do?" Borgnine and Blair take an immediate liking to one another and spend their first evening walking the streets, talking, and visiting Marty's house (Mom wasn't home). A nice twist is the insecurities of Mom and Angie: Mom badmouths Clara, when she gets the idea that a married Marty might like to sell her house; Angie tries to undermine Marty's feeling for Clara, when he fears that he may have to go to the dance hall by himself. Other relatives are not much help either: Aunt Catherine (Augusta Ciolli) has a dismissive, cynical attitude about everybody; Marty's cousins (Karen Steele and Jerry Paris) care only about themselves and their baby. AA for best picture, etc, 1955. The film read in the 50s like a breath of fresh air in the era of biblical blockbusters and epic chariot races. (2015)

**MASH** 1970 Robert Altman 2.5 Elliot Gould as hellraiser Trapper McIntyre; Donald Sutherland overacting a bit as Hawkeye Pierce; Tom Skerritt as more low-key Duke; Sally Kellerman as hysterical Hot Lips Hoolihan; Robert Duvall as priggish Major Burns; Gary Burghoff as Radar O'Reilly. Classic film about the high jinx of field surgeons in the hospital unit only six miles from the front lines in Korea. Film was extremely popular in 1970 and it gave birth to the immortal TV series. Looking at it almost 40 years later, it is amusing, but often lame with marginal jokes; it includes a boring and irrelevant trip to Japan where the boys are obsessed with golf and a boring football game that is stretched way too far; and it takes cheap shots at religion and strongly held personal standards of morality. Essentially nothing happens in the plot – a series of gags, all of which resemble one another in their antiwar animus; the beginning is marked by Trapper's and Hawkeye's arrival, everybody has a rip-roarin' good time, and the end is signified by their departure – no one has changed, no one has learned a thing, and the war keeps killing and maiming American soldiers. The doctors work dutifully and tenaciously to save the lives of wounded soldiers; comic scenes are interspersed with lengthy operating room scenes with lots of blood and gore. The attitude of the doctors is contempt for the army and its orders and hierarchy -- we will do our Hippocratic duty but we will never toe the line. In their (considerable) free time, the guys drink martinis, play cards, smoke, flirt with the nurses (who are usually willing to participate), play golf when they are in Japan, and play dirty tricks on hypocritical prigs like Bible-totin' Frank Burns (he is carted out of the camp in a straight jacket) and especially Hot Lips Hoolihan (her sex sounds when making love with Burns are broadcast over the camp intercom and the curtain around the women's shower is removed to reveal her naked to the whole camp). The doctors are a bunch of immature kids, who however are redeemed by their sense of fun and their devotion to healing the sick. Good laughs in intervals when the camp PA system broadcasts smarmy American songs sung in Japanese and corny summaries of the movies to be shown at night. Filmed in Altman's trademark improvisational style that suits well the subject of the film and its characters. (2007)

**The Master** 2012 Paul Thomas Anderson 2.5 Joaquin Phoenix as US Navy vet following World War II – he has severe mental problems including a violent temper and sex addiction; Philip Seymour Hoffman as outwardly avuncular but actually megalomaniac and ill-tempered founder and head of bizarre religious cult; Amy Adams as his loyal and also fanatic wife. Rather bizarre and often pretentious picture of a religious cult that is obviously modeled after Scientology and an analysis of the complex relationship between Hoffman (apparently based on Ron Hubbard) and his newfound acolyte played by Phoenix. The film’s depiction of the charismatic personality of Hoffman, the beliefs of the cult (“the Cause” – we need to liberate ourselves from the pains of our past lives to move toward individual happiness and the progress of the human race), and some of its practices (Hoffman singing and performing a bawdy song while the camera removes the clothing of all the women present) are all entertaining and sometimes interesting. The severely disturbed character of Phoenix is however a bit much to swallow, e.g., his extreme alcoholism (brewing a concoction that includes paint thinner that is much appreciated by Hoffman), his obsession with sex, particularly his antics screwing a sand girl on a beach in the South Pacific and perhaps the above-mentioned stripping, which might be a figment of Phoenix’s imagination; his wild eyes and extremely violent temper – physically attacking anyone who criticizes Hoffman even to the point of resisting arrest and the destroying a ceramic toilet bowl in a jail cell; Hoffman’s repeated futile attempts to help Phoenix reconstruct his personality, culminating at the end with a long sequence in which the absence of movement (Phoenix sitting in a movie theater) again demonstrates failure. One of the unsolved mysteries of the film is why Hoffman is so attracted to the wreck of a man that is Phoenix – perhaps homoeroticism, but the faithful and attractive Adams is always in the picture. The dialogue is often pretentious (Hoffman tells Phoenix, "I am a writer, a doctor, a nuclear physicist and a theoretical philosopher, but above all, I am a man, a hopelessly inquisitive man, just like you", just as he puts him through a grilling he calls “processing”). The film is often entertaining (the Cause, the excellent acting) but also exasperating (the pretentiousness, the unexplored issues). (2014)

**Match Point** 2005 Woody Allen 3.5 Jonathan Rhys-Meyers convincing understated performance as protagonist tennis pro Chris, quietly social climbing and getting in very deep; Emily Mortimer as daughter of doting wealthy industrialist, who – quiet and nurturing – sets her aim on Chris and gets him; Matthew Goode as tall somewhat clueless brother of Emily; Scarlett Johansson as Nola, sultry, alluring and unstable aspiring American actress who loses Goode and spells big trouble for Chris. Best Allen movie since mid-1990s, although it is very different from traditional Allen product – no Allen on screen, no Brooklyn neurotic character, set in London rather than New York, not much humor and no one-liners. Set in London, but seems transposed from wealthy Hamptons environment, and British critics say it does not get it right; focused much more on universal themes than on satire (although he gets in a few licks); first shot of film is tennis ball hitting the top of the net, bouncing up in the air and ... which side of the net it falls on depends on luck/chance not on some divine plan. Begins as fairly serious four-way domestic drama (will torrid attraction between Rhys and Scarlett cause terminal chaos in the upper-class family?), but then it turns to slippery crime melodrama with more twists than you can shake a shotgun at. When Nola puts unbearable pressure on Chris since she is pregnant, he decides to kill her with one of his father-in-law’s shotguns, taking out an innocent middle-aged woman in the process. The police seem to be on his tracks (Nola left a diary detailing their liaison), and the “ghosts” of the murdered women (one can assume they are objectifications of his remaining bad conscience) appear to Chris also suggesting that he won’t get away with it (he left a big trail). When Chris accidentally leaves the incriminating wedding band of the murdered woman on a Thames embankment, the viewer has a thrill of recognition – ‘Crimes and Misdemeanors.’ Is Allen going to suggest that he was wrong in that great movie and that there is a pattern and force of justice in the world (God) that will lead to Chris’ discovery? But another unexpected development in the murder plot gets Chris off the hook (another drug murder has been committed in the same neighborhood and the dead perpetrator has been found with the middle-aged victim’s ring in his pocket). So, because of good luck (Chris had said in the beginning “I would rather be lucky than good”), Chris will escape, and the last scene of movie pictures the family ecstatic as they bring their first baby home; it is true that Chris is off to the side with a pained expression on his face – he does have a partial conscience at least. Film suffers slightly from artificial segue from melodrama to thriller,

from inexplicable nature of Chris' actions (we are not prepared for his degree of immorality), from Allen's unrepentant in-your-facedness at the end. Still extremely entertaining. (2006)

**Matchstick Men** 2003 Ridley Scott 3.0 N. Cage, Alison Lohman, Bruce Altman. Very engaging con man movie. Plot is good and tricky, and of course (as in 'House of Games') the movie ends up playing a con on the audience; although the big con is a little incredible! Cage is great as the con man with incredible tics and compulsions (when he shuts a door, he has to do it three times!); he lives mostly on tuna and cigarettes; over the top performance that is fun, if pretty exhausting, to watch, at its most extreme when he is not on his 'meds.' Excellent humor from his excesses, and in dialogue between him and his partner. Lohman (who is 24!) is charming and beautiful, and gets the spunky teenage Angst just right; quite moving is the relationship between Cage and his 'daughter' Lohman. Cage warms up to her and faces his parental responsibilities with fear but courage; daughter is charming and delighted to have a dad and participates in his cons. Ends with a 'one year later' in which father and daughter reunite, and although Cage has been thoroughly conned and humiliated, he seems to have gained – he has an honest job, and paradoxically there seems to be a father-daughter connection with Alison; and Alison calls him 'Dad' when she leaves with her boyfriend; Cage also has married the checker we have seen so much of, and she is pregnant with their child. Perhaps we should be disturbed that a cheater and a crook sees the light and more or less lives happily ever after, but what the hay.... (2005)

**The Matrix** 1999 2.5 Keanu Reeves, Larry Fishburne. Sci fi yarn with way too much martial arts, gun battles at end. Could have been interesting yarn – with references to many previous sci fi movies, Bible, etc. and ideas of saviors, Father and Son – but goes for special effects. Good villains. Keanu Reeves without expression; Larry Fishburne portentous; great effects and Hong Kong kung fu. Some reference to the Agents' alienation ('I have this place and it stinks!') but not followed through. Obviously open ending with no resolution of what freedom is going to do for inhabitants of the Matrix. And who invented the matrix and who wrote the code? (2006)

**A Matter of Life and Death (Stairway to Heaven)** 1946 Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger 3.5 David Niven as understated English RAF pilot shot down off the English coast at the end of the war; Kim Hunter as plainly pretty young American WAC that he falls in love with; Marius Goring in mannered performance as heavenly "conductor" with a French accent and attired in effeminate Directoire costume sent to escort Niven to heaven; Roger Livesey handsome, kind, sincere, good-humored and eloquent as English country doctor who defends Niven in his celestial trial; Raymond Massey rather gaunt with bad teeth as American prosecutor with a big chip on his shoulder against the Brits. Colorful and moving fantasy film about an RAF pilot who dies in a plane crash but mistakenly given a life extension; when he falls in love with Hunter, he is summoned by Goring to heaven; Niven however objects and is granted a trial by the benevolent heavenly bureaucrats; at the same time Livesey arranges for an operation on Niven to keep him from really dying and to save him for Hunter; the operation and the trial are both successes – Niven is reunited alive with Hunter and they will surely live happily ever after (at least 50 years). Film sometimes drags toward the beginning, but, despite the long trial scene, becomes ever more gripping and moving as it approaches the end. A fantasy atmosphere is created by the contrast between a majestic black and white for heaven and a brilliant Technicolor for earth (indicating the authors' preference for this world as opposed to the next). Heaven is not depicted traditionally: it is a bureaucracy that operates according to rules and law, majestic with large numbers of people mostly in World War II uniforms milling about, and very keen on fairness and justice. When Niven is granted his trial to see whether he will be granted an exceptional reprieve to live out his life with his true love, the court (presided over by the same actor conducting the surgery down below) goes to great pains to ensure all his legal rights under the American and British systems. The verdict is rendered movingly: the entire court journeys to earth (in color in the operating room) to interview Niven and Hunter, who convince even the prosecutor that they are genuinely in love when Hunter agrees to die in Niven's place (much to the latter's horror); Niven's petition is then granted and he is given an extraordinarily long life to lead. It seems that the trial scene is a dream of Niven's while under anesthesia, but it is not entirely clear. Especially toward the end, the film deals with Anglo-American relations: the hostility expressed by the anti-British Massey (Britain has oppressed so many nations, their plumbing is so bad, etc.) gives way to

enthusiastic brotherhood as the vast numbers of British and American servicemen whole-heartedly applaud the final decision; the view of the vast numbers attending the trial recalls all the British and American servicemen who died for one another during the war. The real subject of the film is love conquers all: when Hunter offers to sacrifice herself for Niven, even the sardonic Massey cannot help but climb aboard; they quote Walter Scott – “Love rules the court, The camp, the grove, And men below, and the saints above, For love is heaven and heaven is love.” Excellent special effects: the vast moving escalator carrying individuals through space, the huge amphitheater where the trial is held, the large eye closing over the surgical light when the operation begins, the freeze that stops the earthly characters in mid-sentence when heavenly visitors arrive, the Pan-invoking nude boy playing his pipe on the beach toward the beginning, etc. Although it seems like a clichéd idea, when given the Powell-Pressburger treatment, the film becomes very moving. (2011)

**Max Manus: Man of War** 2008 J. Rønning and Espen Sandberg (Norway) 2.5 Joachim Rønning as charismatic Norwegian resistance leader, Max Manus, fighting against the Germans in World War II; Espen Sandberg as sidekick conspirator killed in a cafe; Victoria Winge as very pretty bland Solveig, who has an affair with the Gestapo commander (her role is mostly decorative); Agnes Tikkelson as Tikken, a woman that Max eventually falls in love with; Ken Duken as half-decent German Gestapo officer. Sometimes dull, patriotic war-adventure story about the Norwegian resistance to the Germans during World War II (1940-45). The most interesting parts of the film are the planning of sabotage operations and the actual action sequences: the sinking of German ships in Oslo harbor using magnetic timed bombs, a shootout in an Oslo café, where the guys walk into a Gestapo trap trying to get information about the Germans. The film focuses on the experience of Manus and his closest friends: having fought as volunteers in the Russo-Finnish War, they cannot stomach their country’s weak resistance to the Nazis; a lot of scenes highlighting the camaraderie amongst the guys, and particularly the grief of Max when most of his buddies are killed. The film also focuses weakly on the development of an on-again-off-again romance between Manus and Tikken, which is finally consummated after the war is over, and Max – tortured by the loss of his friends and uncertainty about what to do with his life in peacetime (all he has ever known is war and sabotage) – is redeemed by the love of a good woman. All the boys are Nordic and very blond-headed; beautiful shots of Scotland where the guys were in training, but no scenic shots in Norway since all the sabotage activities occur in the city of Oslo. Film builds a fair amount of suspense by cross-cutting between the plotting of the Norwegians and the counter-activities of the German police and by staging exciting action sequence, perhaps the most elaborate of which was the bombing of the German transport ship Donau in early 1945 (the Germans were to use it to send army reinforcements to the western front during the Battle of the Bulge). Interesting that Norwegians seem to be able to travel unimpeded to Sweden and back despite the occupation. Germans are not depicted as bloodthirsty and bestial as in many Resistance films. Reasonably interesting action film that seems best suited for television. (2012)

**McCabe and Mrs. Miller** 1971 Robert Altman 3.5 Highly revisionist American western with realistic depiction of a lawless frontier town coming under control of a big corporation. Warren Beatty as essentially foolish entrepreneur with a gold tooth in the Pacific Northwest about 1890 – he has a fearsome reputation, but knows nothing about gunslinging; Julie Christie with frizzy hair and Cockney accent brings a sharper business sense to Presbyterian Church; Rene Auberjonois as local saloon merchant; William Devane as not-so-smart lawyer; Keith Carridine as an innocent whore-loving cowboy who is shot down in cold blood by a gunslinger; Michael Murphy as mining company rep who would like to make a deal with Beatty; High Millais as towering hitman from the mining company; Manfred Schulz as murderous kid that works for Millais; Shelly Duvall as local widow who becomes a whore. The story is set in a newly constructed wooden town (fresh lumber lying all around) in the Pacific Northwest, where it is always either raining or snowing. It focuses on the fate of Beatty as a small business man, who sets up a whorehouse in Presbyterian Church and is then joined by the hard-nosed Christie, who helps him expand his business and forces him to pay when he has sex with her. It turns out the neighboring mining company wants the town; since Beatty turns down the polite negotiation with Murphy, he is then confronted with the enormous Millais, who arrives with a silver-colored shaggy fur coat, a huge buffalo gun, and two gunslinging assistants. The final long sequence has Beatty scampering through the snow

trying to escape assassination; he manages to kill Millais's two buddies (exciting sequences), but is then shot down by Millais; when Millais approaches him, Beatty plugs him through the forehead and then tumbles down the hill to die in a snowdrift, his body increasingly obscured by the heavy falling snow. The message is clearly that big business cannot be resisted, and that in any case in the unpoliced West (no sheriff or marshal in the town) few will survive. The film follows few of the conventions of the classical western: there are no good guys and bad guys, just the strong and the weak with success going to the former; the whorehouse is presented in graphic detail emphasizing its business aspects and the fun and good humor of the girls, who celebrate birthdays with an elaborate cake; the battle at the end is no choreographed honorable confrontation in the street but scampering through snow and shooting people in the back as they walk past a door or try to climb a hill. The film's aesthetic is realistic and improvisatory: the cinematography is dark and sometimes indistinct; the dialogue is often nearly inaudible with overlapping statements that force the viewer to eavesdrop; the setting is a frontier town under construction, which matches the condition of the set. An excellent example of a realist, cynical western in the Age of the New Hollywood. (2017)

**McCabe and Mrs. Miller** 1971 Robert Altman 4.0 Anti-western drama in a Washington mining town that indicts big business and ends in the destruction of the main character. Warren Beatty as good-humored, clueless gambler in a bowler hat and huge fur coat; Julie Christie as shrewd business woman with experience running a brothel; Rene Auberjonois as good-humored owner of local bar and restaurant; William Devane as arrogant, comically over-confident lawyer; John Schuck familiar face as another of Beatty's subordinates; Shelley Duvall as sweet widow who takes up prostitution; Keith Carradine as sweet kid who has sex with all the prostitutes and then is gunned down for nothing; Michael Murphy as representative of mining company trying to get McCabe to sell his business; Hugh Millais hulking arrogant hit man working for the company; Manfred Schulz blond-haired teenaged assistant of Millais who is even meaner than his boss, shooting down sweet whore fancier Carradine on the bridge for nothing; bunch of female actresses playing the prostitutes. This famous film features intentionally hazy cinematography and random sound recording, which in the bar and whorehouse scenes challenge the viewer to pick out the main speakers. The town is under construction, a realistic touch for a western town; appropriate to the geographical area, the weather is often raining and toward the end the town is covered in deep snow drifts. Dressed in a huge fur coat and a bowler hat, Beatty arrives in the Pacific Northwest town of Presbyterian Church (the film was filmed just over the border in British Columbia), where he establishes a successful whorehouse, which is ratcheted up several notches by the business-savvy English cockney, Christie. The initial meeting between the two is priceless, as Christie packs down a whisky and a four-egg meal and makes a partnership proposition to Beatty, who watches open-mouthed in amazement. The film's main statement emerges when the town is visited by representatives (Michael Murphy) of big business – an eastern mining company – who call in the hitmen (Millais and Schulz) when the foolish, over-confident Beatty (abetted by the equally foolish lawyer, Devane) rejects their not-unreasonable offer. There ensues a lengthy confrontation in the snow, in which Beatty kills Millais' two assistants (nice scene in which Beatty shoots Schulz, who wounds Beatty as he falls into a tub of water) before he is finally shot in the back by Millais; Beatty however is able to shoot the latter in the head when he approaches Beatty's body. The film ends as Beatty rolls down the hill toward the town, and then is covered with snow as he dies. The film is an engaging refutation of the classical Western: lots of subjects forbidden by the Hays Code – whorehouses, random violence, racist behavior toward Chinese (who according to Millais are used to ignite explosives in the mines); big business ultimately controls the direction of western frontier development; the "lone heroic hero" is not heroic, and instead of triumphing over evil, he is destroyed in the final confrontation. The emotional interplay between Christie is engaging – the practical, business-savvy madame usually standoffish with the clueless Beatty but smiling sweetly from under her covers when high on opium. (2017)

**Me and Orson Welles** 2008 Richard Linklater 3.5 Zac Efron as high school student with wavy hair, a broad smile, and winning way who wants to be a part of Welles' Mercury Theater; Christian McKay unforgettable as the quintessential Orson Welles, charming, brilliant, arrogant, dedicated, mendacious, manipulative, and indelibly vengeful; Claire Danes also with a winning smile as a charming,

ambitious underling in the Mercury Theater that gets attached temporarily to Efron; Zoe Kazan as young writer that appears in beginning and end of film; James Tupper as ladies' man, Joseph Cotton; Eddie Marsan as John Houseman, the rotund, highly frustrated owner of the Mercury Theater; Ben Chaplin as very nervous actor George Coulouris. Delightful film about a kid that is hired impulsively by Orson Welles to play a minor part in his famous production of 'Julius Caesar' in the Mercury Theater in 1937, which is staged with stark, minimalist sets and all the players dressed in black fascist costumes (a reference to Mussolini; the parallel to Shakespeare's story is elusive). The film is in part a coming-of-age comedy about a naïve teenager who is supposed to be attending high school in New York (his professor gives fairly boring lectures on Shakespeare's biography), but who is seduced by the glitter and excitement of the stage and by the winning ways of Danes, who beds him once only to move on to pursue her career with Welles' friend, David O. Selznick; in the end Efron returns to school older and wiser without the girl and fired by Welles after opening night but apparently coupled with the young Zoe Kazan, an obviously more appropriate match for Efron. The film also focuses on the romance of the theater: working on the stage, the make-up, the worries of the owner (Marsan), the excitement of performing in front of the public, the egos – primarily the monstrous ego of Welles, but also his leading lady and lover, who obsesses over her appearance in the lights rather than her performance, and ambition that fuels performances but is also the stuff of betrayal. The real focus of the film is McKay's portrayal of Welles. He looks like him and acts the part to the hilt: penetrating eyes and sudden impulses, enormously gifted, brilliant with sudden flashes of insight, genial and supportive to his players when things are going well but negative, manipulative and vengeful when things get difficult or someone (like Efron) crosses him, above all self-centered, convinced that he is right, brooking no criticism, immensely angry if someone stands up to him. A light-hearted, entertaining look at a great personality (Welles) and a fascinating American institution, the Broadway stage. (2012)

**Mean Girls** 2004 Mark Waters 2.5 Lindsay Lohan, Tina Fey, Tim Meadows, Jonathan Bennet. Entertaining movie about cliques in high school (Evanston, Ill.) written by Tina Fey. Lohan (17) is charming high school junior showing up for her first day of school (she had previously been home schooled by her parents); she is pretty and smart. Soon however she is part of the "plastics," the queen bee Barbie clique of the high school. Every girl seems to want the others to suffer. An awful lot of high school chatter and it is hard for an adult to pay attention for long. Movie is however smarter than most teen movies: sex is never a central issue, and the kids are not cartoonish, but seem to have real feelings and issues; even the plastics are a mixed bag – not as horrible as their counterparts in the Christian girls' movie. Ends with a series of moral conclusions hammered in pretty heavy: primarily, don't hurt one another, and geeks have feelings, as do teachers, and probably the most popular girls are not the most interesting. (2005)

**Mean Streets** 1973 Martin Scorsese 3.0 Harvey Keitel, Robert DeNiro as Johnny Boy, Amy Robinson as Theresa, Richard Romanus as Michael, David Proval as Tony. Further adventures of group of Little Italy (Manhattan) kids either involved in or on the edge of small-time mob activities. Plot is pretty thin – Charlie's attachment (why is pretty hard to figure out) to the completely irresponsible, flaky, and suicidal Johnny Boy, how Charlie protects him against Michael (they all are part of the same stem group), but he is finally murdered in a brutal sequence as Charlie is trying to get Johnny Boy out of town. Very veristic filming in the streets of New York – dark, dingy, crowded with big 70s cars, lots of screaming, shoving and real violence; the men are short-tempered, tough talking in their New York accents, full of macho posturing, very foul-mouthed, and loud, and they get in fights often; they can't stand faggots (the guys mock the outrageous pansy in the rear seat of Tony's car) and Niggers. But even so they are often good-natured, likable, and loyal to one another. Film has important autobiographical element for both Scorsese and De Niro. Intense blacks in the night shots and reds inside the bar where Charlie hangs out. The camera tends to long takes, and handheld sequences when Johnny Boy is running, etc.; some jump cutting when Charlie is meeting with Theresa (whom we see in full frontal nudity, but not Charlie of course). Attention focused on Charlie's spiritual drama. Several scenes take place inside the Catholic church where he prays and lights votive candles, holding his hand in the flame a couple of times to remind himself of the pains of hell. He also talks about wanting "to be saved," and makes a

(joking) Eucharistic gesture with his fingers while booze is being poured into a glass in a bar. His life is bifurcated between illegal mafia activity in the streets (he is a collector and “runs numbers” although a nice one) and his desire to please God, be good, and “help others” – on several occasions he acts as Good Samaritan, mainly with Johnny Boy, his “hair shirt;” he is however not very effective. Very intense ethnic texture, what with the church, the Italian street celebrations with the music, the Mafiosi speaking Italian to one another. The guys spend a lot of time in Tony’s bar, shooting the shit, insulting one another, getting mad, drinking, going after women. Theresa seems to be a possible way out for Charlie, but he does not take advantage (she wants him to move uptown where she has an apartment). She is also an epileptic (and thus needs to be cured), but he forgives Johnny when he asks Charlie “What happens when she comes?” and Charlie abandons her for Johnny when she has a fit while the two guys are fighting. Soundtrack consists of appropriate American popular tunes, sentimental Italian ballads, and Italian operatic music. Charlie’s journey does not seem to be over at the end – Johnny is dead in the car (violence) and Theresa is in hysterics (abandoned). Hard for me to like Charlie much; he needs to prioritize his values. (2005)

**Meet John Doe** 1941 Frank Capra (writer Robert Riskin) 3.0 Barbara Stanwyck as fast-talking, hard-driving savvy newspaperwoman with a need for money to support her family – role is parallel to Jean Arthur’s reporter in ‘Deeds’; Gary Cooper more effective than usual as Long John Willoughby, the quintessential American “common man” – handsome, simple, decent, often tongue-tied, naïve, wholesome with common tastes such as playing baseball, but a tiger when he gets going; James Gleason a bit immoral, energetic and wise-cracking as the paper’s managing editor, but who shows his basic wisdom and decency in the quintessential Irish drunk scene; Edward Arnold suitably disquieting as the big shot owner of the newspaper with political ambitions and some fascist-like tastes, such as a private uniformed motorcycle team, personal stormtroopers who illegally break up public meetings, and talk about a “new order” where America will finally get a strong guiding hand; Walter Brennan first-rate as folksy, talkative, down-to-earth friend of Willoughby who doesn’t think much of the John Doe idea – he thinks a bank account would be a fate worse than death; when you get some money, you are besieged by “healots” after your money, and he plays the ocarina; Spring Byington as the usual wholesome and kind matron. The most political of Capra’s Capracorn films, well-acted, great star cast, and wonderfully photographed, but over-the-top clichéd. Setting is big American city – fast-talking, wise-cracking journalists looking for a scoop with few moral qualms, and ambitious would-be dictators allied with big-city political machines and labor unions to take power and split the proceeds. Narrative focuses on newspaper circulation caper – Gary Cooper is recruited to impersonate a fictitious John Doe who is protesting against “civilization” – evil and exploitation in America – and to threaten to commit suicide on Christmas Eve. Soon Stanwyck and Cooper fall for one another, although Cooper has a hard time realizing it. Cooper appeals to the quintessential common man in America – picturesque (play ‘William Tell Overture’ on the harmonica), vivacious, virtuous, commonsensical, simple tastes often looking embarrassed. A lot of cute common man scenes: when Cooper gives his ballyhooed radio address, he preaches the power of common men when they rally behind Capra’s Christian message; just ‘love thy neighbor’; “the meek can inherit the earth only when the meek start loving their neighbor.” In another scene the shy soda jerk tells all how much John Doe inspires him and how he and his wife bridged gaps with other people and promoted ‘love thy neighbor’. They eventually form a federation of John Doe clubs whose main idea is friendliness, giving, and doing things for your neighbor. A dramatic change occurs about two-thirds through the film, when Cooper realizes he is being suckered and he stands up and denounces Arnold and his hangers-on at the big dinner table; and when the previously cynical Stanwyck wakes up, she realizes that she loves Long John, and turns on the ruthless Arnold. After much cliff-hanging suspense, Cooper ends up on the top of the skyscraper on Christmas Eve to reignite the John Doe movement by following through with his suicide. Capra opts for the smarmy, happy ending – a tearful Stanwyck and the common people plead with Cooper to go on living so they can continue the John Doe movement. As a defeated Arnold *et compagne* look on, Cooper enters the elevator carrying Stanwyck in his arms. Much talk and many references to Christian morality and the example of Jesus – when pleading with Cooper on top of the building, Stanwyck urges him to carry on the work of “the first John Doe”. The film follows roughly the same pattern as its famous predecessors – ‘Deeds’ and ‘Smith’: faith in the



common people, corruption in the big city, the same virtuous, aw-shucks male lead, the ritual humiliation, the falling out with the girl and her conversion, and the happy ending – here the system being saved by the common man. (2011)

**Meeting Venus** 1991 Istvan Szabo 3.0 Glenn Close, Niels Arestrup. Very entertaining movie about production of ‘Tannhäuser’ in Paris, with famous conductor Arestrup brought in from Hungary to be music director. Great deal of the cast is Hungarian, although production is in English. From beginning production is incipient chaos, as it is plagued by many union difficulties (at end a strike even forbids the safety curtain from being raised, forcing the singers to perform the opera in concert in front of the curtain!), by the prima donna personalities of the performers, e.g., the love difficulties of the gay performers. Much emphasis on the conflict and inconsistency arising from the European-wide nature of the production; performers spoke six different languages and there were often national tensions among them. Focuses on Close who is grande dame used to being the center of attention, who is suspected of having affairs with her music director “to make sure she is the center of attention,” but who this time really falls in love with Arestrup. Arestrup, who is married with a daughter in Budapest, is not sure about self, and falls deeply in love with Close. This severely shakes up his life, and he almost has a breakdown, but he carries on, and even though the two agree that their affair cannot continue, it appears to be through Close’s faith in him that Arestrup is able to carry off the performance (he is shown on several occasions to have grave doubts about the originality of his talent). Parts of film pretty hokey; but always entertaining, and the music of Wagner is beautiful and moving. (2006)

**Mel Brooks: Make a Noise** 2013 3.0 A tribute to Mel Brooks and his films. Well produced documentary that focuses on entertaining interviews with Brooks, who seems more interested in telling stories and making his viewers laugh than enlightening us about his career. The film contains a lot of tributes and comments from the likes of Carl Reiner, Tracey Ullman, Rob Reiner, Joan Rivers, Richard Lewis David Lynch, Richard Benjamin, who tells a long story about Brooks toward the end of the film, and of course Gene Wilder and wife Ann Bancroft, whom he somehow swept off her feet despite her being much younger. On camera Brooks is voluble, logorrheic, nervous, and sometimes funny (his comic style is obviously not this viewer's preference). Self-described as very Jewish (although not at all religious), he developed his comic style on the streets of Brooklyn and in the Catskill Mountains. He is full of praise for Sid Caesar, for whose television show he wrote. All of his good films come toward the beginning of his career -- 'The Producers' 1968, 'Blazing Saddles' 1974, and 'Young Frankenstein' 1974 -- which were made with the participation and under the influence of Gene Wilder, who seems to have had a great influence on Brooks. All of his movies since 1974 ('High Anxiety', the pastiche of Hitchcock, 'Spaceballs, Silent Movie', 'History of the World, Part II, etc.) are mediocre at best, with the possible exception of 'To Be or Not to Be' 1983 (One wonders however about the blindness and artistic arrogance of an unsophisticated comic to remake Lubitsch's classic). He excels in remaking American genre movies, and pushing comic ideas to their absolute limit, which of course often means too far. His movies are full of topical references, often breaking the "fourth wall" to lead the viewer, for example, on a chase through a film studio, where one presumes the film was made. Not one of America's great comics, but a source of a lot of buffoonish laughs. (2015)

**Melinda and Melinda** 2004 Woody Allen 2.5 Radha Mitchell fetching in dual role as Melinda in both stories, Wallace Shawn as comic playwright who tries to convince us that his comedies are more popular than tragedies because life is basically so tragic that we couldn't take it unless we are laughing (basically the theme of the movie), Chloe Sevigny as trust-fund wife of struggling actor in the tragic story, Will Ferrell as husband in the comic story; he is seriously miscast as the Woody Allen surrogate, the bluff, mostly physical comedian delivering the cynical, self-deprecating Allen-style lines. Allen film with intriguing premise that just doesn't pan out. The film starts with the two playwrights debating in a Francophile New York café about whether life is basically a comedy or a tragedy: Allen then presents a comic version and a tragic version to us mixing the two in an often confusing way. Unfortunately the comic version is not very funny – an occasional chuckle but definitely suffers from Ferrell being miscast as Allen surrogate (can Allen humor work without Allen delivering the lines?); and

the tragedy gets on your nerves, since we have to put up with a constantly fidgeting Melinda always smoking cigarettes and worrying about whether she looks fat; it ends with all Melinda's friends giving up on her and saying that they will just have to abandon her to her own devices even though she has just attempted suicide. The comedy ends with an improbable getting together of Ferrell (recently abandoned by his wife) and the comic Melinda, who has finally seen the demerits of her musician boyfriend. No doubt almost all the actors are charming and winsome; the locations in New York are the usual Allen New Yorkaphilia – spectacular views of the skyline from charming lakes in Central Park, marvelous apartment interiors tastefully decorated with classic moldings and carefully painted plaster walls, some of them traditional and some of them cool modern with lofts converted into minimalist yuppie nests (since they are supposed to be struggling artists, one wonders where they got the money). You have to give Allen points for the premise, the choice of actors, and the photography of New York; but unfortunately the comedy is not very funny, and the tragedy not moving. (2006)

**Memories of Murder** 2003 Joon-ho Bong 3.5 Kang ho-Soon as portly small-town detective a bit overwhelmed by a serial murder; Sang kyung-Kim as deceptively handsome detective who comes from Seoul to help in the murder investigation but who is often befuddled himself; a variety of Korean actors playing a mentally challenged suspect, Kang's wife (in the last scene seen 17 years later with two children), the amusing police chief, the single female Korean police officer, and other characters including the perp and the teenage victim at the end of the film. Entertaining and cinematically ingenious film about an historical Korean serial murder case in the 1980s that was unsolved: the detective in charge of the investigation – Kang – is more or less incompetent and clueless; Sang arrives from the big city to help him; they are in conflict over who has priority; they eventually come to a meeting of minds on how to handle the case, but the case remains unsolved when they allow the prime prospect to escape with his hands still handcuffed behind his back; a postscript recalling the first scene of the film reminds us that the murderer is probably still roaming around near the scene of the crime. The film follows the outlines of the detective investigation procedural, but it adds themes and overtones that make it unique. Bleak comedy pervades many scenes: the police don't hesitate to use torture and intimidation to extract confessions from (usually false) suspects (compare 'Mother'); Kang's sidekick who resembles a haggard Frankenstein on a diet is invited to beat up suspects with fists and feet when they are recalcitrant (his martial arts-like feet attacks are funny); and the suspects are curiously accepting of the violence; police incompetence is satirized in several scenes by the comically ineffective pleas of Kang to dozens of bystanders not to foul a crime scene; the dishonesty of the police investigation is mocked when Kang fakes a footprint next to the first crime scene in order to incriminate the mentally challenged suspect. By continual reference to civil defense drills (high school girls play-acting that they have been attacked with North Korean poison gas) and to police not being available for the investigation since they have been sent to suppress student demonstrations, the film implicitly associates criminal violence and police behavior with the political conditions under the South Korean dictatorship. The evolution of the two policemen follows the theme: the originally calm and professional Sang becomes so frustrated that he tries to shoot down the suspect whom he thinks guilty but who has been cleared by US-based DNA testing; and the mood of the film at the end is a resigned, although tragic, acceptance that the case will never be solved. Such a political theme would appear rarely in an American police film. The filmmaker knows how to manipulate mise-en-scene, editing and sound to fascinate the attentive viewer; his film has great "hooks". The use of McGuffins (the rain and the song that is played on the radio on rainy nights), unexpected public scenes (the visit to the girls' school), the fear of the police all have a connection to the films of Alfred Hitchcock. (2011)

**Menschen am Sonntag** 1930 (silent) Richard Siodmark; Edgar Ulmer (Germany); writer Billie Wilder and Fred Zinnemann. 4.0 Edwin, a taxi driver; Annie, a depressive model who is his live-in girlfriend and with whom he has a bad relationship (she refuses to get up on Sunday morning to go to the country); Wolfgang, gentleman and gigolo and good friends with Edwin (he has bad teeth) – he doesn't even help pay for the boat ride at the end of the film; an extremely cute, rather moody Brigitte manages a record shop—she is picked up by Wolf in the first scene and is pouting from jealousy most of the rest of the film ; Christl, lively, flirtatious friend of Brigitte, who shows up at the lake. One of the earliest

movies to use a non-professional cast and an undramatic, everyday storyline. Consists primarily of a group of non-actors playing themselves as they go from Berlin to Wannsee on a Sunday afternoon; a kind of celebration of leisure. The main narrative thread is the romantic relationships among the five main characters. Lady's man Wolf picks up Brigitte on the street; Erwin has a contentious relationship with the beautiful Annie, who sleeps in rather than go to Wannsee on Sunday; in the lake Wolf tries to kiss Brigitte, but she rebuffs him and Wolf courts her friend Christl; Wolf tries to touch Christl's breast but she resists; she climbs up the tree and allows Wolf to see up her dress; Wolf eventually seduces Christl in the park (the camera pans away when it happens), but no doubt when she has to pull up her stockings afterwards. The four then return to Berlin. The ending is a little melancholy, since the weekend is over and everyone has to "wieder Arbeit, wieder Alltag, wieder Woche" on Monday morning. "Vier Millionen warten auf den nächsten Sonntag." Many cutaways from the main narrative to shots of Berlin streets, autos, taxis, buses, streetcars, trains, etc.; typical Berliner activities on a weekend; field hockey; playing with children in the park, boating, picnicking, lounging on the beach, etc. The film is enlivened by a colorful modern recording of the original soundtrack. The fabulous print includes fluid editing and expressive close-ups of attractive young people, e.g. of Brigitte's jealousy at the lake when Wolf begins to fool around with Christl, the kids having an eventful picnic and vibrating while they laugh, taking photos in the park (stop motion of many individual faces). The film makes pre-Nazi Weimar Germany look like a paradise of beautiful cityscapes, lake scenes, and attractive young people having a good time, insouciant and happy to be in the company of one another; also a strong melancholy because of viewer's knowledge of what comes after – many of the kids probably ended up in Nazi uniforms and were dead perhaps a decade later. The pensiveness is momentarily reinforced by episode that shows cemetery, poverty, marching soldiers (veterans?), and heroic statues like the Siegesäule (cut to lions, eagles, royal symbols, etc.). A poetic, moving film despite its everyday, realist textures. (2014)

**Mesrine: ennemi public #1** 2008 Jean-François Richet 3.5 Vincent Cassel continues as his violent, obsessive, protean, publicity-loving, bull-shitting self; Ludivine Sagnier as his sexy, faithful girlfriend; Mathieu Amalric as more sensible accomplice who parts company with Mesrine when the latter acts too crazy; Olivier Gourmet as the persistent cop pursuing Mesrine and finally getting him; Georges Wilson hilarious and convincing as elderly real estate magnate kidnapped by Mesrine. Second installment in the Mesrine saga, continuing the high octane action and the charismatic performance by Cassel. The film starts off a bit slow with more violent confrontation with the police (rarely in any film have so many bullets been fired) and daredevil escapes from prison and courtrooms; the violent action sequences become repetitive and tiring, especially when they are improbable, such as the sequence in which he breaks out of La Santé prison in Paris with guns brought to him by his lawyer (is there any way she can avoid being held responsible?!). However variety and interest return about halfway through the film. First, the charming and sexy Ludivine Sagnier becomes his third female accomplice; he meets her in a brothel café, has (sexy) sex with her, and she remains with him until the end despite her fears. Second, the kidnapping sequence with the game and lively Georges Wilson is very entertaining: when Mesrine demands that Wilson pay 10,000,000 francs for his release, the latter objects saying that it is not worth it – he is too old; after some ill-tempered negotiation, they agree on 6,000,000; in a subsequent scene while sipping cognac, Wilson remarks that the two of them enjoy the good things in life, but when Mesrine contends that he is a revolutionary (!), Wilson counters that a true revolutionary would have murdered him by now instead of asking for a ransom. The final 20 minutes track the implementation of the police plan to murder Mesrine: he is followed meticulously and suspensefully through the Clignancourt quartier in Paris, and is finally gunned down in a hail of automatic weapon fire while standing at a traffic light; the movie ends with Sagnier covered with blood and wailing about her dog and the police removing Mesrine's bloody body from the car. There is hardly a moment's pause in the succession of violent action sequences; expertly staged and directed. Cassel's performance as Mesrine is fascinating and constantly changing: always profane, sometimes cruel and ruthless (as when he tortures and murders a journalist who insulted him in the press), a gentle lover with Sagnier, a big, charming smile when he wants, always confident and full of himself, sometimes polite with his victims (e.g., the farmer family that he and his accomplice kidnap), fascinated with his public image and imagining himself foolishly as a revolutionary who is going to destroy capitalism by robbing banks! (2012)

**Mesrine: L'instinct de mort** 2008 Jean-François Richet 3.0 Vincent Cassel in high-octane, protean performance as the famous daredevil, psychopathic, publicity-seeking French criminal, Jacques Mesrine; Cécile de France smashing with dark hair as his beautiful, equally ruthless girlfriend and accomplice; Gérard Dépardieu in short-term role as Mesrine's first crime boss (rubbed out in gangland execution); Gilles Lellouche as Mesrine's friend Paul (killed with Dépardieu); Roy Dupuis as Mesrine's brutal Québécois confederate; Elena Anaya pretty and soft-spoken as Mesrine's wife and mother of his three children – she leaves him halfway through the film; Michel Duchaussoy as Mesrine's soft-spoken, gentle father (who seems to get the blame for some of his son's sociopathic behavior). Hyper-active, never-a-dull-moment recounting of the first part of Mesrine's criminal career. After a scene predicting his murder, the film follows Mesrine through his initial crimes in France (broken by a brief stint with an architectural firm that he abandons impulsively), his abandonment of his family to go to Quebec with Cécile de France, their stupid kidnap caper with a billionaire, their capture in Arizona (brilliant filming of the scenery in Monument Valley!), his brutal experience in a special prison in Quebec, his escape; the film cuts off with the murder of two hunting officials who – unfortunately for them – recognize the fugitives. The film has enormous action momentum: scenes are usually short; most of them depict some outrageous Mesrine initiative leading to extreme risk or violence. The most memorable: when Anaya tries to stop him from leaving with his criminal friends, Mesrine beats her to the ground, then shoves a pistol in her mouth warning her never to challenge him again; the sequence of his first months in the Quebec prison has him lying naked on the floor of a solitary cell, periodically beaten by guards with sticks and rubber hoses, sprayed with high-pressure cold water, and bombarded with high-decibel noise; after breaking out of the prison, Mesrine and Dupuis senselessly return to break out some of their friends, and they have a violent shootout with the guards all using automatic weapons. Mesrine's character is complex and bizarre: he is impulsive – driven by some interior demon (the film suggests his woos father, his experiences in the army in Algeria, and falling in with the wrong crowd), he seeks media publicity (when asked by the press to make a comment when he is arrested, he makes the V sign and says 'Vive le Québec libre!'), and he is an affectionate husband and father (he is truly reluctant to leave his little daughter), until the demons take him over and he runs off on another crazy destructive adventure. Film is action-packed, running in hyper-active frenzy from one scene to another. Mesrine's character holds the viewer's attention, although his vicious destructiveness can be off-putting. (2012)

**Metropolitan** 1990 Whit Stillman 2.5 Edward Clements as Tom, an upper West Side kid who stumbles into an Upper East Side debutante set in the party week following Christmas; Carolyn Farina as cute, shy, tomboyish debutante, Audrey, who develops a crush on Tom; Chris Eigeman as Nick, one of the garrulous deb "escorts"; Taylor Nichols as Charlie, the bespectacled escort who delivers much of the sociological analysis; and several other unknown actors to make up a party of about ten. Elusive dialogue film featuring a bunch of nice-looking Upper East Side, "Preppie" kids doing the debutante thing; nary a parent appears in the film. There is virtually no plot, as the kids talk their way through one session after another analyzing upper middle class society (Charlie and Nick dub them UHBs or Upper Haute Bourgeoisie) and whether their class is declining, which everyone seems to think so. The characters are cool – mostly polite, hardly an erotic spark, perhaps one kiss (on the cheek?), rarely an outburst of temper, but just talk about themselves and other members of their set; about girls who have been "ruined" by irresponsible guys but without explaining what that means and not seeming to care a whit. It appears the interchanges are supposed to be amusing, but an occasional chuckle is the most that the film could muster from this viewer. The only appreciable narrative issue was whether the laid-back Tom would even notice that Audrey was in love with him; for most of the film he doesn't, and there is some relief at the end when he shows that he cares: when Audrey, apparently in a plan to arouse Tom's jealousy, spends the weekend in the Hamptons with a guy with a bad reputation, Tom takes a taxi all the way out, confronts Audrey, and Audrey's beaming smile (the first in the film?) shows us that the two are now "together"; the final scene has Tom, Audrey, and Charlie hitchhiking their way back to the city – unthinkable for East Side preppies. The film thus turns out a kind of romantic comedy where the initially distant boy and girl come together at the end for the happily-ever-after. Film is admirable for obviously having been shot on a shoe string – the rich interiors were all loaned to Stillman by parents of his friends.

Film is original, but most of the time cannot escape from the tedium of conversation among privileged kids. Although Stillman does not seem to be making a sociological point, one concludes that privileged preppies are in decline and that they do not make an appreciable contribution to American society. (2011)

**Meyerowitz Stories (New and Selected)** 2017 Noah Baumbach (Netflix) 3.0 Semi-serious family comedy, in which three adult children attempt to come to terms with their formidable father and one another. Dustin Hoffman very entertaining (and in his beard virtually unrecognizable) as crusty, egocentric retired sculptor (he taught at Bard College), who is always looking for validation and can never say he is sorry; one of his sons Adam Sandler evinces the viewer's sympathy as a devoted father who considers himself a failure since he never held a job; Grace Van Patten as his attractive daughter, who is majoring in film at Bard (all of her films are explicitly about sex); Ben Stiller a bit smug as the son who has moved to Los Angeles and become a successful financial adviser; Elizabeth Marvel as the boys' retiring sister; Emma Thompson entertaining as Hoffman's happyish, egotistical wife (his fourth), who is constantly traveling; Judd Hirsch, Rebecca Miller, Sigourney Weaver, and Adam Driver have interesting smaller roles; Candace Bergen has one incisive scene as one of Hoffman's ex-wives. The film's talkiness and Jewish artistic environment in New York call to mind the films of Woody Allen. Its narrative line is less cogent and important than Baumbach's previous films. The children all deal extensively with the dominating paterfamilias, whose serious illness halfway through the film moves the plot along: Marvel makes a startling revelation about sexual abuse by a friend of Hoffman's when she was a child, but otherwise remains generally in the background; Stiller realizes that he is angry with his father, tries to apologize to the evasive Hoffman, and finally decides to visit New York more often. Sandler's story is the most emotional: encouraged by his father to consider himself a failure, he clings to his relationship with his daughter as she moves to an independent life with a boyfriend at Bard; although he never gets a job, Sandler learns to respect himself, and as he departs at the end for an extended visit with his brother, he meets a woman (Miller) who seems interested in him. Meanwhile, the two brothers who were alienated by separate lives with different mothers decide to accept one another and build a relationship. Little is really changed at the end; life moves on in all of its ambiguities. Throughout the film's fast-moving dialogue the viewer enjoys psychological observations and humor, which is often mixed with dramatic moments; e.g., the man that exposed himself to Marvel is now so old he can barely walk and is one of the few that visits Hoffman in the hospital; thirsting for revenge, the boys trash his car with comic incompetence. Although enjoyable, the film cruises by without the same emotional resonance as Baumbach's best work. (October 2017)

**Michael Collins** 1996 Neil Jordan 3.0 Liam Neeson charismatic, dominating chief of the military wing of the Irish rebellion, who however harbors regrets about the violence that prevails in his country; Aidan Quinn as his best friend (they often sleep in the same bed) who turns against him toward the end of the film; Stephen Rea as a rather weasely British policeman who delivers valuable intelligence to the rebels; Alan Rickman quiet, slippery and calculating as Eamon de Valera, the political chief of the provisional republic; Julia Roberts and her "love me" smile rather out of place as a young woman who has little to do with the rebellion, but who apparently is loved by both men; Charles Dance in pungent sequence as tall, lean British leader who is executed in his bedroom with the help of his maid. Rousing action picture about the prosecution and success of the Irish Rebellion: beginning with the Easter Uprising fiasco, to the organization of Collin' guerrilla flying columns, to the disagreements between de Valera and Collins over politics, to the unexpected British decision to open negotiations, to the conflict between Collins and de Valera over whether to accept the treaty, which left Northern Ireland separate and left the new Free State within the British Commonwealth, to the assassination of Collins just before the outbreak of Civil War. The best part of the film is the compelling action sequences depicting the vicious tit-for-tat between the IRA and the British paramilitary forces: the ruthless actions of the assassination squads are depicted in exciting cinematic style – the Irish assassins even give their victims a few seconds to say their prayer before being shot through the head; the Black and Tans pursue their foes relentlessly with superior military technology and often hanging or shooting them with no legal niceties; one disturbing sequence has as British armored car enter a crowded rugby field and then open fire indiscriminately on the bystanders. There is never any doubt that the Irish are the heroes and that among

the rebels Collins is the true architect of independence. Also interesting is the back and forth between the militant although politically moderate Collins and the shifty, uncompromising de Valera. Michael at first supports him loyally, but their relationship breaks down when de Valera absents himself a long time from Ireland to influence American public opinion; the film suggests that de Valera sent Collins as chief negotiator to London so that he would get the blame for the unsatisfactory outcome that he knew was inevitable, and it implies also that a sulking de Valera was at least aware of the plot to assassinate Collins and did nothing to stop it. The weakest aspect of the film is the more-or-less irrelevant love story that stars Julia Roberts in a romantic triangle with Neeson and Quinn; her decision to opt for Quinn precipitates his break with Collins when the two end up on opposite sides of the treaty dispute. Movie is at its best in the rousing action sequences. (2011)

**Midnight** 1939 Mitchell Leisen 3.0 Kind-of screwball comedy with top stars and great Paris art direction; but it isn't very funny. Claudette Colbert her usual charming, good-humored self as chorine that gets involved with Parisian upper class; Don Ameche as Parisian cab driver, who falls in love with Colbert and has to retrieve her from the beautiful people; Francis Lederer as social butterfly ladies' man that makes an extended play for Colbert; Mary Astor rather dull as society lady with a smashingly elegant chateau; John Barrymore long in the tooth (his drinking and age show) but perhaps the most amusing character in the film as Astor's husband, who is jealous of Astor's affection for Lederer; Rex O'Malley as dorky hanger-on with little function in the narrative; Monty Wooley funny and quirky as French judge that handles Colbert's fake divorce (don't ask) at the end of the film. Film charts Colbert's journey through a series of misunderstandings and reversals from lower class (meeting Ameche, the cab driver), to the crème de la crème (Colbert is hired by Barrymore to seduce Lederer so that Barrymore can win back his wife), and then back to true love among the cabbies of Paris (disguised as a Hungarian nobleman Ameche wins her back through a series of daring and improbable maneuvers: when Cinderella's "midnight" strikes, she is riding in a cab (instead of a coach) back to her true status). Film stands out for the sparkling performances of its principals trying their best with an improbable, often wooden script, and also for its stunning Paris sets – the streets, the classical and baroque motifs, the spotless antique cars, not least the astoundingly beautiful and modish gowns worn by Colbert, and all the side-cocked hats worn by the ladies. Perhaps the sequence at Astor's and Barrymore's chateau is the most spirituel: the arrival of Ameche as the "husband" of Colbert turns everything upside down, pretty good slapstick when Colbert talks "long distance" with her "son's" caretaker back in Budapest, who is actually a hamming Barrymore on another extension in the other room; Lederer then maneuvers Ameche and Colbert into securing a "divorce", which is of course overturned by the Wooley's blustering machinations. Although entertaining, this overrated film is often frustrating to watch. The reversals are often incredible, the dialogue aspires to be sparkling, but usually falls short. The humor of the film surely suffers from the watchfulness of the Breen Office; a dash of Lubitsch might have done wonders. (2017)

**Midnight Cowboy** 1969 John Schlesinger 3.0 Jon Voigt, Dustin Hoffmann, Bernard Hughes, Brenda Vaccaro. About the unfortunate, down and out people in America. JV goes to New York thinking that he will make a buck as gigolo stud; but he is grievously disappointed as he learns that selfish New Yorkers are not interested in paying for his services. He becomes homeless and shares abandoned apartment with Ratso. Ambience is pretty miserable and unhappy; no well adjusted people, just pitiful common folk, who crane their necks to see a dead man, and all sorts of weirdos and compulsives in New York. Dustin Hoffmann pulls out all the stops for Ratso, who with his lameness and speech patterns reminds one of Rainman; strikingly different role from 'The Graduate!' Voigt is innocent, good-hearted, dumb, chump guy with a good heart, who doesn't learn too much. The two have a kind of love-hate relationship insulting one another and then mutually supporting. They grow together, and JV is loyal at the end, going to the limit to get bus fare to Miami for the two, and then is by his side when he dies on the bus. Vaccaro as a housewife looking for some action; B. Hughes as older businessman type who turns out to be blubbing pitiful. Negative view of America. Editing very New Wave with flashcuts, jumpcuts, flashbacks, all indicating Buck's prior incestuous experiences, etc. and the contents of his imagination. (2005)

**Midnight in Paris** 2011 Woody Allen 3.0 Owen Wilson a bewildered, stammering semi-clone of Allen as Hollywood screenwriter full of doubts about his writing and his marriage plans visiting Paris with his future in-laws; Rachel McAdams empty-headed and materialistic as his fiancée – she likes to shop and wants Wilson to live in Malibu; Kurt Fuller and Mimi Kennedy amusing as McAdams’ ritzy, right-wing Republican parents; Michael Sheen also amusing as pedantic friend of McAdams; Carla Bruni ok as museum guide who gets in a discussion with Sheen; Allison Pill pretty and charming as Zelda Fitzgerald; Corey Stoll funny as macho Ernest Hemingway with a big mustache (Have you ever been charged by a bull?); Kathy Bates stands out speaking French and Spanish as Gertrude Stein; Adrien Brody very droll as Salvador Dali; Marion Cotillard pretty and mysterious as Adriana, the ultimate artists’ groupie with whom Wilson falls in love; Lea Seydoux beautiful and charming as the (contemporary period) shopgirl that Wilson eventually ends up with. Rather overrated Allen product that focuses on the romantic and literary insecurities of Wilson, which lead him to go back in time to the 1920s and visit all the greats of modernism and the American literary diaspora, including Gertrude Stein, who validates his writing; Cotillard takes him back one more period to the Belle Epoque where she decides to stay; when Wilson returns again to the present, he breaks up with the shallow McAdams and decides to stay in Paris to pursue his writing career and to hook up with the beautiful Seydoux. Film begins with an extended montage of charming Paris street scenes, none of which give justice to the city because they are presented like faded color postcards. The first scenes of the narrative are effective in their satire of pretentiousness (Sheen as know-it-all) and empty-headed materialism (McAdams and their parents), but the passages back in time, always inaugurated at midnight by a large Peugeot touring car that passes in front of Wilson in an old street, soon take over. The 1920s scenes are a who’s who of famous American and British writers (but where was James Joyce?) and French painters admired by Allen, who seems determined to show us how many of them he knows and to confirm the superiority feelings of his audience. The most amusing are Hemingway, always talking about courage and adventure, Gertrude Stein as presented by the pyrotechnical Kathy Bates, and Adrien Brody, who not only looks like Dali but captures his overweening ego perfectly. Wilson, who has a gee-whiz attitude confronted with so many famous people, learns two things by his experience: he has some writing talent and thus he should stay in Paris, and McAdams is impossibly superficial (the usual Allen put-down of Southern California – Malibu and Hollywood) and he should choose someone else (Seydoux). Allen also seems to be saying that we shouldn’t be so nostalgic about supposed golden ages in the past, but we should use their example to improve ourselves for the present. A very pleasant film that entertains; but it has its irritating moments and it does not run deep, unlike ‘Match Point’ or ‘Crimes and Misdemeanors’. (2011)

**Midsummer Night’s Sex Comedy** 1981 Woody Allen 2.5 Woody Allen in an attenuated version of his persona as insecure husband of Steenburgen – he gets no sex from his wife and thus takes refuge in crackpot inventing, especially primitive flying machines that barely work; Mary Steenburgen about the only natural-acting person in the film – sexually frigid as Allen’s sweet-tempered wife; Tony Roberts as Lothario doctor who flings himself into sexual conquests because of the suffering and death he sees in his practice; Julie Hagerty dim-brained, over-sexed nurse who accompanies Roberts to Allen’s house – she calls chess knights “stallions” and “radiates a certain raw energy”; Jose Ferrer as pragmatist, materialist, atheistic philosopher with a big ego – “a pompous ass”; Mia Farrow as his intended bride who describes herself as a free spirit and a modern woman. Only Mendelssohn’s orchestral music is on the soundtrack; a lot of lovely shots of fertile summer nature – birds, grass, the lake, trees, etc. – suggesting the sap rising in the cast’s veins. Light-hearted treatment of love and changing partners in a country house in upstate New York; based obviously on Shakespeare (“Midsummer Night’s Dream”) and Bergman’s ‘Smiles of a Summer Night’. Three couples arrive to celebrate Ferrer’s and Farrow’s wedding, but virtually everybody’s eye wanders: couples find themselves sneaking out by the lake to meet on the sly, Allen falls back in love with Farrow, whom he had known when he was younger, Roberts, who is disillusioned with his womanizing ways, also falls in love with Farrow, Ferrer ends the film with a Neanderthal-type seduction of the delighted Hagerty, etc. All the men can’t seem to find amorous stability until the end when Allen finally has steamy sex (unseen) with Steenburgen, Roberts gets his girl, Farrow, and Ferrer dies of apoplexy while making love to Hagerty, leaving her as the only unpaired character at the end. Much ado is made of magic and spirits, especially as evoked by Allen’s

magic lantern sphere that reveals happenings in both the past and the future; in a puzzling finale, the rationalist Ferrer's spirit takes wing and flits off into the night presumably to haunt the woods for future lovers at Midsummer Night. Is Allen endorsing spiritualism as an alternative to his usual existential pronouncements? Perhaps the funniest – and most bizarre – moment in the film has Roberts making his declaration to Farrow while Ferrer performs wavering, unsteady versions of Schubert Lieder in the background. The Allen persona is subdued (nary a joke about psychiatrists) and his usual zippy one-liners are usually forgettable. The whole production seems forced and derivative, coming across as an awkward homage to Bergman rather than an insightful and moving comedy like many of his other films of this period. A good idea that doesn't work. (2009)

**A Mighty Wind** 2003 Christopher Guest 3.0. Same format as 'Best in Show,' but not as hilariously funny. The music is surprisingly good when the show finally happens; although some unmusical moments getting ready (Levy trying to practice in motel room as couple next door moans with pleasure!). Mickey (O'Hara) and Mitch (Levy) come back together; they are too sympathetic and poignant to be the occasions of 'Bshow' laughs. Balaban great as the fussy emcee who is so uptight primarily because his mother made him wear a helmet when he played chess as a kid. After successful show, all three groups go on to oblivion (e.g., 'Folksmen' sing in an Indian casino). Guest and Levy wrote all the music! Problem: music is too good (or is it really bad?). (2005)

**Mildred Pierce** 1945 Michael Curtiz (Warners) 4.0 Joan Crawford compelling and impactful in her most famous role as overly attentive mom that drives her family to destruction when she steps outside her assigned role as a mother; Bruce Bennet as her nice-guy husband, who remains on the periphery after he breaks up with Mildred over her indulgence of her daughter; Ann Blyth memorable as Veda, a caricature of a natural cold-hearted bitch that cares about nothing except money and status (she even tearfully reproaches her mother for her humble beginnings, for working for a living, and for smelling like food); Jack Carson as morally ambiguous friend that has a sexual yen for Mildred (she always rejects him); Randolph Scott not looking a bit like a cowboy as playboy Monty that Mildred latches onto for status and that ends up helping Carson rip her off; Eve Arden as masculine-seeming, matter-of-fact, wise-cracking assistant to Mildred in her business. Highly entertaining, interesting, beautifully photographed combination women's picture- film noir made at the end of World War II. The film begins with a surprise murder of Scott in his lovely, serpentine beach house (we have no idea who he is), followed by Mildred's attempt to frame Carson for the crime. In the presence of an elegant police inspector, Mildred then recounts the whole story. Her narrative begins in a brightly lit, squeaky clean suburb (Glendale); it is quickly apparent that Blyth is hopelessly spoiled by her mother, who after her younger daughter dies of pneumonia, decides to go to work to give Veda the things she wants; Mildred is instantly a success as a businesswoman, starting with a single restaurant and soon expanding to include a whole chain of them in the LA area; the cinematography grows darker as Veda manipulates her mother for ever more possessions, including a sexy convertible for her birthday; Veda also manipulates other men, including Scott, with whom she begins a sexual relationship despite his relationship with her mother; Mildred even agrees to marry Scott and use her money to remodel his enormous Pasadena house to please Veda. The flashback leads the viewer to assume that a fed up and jealous Mildred murdered Scott, but the denouement in the police station reveals that Veda committed the murder in a fit of jealousy and that Mildred had been trying to protect her. In the conclusion, Veda is taken into custody, and Mildred walks off arm-in-arm with Bennet, safely back in the protection of a good man. Fabulous locations, including especially the picturesque beach house with complicated spaces where love affairs were pursued and the murder took place. Film noir influences obvious in the use of deeply shadowed cinematography (especially in the beach house) and the portrayal of Veda as a kind of femme fatale that leads her mother to near destruction. The narrative however focuses on the plight of Crawford as a woman, who ruins the life of her daughter by spoiling her (although she is so bad we suspect that she was "rotten" by nature), and who creates chaos in her life by stepping outside her mother's role into business and social climbing. Outstanding accomplishment of American movies in the 1940s. (2014)

**Milk** 2008 Gus Van Sant 3.0 Sean Penn as Harvey Milk – determined, seeking the limelight, dedicated, inhibited smile, bad hair, wiry, a little over the hill, in his single-minded quest to be the first



gay elected to major office and to lead the gay community to freedom; Josh Brolin multi-faceted and convincing as the tortured, conservative fellow supervisor Dan White; Diego Luna as crazy, effeminate Latino lover of Milk, who hangs himself in a critical moment; James Franco as Milk's good-looking and sensible first boyfriend. Good biopic about Milk's life from his and Franco's decision to leave New York for San Francisco in 1972, to Milk's election to the Board of Supervisors in 1977, to his campaign against Senator Briggs' (and Anita Bryant's) Proposition 6, and to his assassination by the tortured Dan White in the following year. Film is down-to-earth and honest. It records the basic events without adulation or Spielbergian rising music. The San Francisco cultural and political background to the story is accurate and honest. All performances are genuine and convincing, especially of course the promethean Penn, who puts himself entirely inside Harvey Milk's skin. But despite all of its theoretical virtues, the film just does not resonate. The other characters are cut-outs: Moscone, who barely says a thing throughout the film, is completely undeveloped; all the other characters are presented as hangers-on of Milk, although with different personalities and different quirks. The gays come across as being self-indulgent: sure they have the right to live their lives as they want, but one sees little sense of responsibility toward others, toward society, raising children; everything seems focused on their own pleasure. This viewer found it difficult to buy into Milk's crusade as part of the universal crusade for human freedom; it seems more like a bunch of gay guys having a party. The sections of the film leading up to the assassination of Moscone and Milk are the most interesting: it is fascinating to watch Brolin implode and stalk down the corridors of City Hall after his victims; we know he is going to kill the two men (we saw Feinstein announcing their death at the beginning of the film), but it remains tense and horrifying. Well-made film that fails to draw this viewer in and make him care. (2010)

**Le million** 1931 René Clair 3.5 Annabella charming and innocently sexy as young fiancée who dances in the local ballet and has to compete for the affection of Lefevre; René Lefevre as penniless artist always in debt who pursues two girls at the same time; Jean-Louis Allibert more handsome than Lefevre as his friend and rival for both the girl and the lottery ticket; Vanda Gréville as Lefevre's other girlfriend – although she appears to have an American accent, it turns out that she is Norwegian. Famous charming fantasy chase in the same vein as 'Chapeau de paille italien' (silent 1927). Film's plot is essentially a chase through Paris to find the lottery ticket; at first Lefevre and Allibert cooperate but then they become rivals. The last ten minutes or so are the performance of an opera, providing comic and satirical scenes that were surely an inspiration of the Marx Brothers' 'A Night at the Opera' (1935) four years later. Film is entertaining, but to appreciate it fully one must see it as an inventive fantasy musical at the beginning of the sound era. Lubitsch had already broken the ice with the fabulous 'Love Parade' (1929), but Clair wanted to do it his way. Afraid that dialogue would weigh down the film, he downplayed it and relied mainly on silent comic antics and music. The sets are intentionally artificial – walls appear to be paper with furniture, bookshelves, windows, etc., painted on them, the result being that the viewer feels himself in a fantasy in no real place. In contrast to the realistic Hollywood musicals of the era (characters quit talking and doing and stop to sing a while), the music is used inventively and often non-synchronously. There is plenty of orchestral music (a comic opera orchestra with lots of saxophones and violins) to accompany non-dialogued action as one would see in any 30s film. Voices however are used differently. There are few solo pieces; most are choruses that express the action on the screen comically or comment on it: e.g., the police and the crooks sing an amusing chorus expressing pride in their respective professions. Inventive, mostly non-synchronous use of music. When Allibert has told the police a lie so that Lefevre will stay in jail overnight, a set of voices sing a piece expressing his bad conscience. Annabella and Lefevre sit at the rear of the stage doing the performance of the opera, and when the comically fat principals sing a bombastic love duet, the camera focuses on the principal pair, making it clear that they are going through the same process of anger and reconciliation as the singers. In perhaps the most famous scene toward the end a chase through the back hallways of the opera house is accompanied by sounds of a rugby game – grunts, whistles, and the cheer of the crowd; reminiscent of Vigo's 'Zéro de conduite'. Some of the songs are catchy and memorable, such as 'Millionair-uh' and Allibert's reproach song. The atmosphere is fast-moving, light-hearted fantasy and sweet romance. No corniness à la Chevalier or heavy-footedness. Delightful feel; sometimes a bit slight. (2009)

**Million Dollar Baby** 2004 Clint Eastwood (Warners) 4.0 Clint Eastwood as Frankie, a grizzled, pessimistic, overly cautious, emotionally wounded gym owner in seedy part of LA; Morgan

Freeman as his gym manager, equally wounded but sensible and at peace with himself; Hilary Swank as too old (31) aspiring girl boxer, Maggie, who is from a poor white family and works in a dead-end waitressing job, but she has a dedication and spunk that cannot be denied. Gritty, totally absorbing three-character drama set in the boxing environment, but really about relationships and the struggle for meaning and fulfillment in life. Hillary is convincing and absorbing as young woman, about whom we know very little (her family is a caricature of stupid, grasping rural white trash) but who has an inextinguishable drive to compete and become a boxing champion; she will not give up until Eastwood agrees to become her trainer (“I don’t train girls.”) and until she becomes a champion – she fights with undiluted pugilistic ferocity in the ring, coming out with fists flying and knocking out most of her opponents in the first round. The ‘Rocky’-style movie takes a heart-rending, tragic turn when Hillary is paralyzed by a dishonorable opponent, the German ex-prostitute “Blue Bear,” in her last fight, and she is faced with spending the rest of her life on a ventilation tube. Frankie, who is Catholic and attends mass every day, spends much of the early part of the film arguing with a priest about arcane theological issues (e.g., the Immaculate Conception), but we learn that he is estranged from his daughter, whom he cannot locate; we never find out what happened between them. We know Eastwood is salvageable, since he has a gruff but appreciative friendship with Freeman, who lost an eye in his last fight (he fought 109) – they trade mostly good-natured barbs and are obviously loyal to one another. Frankie finds his second chance in his slow growing devotion to Maggie. There is nary a hint of sexuality in either of Frankie’s relationships – he appears to be beyond romantic involvements and he becomes a dedicated father figure to Maggie; and when she asks him to “pull the plug” on her in the hospital, he at first resists and then complies with great feeling, pity and love. The negation of the Rocky pattern is at first wrenching, but due to the immaculate taste of the director and the superior performances, it is genuinely and deeply tragic. The film has a philosophical cast throughout, due to Eastwood’s involvement in the Church, his study of Gaelic (he and Maggie both seem to be Irish), and his appreciation of Yeats’ poetry, which he reads in both Gaelic and English. The style of the film is immaculately low-key and realistic – no Hollywood glitz (we never see Hillary’s body in a sexy way), mostly dark intimate scenes punctuated for variety by exciting, entertaining boxing scenes. At the end we have an appreciation of the beauty and the tragedy of life – it is never too late for that second chance, but even then fate (or chance) is in charge, and we cannot know the prospect will come to fruition. After Maggie’s death, Eastwood apparently retires to the country to try to find peace, but we are not sure what has become of him.... (2005)

**Ministry of Fear**      1944    Fritz Lang      3.0      Ray Milland suave and charming as man convicted of mercy killing of his wife -- he is caught in a new affair involving Nazi spies in World War II, Marjorie Reynolds as employee of the organization Mother of Free Nations – she helps Milland in his wrong man-style search for the true killers, Percy Waram as quirky Scotland Yard inspector, Dan Duryea in early role as bad guy who gets killed twice. Perfectly linear spy thriller set in wartime London under the Blitz: Milland gets hold of the cake in the beginning, and he then spends the rest of the film being in danger and trying to figure out what is going on and who the guilty persons are. Film is shot on typical Hollywood sets – all indoors – with plenty of shadows for people to lurk in. This is not however a real film noir, since there is no femme fatale, the atmosphere is not paranoid or unduly pessimistic, the hero and heroine never seem destined to destruction, and there is a happy ending (the two leads are married). The film seems to owe a lot to Hitchcock – its “safe” danger for the principals, its wrong man theme, its sense of humor (at times), its piquant minor characters that appear periodically, and its compelling set pieces: the initial carnival scene in which Milland is mistakenly given a prize cake that has microfilm wartime information in it; the séance scene in which after the lights go off and come back on, a man is supposedly murdered (Duryea later reappears in perfect health); Duryea, who is posing as a tailor, approaches Milland, implicitly threatens him with a large pair of scissors, and then uses the scissors to dial the ringleader on the phone; at the end Reynolds’ brother exits a dark room shouting to his sister “you won’t shoot your own brother”, the door slams, complete darkness, Reynolds fires, one small hole opens up in the door as we see the light from the hallway shining in, the door opens and the brother is lying on the floor dead. The famous Lang pessimism and cynicism come through mainly in the dark lighting. (2007)

**Misery** 1990 Rob Reiner 3.0 Kathy Bates in show-stopper role as psychotic fan of romance writer played by Caan, James Caan as famous writer who happens to have an auto accident and is rescued (his legs are broken and thus he is immobilized) by hyper-fan Kathy Bates, Lauren Bacall in cameo role as Caan's agent (and there is some Angst about popular authors not getting the respect they deserve from the critics, Richard Farnsworth as quirky and conscientious sheriff who ends up getting a nasty shotgun blast in the back. Effective little horror thriller based on story by Stephen King and adapted by William Goldman. Caan is imprisoned in psychotic Bates' house since both legs are in casts (Bates is a former nurse who knows how to take care of her accident victims), and many chills are evoked by his attempts to escape from his room and even from the house. Bates is effervescent and obviously having a lot of fun playing her over-the-top character, oscillating between giddy enthusiasm for every word of Caan's oeuvre to murderous rage when he contradicts her or threatens to abandon her. Some effective humor based mostly on Bates' unpredictability and on the quirky interchanges between Sheriff Farnsworth and his wife. Bates harbors the ambition that Caan will write another (presumably the last) installment of the 'Misery' series, resurrect Misery (a female character) since Caan killed her off in his last book, and take at least partial credit for it. Caan gives a solid performance as intelligent, although helpless, writer using his wits and his literary imagination to string his captor along and to postpone being done away with at the end, when he sweet talks Bates into giving him more time to finish the last novel (he plans a romantic dinner with candles). Furious confrontation at the end when Bates attacks Caan, and the latter, who has to drag himself along the floor, beats Bates' face to a pulp – with great difficulty since she does the Hollywood thriller resurrection bit at the very end. Film has a little bit of subtext about celebrity worship in U.S. culture. (2005)

**Mishima: A Life in Four Chapters** 1985 Paul Schrader (also wrote screenplay) (Japan) 3.5 Jen Ogata as the adult Mishima. Daring arty/modernist impression of Mishima's life, ideas, and emotional world. The film is framed by events in his last day: getting out of bed, donning his (comic opera) uniform, being driven in a cramped car to an appointment with the Tokyo garrison commander, kidnapping the latter with no firearms (only ceremonial sword and knife), urging assembled soldiers to rebel against the selfish politicians (they jeer and cat call at him), and then committing seppuku, ritual suicide – stabbing self in gut with knife and then being decapitated by a lieutenant (luckily the director spares the audience most of the gore). The rest of the film is divided between black and white images that supposedly tell the story of his life; and garish melodramatic color images that illustrate his idea world through impressionistic dramatizations of scenes from his writings. Mishima is depicted as a shy and solitary youth beset by a severe stammer; he was also influenced by his mother, who had an unusual frank relationship with her son ("Who did you sleep with last night?"). He is portrayed as a self-indulgent seeker after truth, constantly looking into his own soul and writing compulsively to reveal its current condition to the world. From the beginning he is obsessed with beauty and art (the preservation of beauty) – how do you obtain it. He places much emphasis on sexuality, at first with beautiful women and then progressively with men as he transitions to homosexuality. He hopes to find beauty in his own face (narcissistic), but then he focuses on his body – "My body will be my face" – and he takes to body-building, bragging to his mother that he has gained two inches on his chest (his body never looks up to the standards of his ambitions). Obsessed with the inevitable decline and decay of his body – his guarantee of beauty and art – he increasingly emphasizes violence, wounding of the body, and death as the path to fulfillment, the perfect union of art and action. The film does not develop his political ideas, but he recruits his own small private army dedicated to the restoration of the authority and dignity of the Emperor, has them train with the regular Japanese army, and plans his coup against the "capitalists", which if it fails will have the escape valve of seppuku. Especially his political ideas and military style are vividly illustrated by lurid dramatizations of scenes from his novel "Runaway Horses", which has a young officer commit suicide in front of the setting sun after he assassinates a political leader. The color palette recalls MGM musicals of the early 50s. The film is dense and challenging – requiring attention and sensitivity from the viewer. It paints a picture of a unique personality – narcissistic, gifted, creative, developing an ideology of art, physical (sexual) beauty and death at the limits of human society. Except for the violence and militarism he reminds us of Oscar Wilde, who had a similarly antagonistic

relationship with the mainstream values of his society. Enjoyment of the film is not mitigated by knowing from the beginning how it will turn out. (2015)

**Miss Bala** 2011 Gerardo Naranjo (Mexico) 3.0 A sort of thriller about a pretty young woman in Tijuana who enters a beauty contest and gets caught up in gangland drug wars. Stephanie Sigman as the low-key, long-suffering Laura; Noé Hernández as Lino, the gang boss who takes a liking to Laura. The screenplay focuses on the experience of innocent civilians caught up in gangland warfare in Mexico. Rather than tell us about the gang members or develop a well-constructed narrative, it emphasizes the experiences and feelings of Laura. Although the identity of the gangs is never made clear, it eventually emerges that one is the Estrella gang under the leadership of Lino, and the other is (probably) the police (American DEA and Mexican), whose behavior is little different from the illegal gangs. When Laura contacts a police officer to report on the disappearance of her close friend in a gangland shooting, the officer takes her directly to the gang's headquarters, where she is forced to help the crooks smuggle money across the border into the USA, arrange the murder of a police general, etc.; the latter episode is particularly confusing since Laura changes sides in the middle of the operation (motive unclear) and then the outcome is confusing: the operation may have been planned by the authorities to manufacture a positive story for the press. In the meantime, Lino becomes curiously attached to Laura, promoting her career as a beauty queen, and then in a lengthy sequence he drives her in his pickup truck to the beach where he brutally has sex with her from the back (His only preliminary is the command "Undress."). Although Sigman's portrait of the victim is effective, the screenplay does not give her much to do except suffer her misfortunes stoically and virtually expressionless. The psychology of the characters is mysteriously vague: Why would the mobsters trust a kidnapped woman to do their bidding? Why would Laura do it without objecting? The film effectively conveys the suffering of the innocent bystanders. Can't help but yearn for a clearer, more developed screenplay and deeper character definition. (November 2017)

**Missing** 1982 Costa-Gavras 3.0 Jack Lemmon as father who comes to Chile to find out what happened to his son at the beginning of the Pinochet coup in 1973, Sissy Spacek a bit too cutesy and folksy as the missing son's wife. Based on a story by an American lawyer, the film chronicles Lemmon's search for his son, his interaction with his daughter-in-law, and his eventual discovery that his son was executed by the Chilean military (with the connivance of the American authorities) because he had learned (in Viña del Mar) about the US' role in preparing the coup. Perhaps a weakness of the film is the confusing (modernist?) way the story is developed: we begin knowing little about the couple and the situation in Santiago (the city is named, but not the country!), but then we get a lot of confusing flashbacks to fill us in on whether and why the son was arrested. Lemmon is very good as the exasperated straight-arrow American father, who is initially annoyed at being forced to come to Chile and to deal with his "anti-Establishment" children, but who gradually develops an affectionate relationship with his daughter-in-law and is not afraid to show his grief as he nears the awful truth; in her cute Southern accent, Spacek is perhaps less believable. The depiction of the country in chaos is effective, although a bit heavy-handed: crazy soldiers firing machine gun rounds into buildings seem always to be racing up and down the streets, and as characters speak inside buildings, shots are fired outside. Famous scene in the city morgue where Lemmon and Spacek walk among hundreds of blood-smearing bodies as they look for the boy's body, and at the end the camera pans upward to photograph silhouetted bodies through the glass floor. American embassy officials are well depicted: although they were obviously involved in the son's death, they never admit it, lie through their teeth, and are full of mealy-mouthed assurances to Lemmon that they are doing all they could to find his son. Perhaps because of the modernist style editing, the film never quite builds the tension and outrage of Costa-Gavras' best, such as 'Z' and its relentless narrative drive. A good movie that should have been more gripping and suspenseful and should evoke more outrage. (2006)

**The Mission** 1986 Roland Jaffe 2.5 With his pretentious stage actor's accent, Jeremy Irons lacking the spiritual depth and sense of dedication of Father Gabriel, the head of the Guarani Indian mission above the falls; Robert De Niro more believable as hot-headed Portuguese (one assumes despite

the New York accent) slave trader, Mendoza, who converts to the Jesuits under Gabriel out of remorse when he kills his brother; Ray McAnally effective as the inscrutable Cardinal Altamirano, sent by Rome to decide whether the Jesuit Indian missions will survive. Well-photographed liberal epic film that is ultimately listless because of miscast actors and lethargic direction. Subject is interesting – the fate of the Jesuit *reducciones* in Paraguay and northeastern Argentina, when the Jesuits come under attack from the Portuguese and Spanish governments in the middle of the 18th century. Spanish and Portuguese commercial interests are hostile to the missions, because they get in the way of profit and pursuit of the slave trade; the papacy dispatches Altamirano to adjudicate, but despite the impression that he is impartial and even sympathetic to the side of the Jesuits, he comes with the commission to abolish them – the Jesuits will be expelled from Portugal and Spain if he does not. After abolition, the two protagonists decide to resist – Gabriel by non-violent means (leading noble hosts of Indians to their slaughter) and De Niro by hopeless military resistance (they have almost no firearms). In the subsequent attack by the Portuguese military – rather confusing because of poor editing – the Guarani and both leaders are mowed down by the ruthless secular authorities; it seems all are killed except for a few children, who preserve hope for the future by making off in canoes. The film has some appealing epic characteristics – interesting historical events; beautiful widescreen cinematography; spectacular natural scenery, especially sequences of the principals negotiating Iguazu Falls -- at one point De Niro drags his armor and sword in a mesh sack up the rocks next to the falls); realistic appearance and costuming of the Guarani Indians (apparently Colombian Indians hired by the director). However, the film ultimately fails to enlist the viewer's sympathies, primarily because of poor acting – Irons is incapable of portraying a spiritually profound and loving priest; De Niro sometimes looks uninvolved, sometimes overacts, as when he finally breaks through the negative stage of his remorse, weeping copiously to the enthusiastic applause of the Indians around him. The hyper-liberal film makes the Indians into gentle noble savages converted to an innocent, rock-solid Catholicism, following the monstrosity to their deaths; they are also depicted as soulful and expert musicians, making violins (apparently historically accurate) and singing polyphonic choral pieces as Cardinal Altamirano visits the vast cathedrals they have built. This viewer was also annoyed by a narrative cheat: the Cardinal gives every sign of sympathy with the Indians and their missions, but we know from the beginning that he is going to approve their destruction; all he can do at the end is make cynical remarks about the tragedy of it all. (2014)

**Mission Impossible** 1996 Brian DePalma 3.0 Tom Cruise as usual brash, virtuous, toothy, hyper energetic young CIA operative determined to find out who killed his team in the beginning of the film, Jon Voight as leader of the team, who appears to be killed in the Prague disaster but who stays alive and ends up being the villain behind the action, John Czerny as CIA head, the model of bureaucratic efficiency, Emmanuelle Beart as charming pouty wife of Voight, who escapes from the hecatomb and is revealed in the end as part of the evil plot, Vanessa Redgrave as subsidiary villain (paying Cruise for information that she could sell at a profit?) with a smirk and sense of humor and who appreciates Cruise's toned body, Ving Rhames in rather colorless role as loyal (to Cruise) computer operative. Very fast paced resurrection of the 70s TV show, although this time without the moral focus of the Cold War when the good guys had something substantial to fight for (I am still not sure what was the motive behind the murder in this movie). Moves rapidly with lots of surprises keeping the viewer confused and off-balance. Good action set pieces that DePalma enjoys working with – the lifting of the NOC names by wire-suspended Cruise from the CIA computer terminal in Langley, Virginia (memories of *Topkapi* from the 60s), the original action sequence in Prague, the extremely improbably action sequence of the helicopter chasing the TGV into the Chunnel and taking a couple of minutes before it crashes in flames, etc.! Film is very computer age – most of the action and intrigue is centered around computers, modems, rapid copying of data cds, and even the last train chase scene depends in part on Rhames' ability to jam transmission of the names list to a buyer by Redgrave (if it were to succeed, the identity of all U.S. agents in Eastern Europe would be compromised). No character development or difficult moral choices that we saw in Cold War spy movies – just high testosterone action, and Cruise's energetic moral uprightness from start to finish. (2007)

**Mistress America** 2015 Noah Baumbach (co-wrote with Greta Gerwig) 2.5 Lola Kirke an sweet, naïve, impressionable freshman at Barnard College, New York – interested in writing, she falls under the sway of...; Greta Gerwig as impetuous, egotistical, insecure, motor-mouth 30-year-old, who is the stepsister-to-be of Greta; Kathryn Erbe, Michael Chernus, Heather Lind, etc. as various difficult-to-identify 20-something friends and acquaintances living in New York. A kind of social comedy (*comédie des mœurs*) that again treats the efforts of young New Yorkers to find their place in life. Although Kirke is the first character the viewer meets, Gerwig occupies the screen aggressively with incessant chatter about her various schemes for success in the Big Apple. Having never been to college, she plans at 30 to open a restaurant with the financial assistance of a boyfriend (never shown on screen) that she says she would never spend time with if she wasn't in love with him. Rattling around and lonely in her first semester, Kirke becomes Gerwig's acolyte, following her eventually to a cool suburban house in Connecticut, where an entertaining, although long-winded Feydeau-style farce leads eventually to the breakup of Gerwig's and Kirke's sisterly affection. Meanwhile, Gerwig is shown as hollow and all show, since her plans for a cool restaurant fall flat when the boyfriend pulls out and hopes for support from her Connecticut friends come to naught. A rather inconclusive postscript seems to bring Kirke and Gerwig back together. The film lacks the usual Baumbach magic. There are some entertaining moments and amusing lines, e.g., when an ex-high-school friend approaches Gerwig in a restaurant and accuses her of having made her life miserable, leading to an entertainingly snarky putdown by Gerwig. The characters and dramatic situations don't generally come into clear focus, so that the viewer fails to connect with them. The characters say funny, sometimes even wise things – "Being a beacon of hope for the rest of the world is a lonely business." "New York isn't the New York I used to know. There's too much construction." Overall, the film feels as if the actors are reading expertly from a script. There is possible pathos in Gerwig's plight, but at the end it's hard to avoid being glad we are rid of her. Kirke is attractive and more convincing, but she is little changed at the end from the beginning of the film. I would suggest Baumbach to try a theme other than his usual one of growing up and maturing in New York. (2016)

**Moby Dick** 1956 John Huston (wr. Ray Bradbury) 3.5 Gregory Peck brooding, charismatic, hate-filled, obsessive, one-track-mind, revenge-driven Captain Ahab, Richard Basehart as the rather low-key, retiring Ishmael, the only member of ship's crew to survive the final Olympian confrontation with the Great White Whale, Joe Genn as the God-fearing Starbuck who is horrified at Ahab's temerity to defy God in the name of fate and hate, Friedrich Ledebur as Queequeg the harpooner who is filled with omens, Harry Andrews as the good-tempered second mate Srubbs. Excellent adaptation of the impossible-to-film famous novel: Bradbury gives us the focus on the obsession of Ahab, and Huston gives us the desaturated color, the highly realistic 19<sup>th</sup> century mariners' speech, the exactly accurate look at the business of hunting whales (it is presented as a sort of sport), and the special-effects laden storms and final Armageddon confrontation with Moby Dick; especially impressive is the use of quiet as we wait for action – the quiet motionlessness in the doldrums, the quiet before the final fight as the men in the whaling boats look at the circling gulls and wait for Moby Dick to rise from the deep. All the supporting actors are excellent; Peck with his facial scars and his whalebone artificial leg is convincing as Ahab, but perhaps his kindly persona makes it difficult to accept his hate-filled obsession; his rabble-rousing speeches to the crew at about .35 and .85 are convincing; one wonders why Huston didn't choose Welles for the leading role (well, box office). The theme seems to be the contest between the "Christian" behavior – value human life, accept your limits under the sun and creation, go out and hunt whales in order to make money for the owners and provide the tables of the world with lighting oil – and Ahab's vision of hatred and revenge, of defying God himself if he tried to get in the way – "I would strike the sun if it insulted me!" It's the contest between acceptance of God's sovereignty, as expressed in Orson Welles' early sermon in which he warns the mariners in New Bedford by reference to the Jonah story, and defying God, shaking your fist at Him and thus risking punishment and death. Something of a Christian existential drama played out in the desolate ocean where we feel alone and abandoned anyway. Ahab is charismatic; he gets all the crew on his side against the liver-livered Starbuck, and at the end the men follow the captain willingly to their destruction. Film ends with the death of all hands except for the lucky Ishmael, who survives to be the narrator of the tale, the death of Ahab, who is drowned when he is tied to Moby Dick by the harpoon lines, the destruction of Moby Dick

himself, but not before he sinks the Pequod. Special effects are excellent for the day – Moby Dick leaping and plunging into the sea, the Pequod going down in a whirlpool, the storms ripping the sails to shreds. Film is pretty thought-provoking; its dourness wears a little and it occasionally drags. But it is hard to imagine a better adaptation. (2008)

**Mogambo** 1953 John Ford 2.5 Clark Gable a tough guy, real man owner of wild animal business somewhere in East Africa; Ava Gardner with 50s cropped hair looking less beautiful than usual as down-to-earth New York girl come to meet a "maharajah" at Gable's station (he has already flown the coop!); Grace Kelly straight-laced but sporting undercover passion as wife of anthropologist -- they arrive after Gardner. 50s, 'A' level star entertainment set in Africa like other recent Hollywood hits -- 'African Queen', 'King Solomon's Mines', 'Red Dust', etc. Photography of environment is arresting -- obviously the film was done mostly on location -- but the film includes too many random pictures of ferocious beasts, e.g., shots of lions of leopards looking angry in their own frames, and then cutting to cowering humans (usually Grace Kelly) in a separate frame. Clark Gable is tough but sympathetic as charismatic owner of a business that supplies zoos with captive animals (he doesn't like to shoot animals); he has never been married, but he is straight-to-the-point with the ladies: if he sees an opening, he basically rape-kisses both Gardner and Kelly, who are hesitant, even shocked at first, but then return his passion by melting into the standard 50s Hollywood kiss (an obvious substitute for sex). The film is essentially a romantic competition between Gardner and Kelly; the informed viewer knows, however from the beginning that the cards are stacked in favor of Gardner: there are so many sparks flashing between her and Gable that we know they are destined to get together at the end, and anyhow the Hayes Office in the early 1950s never allowed even Gable to break up a marriage. The wise-cracking Gardner exchanges some entertaining quips with Gable; in the midst of Africa her costumes bare her shoulders -- perhaps so the lions and panthers can get a better bite (but who did she pay off to get an Academy Award nomination?). Kelly seems like a fish out of water, a compendium of movie clichés: she dresses in proper straight-laced English attire for a safari (even with pith helmet); she is afraid of the wildlife and screams and faints out of anguish on several occasions; she does not convince us that there is a passionate beating heart under the formal exterior (and she received an AA nomination for that?). The film's main attraction is the concentration of three mega-stars in one production. Ford's direction is pedestrian at best; it looks as if he left most of it to assistants; he must have been yearning to get back to the western. (2011)

**La môme (La vie en rose)** 2007 Olivier Dahan 3.0 Marion Cotillard in blockbuster performance as tragic singing superstar Edith Piaf; Jean Pierre Martin as Piaf's only true love, middle weight boxing champion Marcel Cerdan; Gerard Depardieu as Louis Léprieu, the cabaret owner who discovers her in 1936; Caroline Silhol in cameo portrayal of Marlene Dietrich, who appears briefly in a New York restaurant to express her admiration for Piaf. Biopic about the rise and fall of Edith Piaf ('piaf' means sparrow). Her fall actually begins in her childhood – she is abandoned by her father and her mother and spends the happiest moments of her childhood in a whorehouse run by her grandmother; she is depicted as an alcoholic as a young woman, when she was trying to earn a living by singing in the Paris streets, and afterwards she continues to abuse alcohol and drugs leading to a serious physical and mental degeneration until her death at 47. Cotillard seamlessly lip-synchs Piaf's (apparently remastered) performances of her most famous songs – 'Hymn to Love', 'Je ne regrette rien', etc., although it is frustrating not to hear longer renditions of the songs. The songs are not only expressive of Piaf's life experiences, but the powerful voice emanating from such a frail body are expressive of her courage and determination. Cotillard's performance makes the film work: full of pugnacious energy, resentment, rage and defiance that rarely let up except in her tender interlude with Cerdan, where she shows happiness and joy; despite her persistent problems, completely dedicated to her craft (including collapsing twice on stage during performances); always making us feel her pain and suffering. Her make-up is astoundingly effective, as we follow her from her more or less pretty, though disheveled, self in the 30s and early 40s; to her decline in the 50s, when her behavior becomes more erratic and she walks with a serious stoop; to complete degeneration in the early 60s with pasty face, slurred words, virtual inability to walk. Film is edited in arty way moving the confused viewer back and forth among the different phases of her life with few clues as to where we are except for the color of her hair. This technique does however work at the

end of the film, when we leave her on her deathbed and cut back to three years before, when she miraculously rises from complete dejection to sing the rousing, autobiographical “Je ne regrette rien” in front of a bejeweled audience (curtain). The filmmaker has a problem, since any biographical account will have to deal with Piaf’s slow, depressing decline; Dahan deals with it by showing her later in her career at the beginning of the film, and then ending on a triumphant note. The emotional balance of the film might have been disrupted by having to focus so much on her negative experiences. Still, a film to remember. (2007)

**Mon oncle Antoine** 1971 Claude Jutra 3.0 Jacques Gagnon as Benoit, very cute 14-year-old visiting with his uncle at Christmastime in a Québécois asbestos mining town; Lyne Champagne as Carmen, equally cute early adolescent girl who flirts with Benoit; Jean Duceppe as Uncle Antoine, often inebriated owner of town general store who doubles as town undertaker when needed; Claude Dutra as Fernand, Antoine’s sometimes mischievous assistant both in the store and in burial; Lionel Villeneuve as hirsute miner, whose discontent with the mine kicks off the movie (he is cursing colorfully while lying under a broken-down truck). Affecting coming-of-age film set in Black Lake, Quebec (not far from Quebec City), in which Benoit undergoes various experiences that introduce him to adulthood: love as his affection for his fellow shop worker Carmen develops in the course of the film; sex, when he watches through a cracked door while the town beauty, the wife of the local notaire, bares her breasts to try on a corset that she has ordered; death, both in the beginning when he is officiating as an altar boy at a funeral and at the end when he and Antoine have to travel in a sleigh through a freezing, driving windstorm to retrieve the body of a teenage boy that has died – Benoit is afraid to touch his legs and then has to abandon the coffin in the snow when it falls off the sleigh; his realization that his idol Antoine is a hopeless drunk. The first half of the film is pleasingly and humorously episodic as the viewer is introduced to the culture of the town and its main characters – the impromptu funerals, the men drinking large amounts of beer in the bars, the flirting among the principals in the store (Fernand turns out to be the lover of Antoine’s plump wife), the ruining of the grand opening of the Christmas display when the curtain apparatus in the store window does not operate properly, the ride of the mine owner through the town throwing cheap Christmas stockings to the children and then getting pelted by snowballs. The film darkens and moves much more slowly in the second half with the long-winded journey to retrieve the body of the dead boy; much of this lengthy episode is humorous focusing on the drunkenness of Uncle Antoine, but it ends rather bathetically when Fernand and Benoit observe through the window (always extremely cold outside) that the family has retrieved the coffin and the body of their son and they are mourning him in their home. The film’s drama is underlined by an often beautiful score seemingly based on Québécois folk music. The director’s mise-en-scene makes effective use of moments of stillness and immobility, notably in the scene where Villeneuve parts from his wife to journey to a lumber camp. The film has a clear environmental subtext – many scenes of the piles of asbestos sludge all around, the dark dross being dumped down the hill on top of the pure snow, the arrogance of the owner, the implication that the miner who died in the beginning is killed by asbestos poisoning, etc. Although affecting, the film perhaps does not live up to its reputation as Canada’s best film of all time. (2013)

**Mona Lisa** 1986 Neil Jordan 3.5 Bob Hoskins in award-winning role as "underworld foot soldier" (Ebert) on the streets of London, Cathy Tyson as the classy, high class hooker whom he at first serves as a driver and then falls in love with, Michael Caine as the matter-of-fact businessman who runs the sex business that the principals are involved in, Kate Hardie as sexy teenage prostitute that Tyson is attached to. Very entertaining and genuine story about a little man of the London underworld, his relationship with the hooker that he serves (and then loves) and the trouble it gets him into. Hoskins is excellent as ill-tempered, tough-talking, "bullet headed" lower class fellow with absolutely no fashion sense (the clothes he buys when Tyson gives him some money are hilariously hoodish), who however has a heart of gold: he is very attached to his daughter (he sneaks around her mother to get to see her), and then finally falls in love with Tyson, allowing her to manipulate him into risking his life to find her (probably lesbian) beloved. Sound track has continuous, several versions of the title song by Nat King Cole. Setting is gritty with run-down locations in London, piquant colorful characters like Hoskins' friend Robbie Coltrane who deals in strange goods like plastic piles of spaghetti and plastic statues of the Virgin



that light up. The viewer becomes closely attached to Hoskins and Tyson, and as the plot turns to thriller during Hoskins' search for Cathy, we are very concerned that the two make it through. (Satisfyingly) violent conclusion when Tyson takes a gun and viciously and bloodily kills Caine and his assistant smearing blood on the wall, etc. Hoskins feels betrayed by Tyson, but he has neat substitute fulfillment in final shot as he, Coltrane, and Hoskins' daughter walk arm in arm away from the camera, all happy like a nice family. Perhaps too neat and a bit Hollywoodish, but superior characters, acting, location and directorial pacing. Well-made film that is very hard to resist. (2007)

**Moneyball** 2011 Bennett Miller 3.0 Brad Pitt jocular and intense as Billy Beane, legendary general manager of the Oakland As in 2002; Jonah Hill very believable as nerdy computer analyst hired by Beane to put together a baseball team on the cheap; Philip Seymour Hoffman as the irascible manager of the team – his skepticism delays the inevitable triumph of Beane's scheme. Well-made Hollywood-style 'Rocky' sports movie that charts the progress of the Oakland A's from the dumps in the 2001-02 off season until their near triumph at the end of the 2002 season. Faced with the money inferiority of the As compared to the Red Sox and the Yankees, Beane takes on Hill, who convinces him that with his computer-generated analysis he would be able to identify under-appreciated but effective players (measured primarily by their on-base percentages) that he could hire for chump change (under \$300,000 for the season). From then on, the film follows the inevitable, if sometimes, rocky, ascent of the A's to the division title at the end of the season, although – like the previous year—they never quite make it to the World Series; a postscript has Beane turn down a tempting and flattering offer of \$12.5 million from the Red Sox and returning to the A's for a lesser contract and to continued personal involvement in his (adorable) daughter's life. The film is very entertaining. Pitt, sometimes irascible, sometimes in-your-face, carries the film on his broad shoulders. The spare, somewhat seedy atmosphere of the clubhouse, the players' locker room, and the A's stadium is well rendered, especially when compared to the luxurious digs of the Red Sox. Hoffman seems underutilized – a little more fireworks from him would have pumped up the excitement. But the obstacles that Beane has to overcome adds to the pleasure: their bad start when at one point they lost 14 of 16 games; the disgust of the fans and sports writers who complain about trying to build a team with numbers rather than human beings; the bemusement and anger of the scout staff at being given short shrift by the G.M. (an especially colorful confrontation between Beane and the head scout); the refusal of Hoffman to handle the players like Beane wants him to (a couple of good face offs); and then the sudden turnaround of the team and their record-breaking feat of winning 20 games in a row. Film is played pretty much straight without satire. It is perhaps frustrating to the baseball fan that the film doesn't explain how the system worked; in many cases the players acquired seemed such stumblebums that it is difficult to imagine them almost winning the whole thing. Well-made, entertaining, crowd-pleasing movie. (2011)

**Mongol** 2007 Sergey Bodrov 3.5 Tadanobu Asano as the hirsute, persistent and charismatic Temudjin, the future Genghis Khan; Honglei Sun as his "blood brother" Jamukha, originally an ally who becomes his enemy; Khulan Chuluun as Borte, the beautiful, focused, loyal wife of Temudjin. Stunningly beautiful and often dramatic account of the infancy and rise of Genghis Khan to power. It covers Temudjin's choice of a wife when he was nine; the poisoning of his father by Mongol enemies; the rebellion of his own people against him when as a child he tries to succeed his father; many adventures and hardships as a child when he is captured, kidnapped, beaten, and somehow – with the help of his god who appears in the guise of a wolf or thunder in a storm – manages to survive; his imprisonment in a cage on the side of a building in the Tangut Empire where his face becomes extremely lined and emaciated; his pursuit and rescue of his wife after she is kidnapped by enemies; his falling out with Jamukha, since neither is willing to play second fiddle to the other; finally his confrontation with the mammoth army of Jamukha, and his victory over him largely because Jamukha is afraid of the thunder and Temudjin, as he says, has been exposed to so much he is no longer afraid; in the last scene Temudjin sets Jamukha, his "brother", free, setting the situation for a possible sequel (this film is supposed to be the first installment in a series of three). Perhaps the star of the show is the stunningly expansive scenery of Kazakhstan, Inner Mongolia, and China, where the film was photographed: barren plains with blue-gray mountains in the background, deep arroyos where the horsemen ride, snowy plains on which the small groups of

horsemen are dwarfed, the sands of the Gobi desert being trod by a lone monk who brings a message to Temudjin (he does it so his monastery wouldn't be sacked when, as he predicts, Temudjin prevails in the power struggle), green grassy plains crossed by horsemen. The film is ethnographically vivid and correct – the marriage customs, the dress of the warriors (pointed furry headdresses for the Mongols, shockingly ugly, primitive masks for the Murkit warriors), the cult of horses, which confer military dominance, the smithing of iron, the yokes used to humiliate slaves, the Mongol tradition that children should not be killed in warfare. The battles are grandly staged and very violent, although the instantaneous splattering of blood when sword encounters flesh seems unrealistic and becomes tiresome. Temudjin is presented as a kind of civilized reformer, who insists that in bringing Mongols together under one khan (not occurring in this film) he will give them laws, such as not killing women and children in battle and not betraying your master, which they will be obliged to follow (perhaps an idealistic view of the personage, since Borte says to Temudjin, “All Mongols do is kill and steal.”). He is also a very romantic lover, who will go to any length to recover his bride, even to the point of adopting the child that she is bearing from another man. The drama is often gripping, although the narrative proceeds in fits and starts, often focusing on a particular moment in Temudjin's life and then skipping to a period several years later: e.g. once Temudjin falls through the ice of a frozen lake – he looks like a goner, but we never hear about the incident again; toward the end he leaves his wife and children vowing to gather a great army, then a fade out and fade in has him riding at the head of that army; omitted is how it all happened. A grand epic that leaves the viewer hoping (five years later) that Bodrov will soon deliver the second installment so we can see the guy unite the Mongols. (2012)

**Monkey Business** 1931 Norman MacLeod 3.5 Marx Brothers, Thelma Todd. Hilarious anarchic spoof of virtually anything with the most minimal plot – the guys are on an ocean liner, hired by thugs, and end up on shore at big dinner party (which of course they disrupt) and a free-for-all in a barn. Opens with all four in pickle barrels singing “Sweet Adeline” in harmony. Wonderful sequence when Harpo, pursued by ship's officers, joins a Punch and Judy Show with a dozen kids watching; Harpo's facial expressions are priceless. Funny Feydeau-like sequence where Groucho runs in and out of multi-door closet in Thelma Todd's stateroom in order to hide from her gangster husband, Groucho says to gangster, “Do you think that girls think less of a boy if he lets himself be kissed?” “You're just wasting your breath...and that's no great loss either.” “I have a complaint...It's about who was in my stateroom at 3:00 AM.” “Who?” “No one. That's my complaint.” Gangster sequence: Harpo hits hood over head with horn, he puts up hands and Harpo plays Patti cake with him; to show how tough they are, hood feels thigh muscles of Harpo when he raises his leg! Harpo makes violent faces and knocks Chico across the room a couple of times. Groucho: “What? Leave this woman alone with her husband? What would happen if her boyfriend came in?” Leaving boat without passports; the only one the four have is Maurice Chevalier's. Zeppo sings “Nightingale” song and is rejected; then Chico tries and back talks; then Groucho in his gravely voice; then Harpo tries with a recording of Chevalier's actual voice; it runs down and has to be wound back up. They make chaos among the immigration bureaucrats. Groucho: “A man's fainted, I'll soon take care of him. It's my hard luck it can't be a woman.” Big dance party in which Groucho gives priceless imitation of a cowboy – bowlegged and big drawl. Groucho to Todd: “Oh, why can't we break away from all this, just you and I, and lodge with my fleas in the hills...I mean flee to my lodge in the hills.” “Don't be afraid. You can join this lodge for a few pennies. And you won't even have to take a physical examination ...unless you insist on one.” Harpo chases beautiful young girls, as usual. Groucho to cow while fight is going on in barn: “You're a mother. How would you like someone to steal one of your heifers? I know, heifer cow is better than none. But this is no time for puns.” Even Chico's piano is a little more humorous than usual; and Harpo in his first playing of harp, mocks the coloratura pyrotechnics of a soprano singing “O sole mio.” Zeppo is not too bad as the straight guy. Film insults the rich, but is not really subversive; when the police come, the guys always start running. (2007)

**Monkey Business** 1952 Howard Hawks 3.5 Latter-day screwball comedy recapping many of the characteristics of Hawks' ‘Bringing Up Baby’ 1938. Cary Grant as absent-minded chemist wearing very thick glasses – his near-sighted performance is convincing; Ginger Rogers as his sensible, extremely blond wife; Charles Coburn effective as the head of the company that Grant works for; Marilyn Monroe

as Coburn's bodacious, but dim and incompetent secretary; Hugh Marlowe as Grant's straight-man lawyer; George Winslow as dead-pan kid with as gravelly voice. Amusing, sometimes zany comedy meant as a return to the good old days of screwball comedy. The narrative focuses on a rejuvenation formula that Grant is developing; it doesn't work well until a research monkey in Grant's lab mixes ingredients and puts them in the water cooler, causing sundry humans to be affected. At first Grant and Rogers are turned into teenagers: Grant gets a short haircut, dances hyperactively, and drives recklessly through the streets of Los Angeles with Monroe in tow; Rogers reverts to her bobby sox appearance and behavior of 'The Major and the Minor' 1940 – cute, immature, impulsive, fond of swing music (a little behind the time?); the Hayes Code keeps any sexual behavior at arm's length. A second round reduces the couple to about 8 years old – Rogers is good at playing the bratty little girl; Grant puts on war paint to play Indians with a bunch of kids, even tying Marlowe to a pole, war whooping around him, and “scalping” him (giving him a Mohawk haircut). The chance appearance of a toddler on the scene causes a panicked Rogers to think her husband has been age-reduced to where he is no longer himself. The film ends with the company board members swinging from the chandeliers when they drink the formula and Grant and Rogers restored to their former selves kissing in a romantic finale. Film is strictly wacky good fun with no satirical or critical intentions. The director sometimes uses overlapping dialogue and seems fond of long takes. The Hecht, Lederer, Diamond writing team came up with some amusing dialogue: when Rogers celebrates that she can drive with no hands on the way to her second honeymoon with Grant, Grant comments “a honeymoon with no hands?” When Coburn wants a document typed, he says to Monroe, his secretary, “Get someone to type this”, and as he watches her sashay away, he remarks “Anyone can type”. A lot of silliness that remains entertaining because of good writing, direction, and acting, particularly from Grant and Rogers; fun to see Monroe in an early appearance. (2015)

**Monsieur Hire** 1989 Patrice Leconte 3.5 Michel Blanc as up-tight, compulsively neat, impeccably dressed loner who stares obsessively at young woman who does not believe in closing her curtains, Sandrine Bonnaire as beautiful young woman – Alice with spectacular smile – with insensitive boyfriend who avoids the subject of marriage. Film begins as a murder mystery with long-haired Paris cop pursuing Hire as best suspect in the neighborhood, but soon focuses on psychological drama between Blanc, who starts off looking like a sexual voyeur, but in a surprise we learn that he is truly in love with Alice, and Alice, who originally responds to Blanc because of the unsatisfactory nature of her relationship with boyfriend. Alice appears to be an exhibitionist, who is turned on by being watched by a stranger. The developing relationship between the two principals has strong erotic aspect although they never have sex; M. Hire gives up his whore-mongering ways for Alice, and tries to persuade her to go off with him to the house he owns in Lausanne. In a surprise near the end we learn that the boyfriend committed the murder that Alice is covering up for him (she has hidden his bloody raincoat), and that Hire refuses to discuss the case with the police in order to protect Alice. In finale, Alice stands up Hire when she is supposed to meet him at the train station; when Hire returns to his apartment, he finds that Alice has framed him for the murder with the police – she apparently has decided for the boyfriend and thus has to incriminate Hire! Hire then escapes on the roof, falls to his death in the street, and we have a long held shot of his face on the pavement with blood oozing from his mouth. In an epilogue the policeman discovers the bloody raincoat of the boyfriend in a locker; he was led there by an incriminating note written to him by Hire when he thought he was going to Switzerland with Alice. Irony is that Alice is now left with no one – boyfriend will soon be arrested by the police and Hire, although innocent, is dead from his fall. Hire, who seemed morally corrupt in the beginning, turns out to be the virtuous man; Alice, who seemed the victim at first, turns out to be the reprehensible one. Film has tragic feel at end as we have pity for hopes destroyed and lives sacrificed. (2008)

**Monsieur Lazhar** 2011 Philippe Falardeau (Canada:Quebec) 3.0 Mohamed Fellaq quiet, reserved, supremely courteous, highly competent teacher that takes over the sixth grade class in Montreal after the suicide (in the classroom!) of the previous teacher; Sophie Nélisse as charming blond pupil, Alice, that quickly becomes Lazhar's favorite student; Émilien Néron as Simon, a troubled child who was close to the previous teacher. Quiet, not particularly dramatic (with the exception of the first scene when Alice and Simon discover the body of their teacher hanging in her classroom!), but sensitive and quietly

poetic film about an educated immigrant trying to connect with his pupils and deal with his own issues. Fellaq's quiet exterior belies his turbulent personal life: his wife and children were murdered in a terrorist attack in Algeria and he is seeking political asylum in Canada. His own sense of loneliness and loss sometimes matches up with that of the kids in his class, although the film does not dwell explicitly on the parallel. Most of the film is devoted to Lazhar's efforts in the classroom: compared to the progressive approach of his predecessor, he is a "classical" teacher, emphasizing courtesy, grammar and correctness in writing French, requiring the students to realign their desks in straight rows, and even – to the kids' chagrin – giving them a "dictée" on a difficult passage from Balzac. He does however have a light-hearted sense of give and take that allow him to deal effectively with his lively, humorous, and even sometimes disrespectful pupils, who after challenging the new teacher, come to love and admire him toward the end of the film. One of the female teachers (all the teachers except for two are women) tries to get close to Lazhar, but his dinner in her apartment is something of a *débâcle* and he remains alone and courteous as always, loathe to become intimate with anyone. Modern pedagogy intrudes in the form of a strict rule against touching a pupil in any way: Lazhar breaks the rule once when he cuffs Simon lightly on the back of the head after a disrespectful remark; it turns out that Simon's unhappiness is due largely to an incident when the previous teacher gave him a hug, for which he felt guilty; he is able to move on when he realizes that what happened was innocent. Lazhar also cultivates the friendship of Alice, the other witness to the hanging, and in a moving finale, we know that she too is restored when Lazhar kneels to give her a tight healing hug; no danger of being fired, since he has already lost his job when the principal discovered that he had no prior experience teaching before coming to Canada. A little gem of a film that would have benefited from a little thespian or cinematic fireworks. (2013)

**Monsieur Vincent** 1947 Maurice Cloche (writer Jean Anouilh) 3.0 Pierre Fresnay calm, solid, dedicated as St. Vincent de Paul, committed to the service of the poor no matter what; Michel Bouquet and a host of others in subordinate roles as either miserable beggars or well-off ladies (mostly), who follow Vincent in his devotion to relieving suffering in 17th century France. Beautifully photographed, well-costumed appreciation of the generosity and dedication of St. Vincent de Paul to the poor. The film begins with a bang – Vincent descend from a coach, rushes down a road to a picturesque French town, where he is denied admittance to homes as he is pelted with stones thrown from windows; he finds the church ruined and deserted, and he attends a masked ball "of death", where the wealthier inhabitants are engaged in an orgy to distract themselves from the plague they imagine is present. The film then follows the sundry efforts of de Paul to do something to relieve the sufferings of the starving poor in 17th century France. He changes course several times – sometimes relying on his own resources, often relying on his connections to the wealthy to collect money to finance his shelters and hospitals. The film emphasizes the difficulty of his job, since all classes of people have their vices. The rich – sumptuously dressed and residing in luxurious palaces – blow hot and cold: the "Ladies of Charity" that he recruits are disgusted by the poor and unwilling to come into direct contact with them; in one memorable scene, de Paul appears at a meeting of the rich ladies with a foundling that he had found outside a church and he waxes indignant when the women refuse to have anything to do with this child of (sexual) vice. The poor are treated no more favorably: de Paul admits explicitly that they are dirty, ugly, rude, ignorant, and ungrateful, and yet their condition entitles them that much more to the love and service of the people of God; the poor are their "masters". Since Fresnay is the center of every scene, his coolness and calmness can be somewhat off-putting. The wealthy people are depicted realistically and memorably in their Louis XIII finery, but the poor are sometimes less convincing: their rags often look tailored, and especially the children often resemble well-fed French middle-class offspring in costume. The film sometimes skips quickly through de Paul's career, at one point rushing through thirty years to the day of his death, when he has a heart-to-heart discussion with the queen (1660 – Ann of Austria?) about the fruitlessness of one's lifetime efforts, and then returns to his hospital to die while giving a heartfelt speech about the duties of society toward the poor. It is doubtful that the poor are much better off at the end compared to the beginning of the saint's career, but at least society has become aware of the problem. The film sometimes reads as an endorsement of the new French social welfare laws passed in the late 1940s. (2014)

**Monster** 2003 Patty Jenkins 4.0 Charlize Theron, Christina Ricci. Mind-rocking acting performance by CT on a female serial killer. How could beautiful Hollywood starlet turn herself into unattractive worn-out foul-mouthed, white trash prostitute?! Part superior make-up, mostly amazing acting abilities. Really strung out by the end of the movie (how could such a person sell herself to her johns?!?). CR also very good as kid lesbian – quirky, dependent, but with bits of independence. Focus is pretty objective, dispassionate look at what made Aileen commit the murders: she was abused by her father's friend, she was a prostitute from the age of 13; she hated men, and she also desperately needed money in order to be with her beloved. Movie not really a thriller; no focus on the blood and gore. Movie is very honest. Ambiguity plays important role, as it does in real life. E.g., at end Aileen is condemned with the help of CR's testimony; CR is saving herself at her lover's expense, and CT implicitly cooperates. She will be destroyed, but love survives in the guise of her sacrifice. (2005)

**Monte Carlo** 1930 Ernst Lubitsch 3.5 Jeanette MacDonald looking a bit more natural than 1929 as kind of con woman fleeing from marriage and looking for husband and fortune in Monte Carlo; Jack Buchanan thin, toothy, sporting a thin, artificial giggle and a tinny singing voice, and a bit disreputable when he is out of uniform (evening clothes) as rich nobleman who disguises himself as a hairdresser to woo JM; Claude Allister as the effete, dandy hyper-English flop that MacDonald is running from; Zasu Pitts colorless as low key, solemn, rather dim-witted maid to MacDonald. Mildly entertaining musical comedy with a so-so musical score. "Trimmin' the Women" is a silly trio about how the haircutting profession gives one lots of opportunities to meet and court women. "Always" is a smarmy love song sung to MacDonald by Buchanan and used extensively in the sound track. But the film is saved by Lubitsch's ingenious manipulation of two scenes. "Beyond the Blue Horizon" sequence deserves its high reputation: MacDonald's sings the optimistic song while the rhythm is punctuated by the chugging and whistling sounds of the big penis-like locomotive (final sequence to "North by Northwest"?) and by well-timed cutting to shots of the locomotive, the drive wheels, and toward the end a chorus of peasants in the fields waving gaily as the train passes: ingenious and imaginative combination of post-dubbed music and editing. The last opera sequence also stands out. The usual misunderstanding between the two lovers is played out by a silly opera that they are watching ('M. Beaucaire' after the episode the film is partially based on): Lubitsch of course mocks the opera – the discovery of the prince is repeated endlessly in the several voices of the chorus as the audience waits patiently; the discovery that the leading man is a nobleman and not a hairdresser is played out in recitative on stage as the principals in the balcony look on bemused; and then Buchanan rejects the unhappy ending of the opera, makes his declaration of undying love to MacDonald, and they live happily ever after. Plot includes the familiar pattern of a spirited and independent woman trimming her sails and subjecting herself to her man in order to get married (see 'The Love Parade'). Smaller bits include: a mechanical clock figure emerges to play the tuba when things between the lovers are not going well, the flute when they are together at night; in order to protect her virtue, MacDonald triples locks herself inside her room with keys locked in boxes and doors secured by previous keys; one rather insipid duet between MacDonald and Buchanan happens in a telephone conversation with editing between the two singers, and some singing done in a tinny tone over the phone. Buchanan is too skinny, silly and smiley, his singing voice too thin and reedy, to stand up to MacDonald. The humor does not quite have the wit that Lubitsch is used to, and the plot is draggy and predictable. Thus some great bits set inside a rather dull movie. (2010)

**Monty Python and the Holy Grail** 1975 Terry Gilliam and Terry Jones 4.0 The Monty Python troupe. Hilarious, off the wall, anarchic spoof of medieval stories and romances. Story, ostensibly the search for the Holy Grail, is really a thin excuse for stringing together jokes and gags that can be aimed at anything. A few are flat, but most are hilarious. Objects of humor. Mocking medieval romances and culture: merry maids, monks chanting, personal titles ("Oh Tim!"), medieval music ('The Song of Sir Robin'), heroic rhetoric (e.g., when Cleese hacks his way through wedding party to save son of king, whom he thought was a damsel in distress). Anglo-French attitudes, especially when Cleese shouts insults (French taunts) at the knights from the top of the castle (twice). Anachronistic dialogue, as when peasants rolling in the muck, start spouting Marxist and anarchist rhetoric, and then argue among themselves. Homer, as when the Trojan rabbit is rolled up to the French castle (it doesn't work). Cruelty

to animals (short scene). Complete nonsense, as when Cleese the black knight continues fighting even when both arms and both legs have been severed; the vicious rabbit that inflicts serious casualties on Arthur's party; the Holy Hand Grenade of Antioch that finally disposes of rabbit. Christian religion: the appearance of God as old Man in the Sky; Cleese's hilarious reading of the directions for the Holy Hand Grenade in style of English liturgical readings in King James rhetoric. Making of the movie intrudes on several occasions; perhaps funniest is the manipulation of the time dilation that comes from using telephoto lens on an approaching knight; sound effects as the knights have no horses and their orderlies wearing backpacks knock coconuts together to imitate horse hooves. Also musical comedy, as when the gay son of the king (Edward I?) has a propensity to burst into song at every moment. Simple verbal nonsense, as when two guards cannot get straight the directions of the king about guarding his son. Inspired lunacy. (2005)

**Monuments Men** 2013 George Clooney 2.5 George Clooney as laid-back, good-humored Harvard professor devoted to the return of art stolen by the Nazis during World War II; Matt Damon as his sort-of sidekick, who develops a vague, kind-of relationship with Blanchett (he speaks French with an atrocious accent); Bill Murray barely cracks a smile as another sidekick; Cate Blanchett as a reserved French woman, who despises the Nazis, but is also resentful of the Americans, whom she suspects wanting to get their hands on European art treasures; John Goodman his usual overweight self but no comic impact; Bob Balaban as would-be comic sidekick, whose aggressiveness contrasts with his nerdy short stature; Jean Dujardin as perhaps more credible character, a Frenchman who joins and admires the Americans; Hugh Bonneville as alcoholic Brit that redeems himself by loyalty and getting killed; Dimitri Leonidas as attractive young immigrant Jewish American, who speaks German. Frustrating account of the attempts -- mostly successful -- of a team of six American soldiers, one Brit, one Frenchman to recover and return the huge number of art works stolen by the Nazis in Western Europe (mostly Bruges and Paris) and destined for the Fuhrer museum proposed in Linz. The characters are undeveloped and vague, so that when two of them are killed, the viewer remains unmoved. The narrative follows the progress of the mission from England through France and Belgium into the mines of southern Germany. The action however is highly episodic. Sometimes it deals with dangers encountered by the soldiers, often from being threatened by German children wielding guns. The screenplay tries to give the plot a certain unity by following the fate of the Ghent altarpiece and the Michelangelo Madonna and Child from Bruges: they are both rescued at the end in fairly suspenseful sequences, where the guys search through German (Bavarian?) mines, in the process discovering not only most of the artworks, but also the Nazis' entire gold bullion supply. The musical score by Alexandre Desplat is disappointing, focusing primarily on American martial music and dramatic sequences. Although intermittently entertaining, the film is a disappointment. This interesting and potentially exciting subject is worthy of a better treatment, especially a better script. (2014)

**Moon** 2009 Duncan Jones 3.5 Sam Rockwell striking as security and repairman working on the dark side of the moon in a mining operation -- his three-year contract is almost over and he is looking forward to returning to his earth family; Kevin Spacey as the sometimes disquieting voice of the computer Gerty who is programmed to support both the mining mission and the well-being of the moon employee; Dominique McElligott as Sam's pretty wife back on earth -- she communicates with him by TV transmission. Interesting and engaging science fiction film filled with plot twists and issues such as identity and technology. The narrative has important twists: when Sam is severely injured/killed in a moon rover accident, the man who then appears on the infirmary table back in the space station turns out to be another moon worker whose looks are identical to the first Sam; gradually -- in part because Gerty can't keep a secret -- the two men, who have in the beginning an adversarial relationship, discover that Sam II is a clone of Sam I and that the evil multi-national corporation back home is scrimping on costs by having Gerty replace workers every three years with clones, who look identical but have differing personalities (why is not clear); in the end after some important suspense caused by the impending arrival of a rescue squad (they have really come to finish off Sam I), the two Sams persuade Gerty to activate a third Sam, Sam I then dies, and Sam II rockets off to earth to tell a select Senate Committee about the nefarious activities of the company. The film has interesting issues: the computer's programming, for

example, is ambiguous, since Gerty is programmed to maintain the well-being of the worker (“Have you had anything to eat today, Sam?”), and this causes him to betray the trust of the corporation by giving Sam information and helping Sam II to escape. The film is also touching, since each successive Sam is attached to his wife and daughter back home (actually to their image projected in archival video footage!), since the memory of the clones is implanted in each at the beginning of each mission; thus each clone has human characteristics such as loneliness and love for a particular family; or would you just say each is really human? Gerty is suspenseful from the beginning (does anyone cause more anxiety than Kevin Spacey telling us that everything is perfectly alright?), but he and the two Sams form an affectionate relationship that is shown at the end when Gerty tells Sam II that he had better erase his (the computer’s) memory so that the rescue party is not able to read their plans; and Sam II shows his reluctance as he shuts down Gerty to erase the data. Almost all the film is shot inside the moon station with only a few rather cheap-looking external shots of the rover bumping over pebbles. The film obviously owes much to ‘2001: A Space Odyssey’ in its interior design, its use of a disquieting computer, and the pervasive quiet and loneliness of the main character. As in many contemporary films, the bad guy is the multi-national corporation, an easy target that won’t sue or murder the producers for the insult. Film drags in places, but an imaginative and compelling story simply and competently filmed. (2010)

**Moonrise** 1948 Frank Borzage (Universal) 3.0 Intense expressionistic film about a guy, who is traumatized by peers in his childhood but who works his way to redemption. Dane Clark as intense, angry, violent man scarred by the execution of his father for murder; Gail Russell very pretty, brunette, sensible as girlfriend who remains attached to Clark despite his excesses; Allyn Joslyn as easy-going sheriff that gives Clark a second chance; Ethel Barrymore displays her acting chops as Clark’s grandmother, who sets him straight; Harry Morgan as retarded kid that Clark stands up for; Rex Ingram as noble bearded swamp inhabitant (African-American), who is a good influence on Clark. Film is carefully controlled, set-bound (made on just two sets)portraying a swampy region of Virginia – small town, swampy pools of water, dense forests, a shack on the edge of the water. Opens with expressionistic representations of the execution of Clark’s father, the teasing in the schoolyard, Clark’s explosive temper as a young man, and the accidental killing of a peer in the forest (played by Lloyd Bridges). Film focuses on Clark’s tortuous path to redemption: he is turned around by his rather improbable romance with Russell (always a pleasure to experience), the philosophical ruminations of Ingram, and the somewhat over-dramatic lecture from Barrymore. In the end he finally distances himself from the condemnation of the community and accepts that his father did what he had to in the circumstances; with Russell emerging from the woods and supporting him, he gives himself up to the sheriff and his bloodhounds, and heads back to a jury trial, where Joslyn says he will probably be acquitted; to make sure the viewer gets the message, the film ends with a view in the distance of an Elysian Fields look-alike instead of the usual oppressive swamps and Spanish moss. Borzage as usual paints an eloquent picture of loyal, intense romance, and even has the couple holed up in a decayed, tumble-down mansion before the conclusion. The (more or less) happily-ever-after Hollywood conclusion is a disappointment; the impact of the film would have been greater with a tragic close such as ‘Thieves Like Us’ or ‘Gun Crazy’. For once Borzage looks at a gloomy dramatic subject, but he can’t resist a sunny conclusion. (2017)

**Moonrise Kingdom** 2012 Wes Anderson 4.0 Edward Norton as martinet, but gentle-hearted Scout Master Ward; Bill Murray as the disheveled, nerdy, slobby dad, Walt Bishop; Frances McDormand as nerdy mom, Laura Bishop – gaunt and a bit terrifying; Jared Gilman as Sam, the reluctant Khaki Scout who is an orphan; Kara Hayward as Suzy, a socially maladjusted 12-year-old always looking through her binoculars and capable of violence – she stabs one of her pursuers in the back with a pair of scissors; Bob Balaban as the Narrator; Bruce Willis deliciously nerdy and lonely as the local police captain – he turns out to be the savior of the kids; Tilda Swinton as officious social services worker; Harvey Keitel in cameo role as befuddled scout commander. Beautiful, moving, thinly disguised fairy tale about the difficulties of puberty, especially for children not well integrated with adult society. Film begins with two scenarios – a camera cruises through the pleasant, old-fashioned New England home of the Bishops where we see Suzy reading, as always; and the camp of the Khaki Scouts where Norton commands his troop officiously but benevolently. Both Suzy and Sam are soon presented as dissatisfied; they meet in a delightful flashback

sequence where Suzy was playing a raven (afterwards demoted) in a performance of Benjamin Britten's 'Noye's Fludde' in the local St. Jack's Church; they run off, set up camp by themselves on the beach they call 'Moonrise Kingdom', are caught by the nasty-looking adults, escape again, and as the forbidding Social Services (Swinton) agent threatens to cart Sam off to an orphanage and a violent tropical storm ravages the island, the loving couple is saved by Captain Willis, who agrees to adopt Sam; the final scene makes it clear that the couple is faithful, although not living in the same house, and that they visit every day: happy ending. Characters are amusing and moving: Murray and McDormand are harsh parents bent on making their children conform to the traditional norms, but they are amusing especially when they spout lawyer-speak and they play a positive role in the denouement when they threaten Social Services with legal action if she doesn't allow Willis to adopt the children. Norton is befuddled but benign; Willis is a classic Dickensian character, nary a bad bone in his body and willing to do anything to save the kids. When Sam and Suzy are together on the beach, they read, talk, and strip down to their children's underwear, experiment with their first tongue kiss, opening the director up to a charge of kiddie porn; but all remains innocent and groping. New England lore all around – the picturesque house, the coastline, the small, amateurish community on Penzance Island; all of which is reinforced by charts of the fictitious locations and topographical descriptions proffered by narrator Balaban. Also charming and moving is the continual resort to music: the sparely evocative score, "Alija was a wooden Indian", excerpts from Respighi's "The Birds", Saint-Saens' "Carnival of the Animals", Mozart's "Cosi fan tutte", and particularly bits and pieces of Britten's children's music – excerpts from 'Noye's Fludde' play an important role in the film and "A Young Person's Introduction to the Orchestra" begins and ends the film. The children will adjust to the real world, nature is on their side (the storm), enough of the adults will mentor them benevolently. A charming and moving fantasy. (2013)

**The Morning After** 1986 Sidney Lumet 3.0 Jane Fonda, Jeff Bridges, Raul Julia. Fairly gritty romantic murder mystery set in the seamier parts of LA. Lumet photographs LA warehouses as sort of modern art pieces with broad flat planes of color. Fonda is excellent as washed up alcoholic ex-actress gradually, reluctantly and awkwardly falling in love with Bridges, a sort of hippy ex-cop, who drives around in beat up old Chevy, collects Nancy Drew murder mysteries, and provides support and protection to panicked Fonda (previously she has been protected by her ex (sort of) husband, Raul Julia, the owner of a 'Shampoo'-style, upper end hairdressing salon in LA). The murder/thriller plot is silly and full of holes (What is the significance of the cat that appears in several scenes of the film? Why does Fonda take the bloody sheets home with her? Why don't the cops find the sheets in her apartment? How did Julia get the bloody body from the man's apartment to place it in Fonda's shower? etc.), and the revelation of the plot (Julia is helping his new rich girlfriend murder her blackmailer and is framing his supposedly good buddy Fonda for the crime!) is offhand, rushed, and awkward. However, acting is quite good, and the dialogue is sharply entertaining. Bridges is good at playing his laid back, yet vulnerable and caring self. Fonda pulls out all the stops to showcase her complex character (although her accent is sometimes too clipped), and has good final scene with Bridges in hospital, where two agree to give their relationship a try without unrealistic hopes of success. (2005)

**Morocco** 1930 Josef von Sternberg 3.0 Marlene Dietrich as beautiful, pure-hearted, cynical, disabused, evasive, quietly alienated cabaret singer who comes to Morocco on a one-way ticket, but is still capable of love for a good man, Gary Cooper as also alienated, lost in a hostile world, cheeky, insubordinate, and has difficulty believing that he is the love object of such a beautiful woman, Adolphe Menjou as very rich (terrific big luxury cars!), suave, man of the world, hopelessly in love with Dietrich, but will do anything to make her happy, including facilitating her pursuit of Cooper. Dietrich's first American film, and Von Sternberg's first American partnership with her. Set in French Morocco, slow-moving, exquisitely photographed film with very little plot – will Dietrich marry the rich man who adores her or will she follow her heart and stay with the private soldier in the desert. Very careful art direction and mise-en-scene – almost all set on elaborately constructed sound stages in the Paramount lot: shadowed streets teeming with Moroccans and Legionnaires, lots of slatted windows, gauzy drapery hanging from the walls, Moroccan shaped arches, smoky Moroccan cabaret, opulently decorated rooms (the palace of Menjou), mist, sand, and sandstorms; an annoying detail are the female camp followers –



they look just like Hollywood starlets and are dressed in very unMoroccan costumes that resemble Hollywood gypsies. Dietrich is the *raison d'être* of the film – if you don't enjoy looking at her carefully lighted and framed shots and the art direction, the film doesn't have much to offer. Cooper is wooden and callow; his quiet sadness perhaps moved the ladies, but to this viewer he lacks charisma, passion, projection. Has a rather existential feel – both characters are alienated from the real world, don't seem to care much about anything, and have come to Morocco with no intention of ever leaving; they are then redeemed by their love for one another. Dialogue is sparse (and not always convincing, e.g. “What in the name of 10,000 corporals has brought you here?”), and von Sternberg relies on visual information to tell the story (early talkie in 1930); he uses a lot of long takes; since the only music is within the story (cabaret music, people singing, etc.), the soundtrack is often quiet (a bit hissy). With the sparse plot, the focus on Dietrich, and the camera style, the film moves very slowly. A good scene is the engagement dinner with Menjou: Dietrich sits absent-minded amidst the high society toasts and gaiety, and when she hears the drums and bugles of the Legionnaires returning, she leaves the room to greet Cooper. Movie has a moving, although extremely slow moving ending: Cooper, resisting her overtures to the last, marches off in the sand with his unit; Dietrich hesitates, kisses Menjou goodbye, and then leaves the city following the camp followers over the horizon with only the sound of the desert wind on the soundtrack. We don't know what will happen to the two lovers, but Dietrich is moving since she has remained true to her heart. (2007)

**Moscow on the Hudson** 1984 Paul Mazursky 2.5 Robin Williams cutesy and lightweight as timid Russian circus saxophonist that decides to defect when he visits Bloomingdales during a trip to New York – he seems to be channeling Mork in his performance; Maria Conchita Alonso as pretty, compulsively smiley Italian girl that Williams meets when he defects; Elya Baskin endearing as Russian circus clown with very expressive face – he wants to defect too, but chickens out at the end; Alejandro Rey sometimes amusing as Williams' harmless opportunistic Cuban immigration lawyer. Film contrasting Soviet and American societies; it has a promising premise, which is however partly undermined by Williams' cutesy personality and the director's sentimental, often corny humor. The first part of the film in Moscow is sometimes amusing and interesting – the dearth of consumer goods, people standing in the snow in line (Vladimir buys two pair of shoes that don't fit him rather than get nothing after waiting for so long), Vladimir's zany family (his grandfather is a bit over the top). The high point of the film is the extended scene in gleaming, upscale Bloomingdale's, where Vladimir impulsively decides to defect, and after some adventures with his Russian mentor, is able to do so with the help of African-American security guard Cleavant Derricks. The remaining half of the film is filled with an uninteresting rom com with Alonso (after much resistance she agrees to live with the overeager Vladimir, but not marry him, at the end of the film) and a lot of clichéd scenes showing the positives and negatives of New York: on the one hand, dancing to Jewish ethnic music and salsa, on the other, living in a slum and not being able to find an interesting and sustaining job. Another memorable scene is the encounter with another Russian émigré in a café – the two almost come to blows because of Vladimir's loud complaining about New York, but he ends up listening to the Russian's contention that – with all its frustrations – America is really the home of freedom and diversity, not just chaos and frustration; “yes, in America anything is possible.” Vladimir is settled into the city at the end with good prospects of marriage with his true love. Film makes a real effort to paint a warm portrait of the ups and downs of living in America, but the cutesiness, the overly broad boisterousness, the silliness of especially Williams' acting often strike a false note. (2014)

**The Most Dangerous Game** 1932 Ernest Schoedsack, Irving Pichel (RKO) 3.0 Adventure film with touches of horror made with same actors and sets as 'King Kong'. Joel McCrea thin and youthful devotee of hunting; Fay Wray very pretty in sexy, clingy, early 30s dresses as Eve; Leslie Banks with sharp beard and foreign accent convincing as Cossack Count Zaroff; Robert Armstrong as Fay's drunk brother that Zaroff does away with early in the film. Sovereign of out-of-the-way island, Zaroff lures potential human prey to his island, where they can be hunted and killed. Fair amount of Nietzschean-style palaver: we hunters (Zaroff and McCrea) have hunted the big game, but now we want something more challenging, more dangerous, more exciting for jaded appetites – hunting humans! The

thrill of murder. The prize for the successful hunter will be the delectable Wray, the sexual prey after the kill. Banks is at first charming and hospitable, even playing Chopin-like pieces on his grand piano, but he soon lures the drunken Armstrong into the basement room never to return. A human head is displayed there as a sign of things to come. Soon he sets McCrea accompanied by Wray into the impenetrable jungle to see if they can survive until dawn. Much picking their way through jungle and climbing cliffs to escape the pursuing Zaroff (first armed with powerful bow and arrow and then with a rifle after he gets frustrated) and his large pack of vicious dogs. A big crisis when the escapees set a big jungle trap, which however does not succeed. Climax comes when McCrea falls into the sea while fighting a big dog on a ledge; he thereupon surprises Zaroff when he reappears in the castle. Film ends with our romantic pair escaping in a motor launch as Zaroff looks on helplessly. Good example of “pre-Code” film that titillates (the delectable Wray) and challenges the audience with sociopathic appetites and criminal sport. The film would have been more gripping and exciting if the print were sharper and the soundtrack clearer and more comprehensible. (2016)

**A Most Violent Year** 2014 J.C. Chandor 3.0 Oscar Isaac as Abel, a decent Argentinian immigrant struggling to make a success in the heating oil business in a crime- and mafia-infested New York environment; Jessica Chastain as his sexy, loyal wife – coming from a crime family herself, she is aggressive, even a bit ruthless; Albert Brooks calm and solid as Andrew, Abel’s consigliere and lawyer; David Oyelowo as calm and decent federal prosecutor determined to “clean up” the heating oil business; Elyse Gabel as oil company’s truck driver – he begins and ends the movie. Suspenseful dramatic film set in the most run-down, semi-abandoned outer parts of New York, where the deserted buildings and the subway are covered with graffiti. Year is 1981, presumably the low water mark of the fortunes of the city; the debt to the run-down cop movies of Sidney Lumet is apparent. Suspense abounds as aggressive businessman Abel buys an oil installation from a colorful Hasidic Jew and then has to scramble for the rest of the film to come up with the remainder of the money; if he doesn’t, he loses a big deposit and is ruined. Essentially he spends his time begging others for loans to make his payment; after his bank backs out because of the legal problems he is having with the Justice Department, Abel covers the gap with loans from various associates and competitors; and – the big surprise of the film – his wife admits to him that she has been skimming money off the books for years and she has enough in a special account to put him over the top. His quest is complicated by illegal hijackings of his oil trucks. Chastain is excellent as the Lady Macbeth wife that is more inclined than her husband to resort to shady and violent methods to save the company and the family (three children living in middle-class splendor away from the company’s depressing surroundings). Employee Gabel represents the American dream as the upwardly mobile truck driver destined to move higher in the company, but when he follows the union’s insistence that he use an illegal concealed weapon, he panics and runs from the police. The film ends with him shooting himself in the head right after Abel finalizes the purchase of the oil facility; after wincing at the blood and violence, Abel walks over to Elyse and ... plugs the hole that Elyse’s fatal shot had opened in the oil tank; Abel’s essential decency takes a back seat to the profit motive at the fade-out. Film is beautifully shot in dark, glowing tones; Isaac and Chastain excel as the focus of the film; must admit however that Abel’s search for funds sometimes gets tiresome. The film is a worthy follow-up to ‘Margin Call’, although not quite as compelling. (2015)

**A Most Wanted Man** 2014 Anton Corbijn 3.0 Philip Seymour Hoffman in his last film as overweight, chain-smoking but good-hearted head of a special German office responsible for uncovering Islamist threats in Hamburg; Nina Hoss as his quiet assistant (not an impressive role for a well-known German actress); Grigoriy Dobrygin as mild-mannered Chechyan-Russian refugee and devout Muslim, who appears mysteriously in Hamburg, wanting to contact a British banker about a substantial inheritance; Willem Dafoe with dark dyed hair as the banker; Rachel McAdams as idealistic (and perhaps too pretty) human rights lawyer trying to secure asylum for Dobygin in Germany; Robin Wright as reserved American embassy official, who is tight with German intelligence. The most recent adaptation of a John Le Carré spy novel about efforts to track down a network that provides financial assistance to Islamist organizations. The film really focuses on competing jurisdictions: Hoffman wants to track the suspected terrorists over a long period of time to get to the root of the conspiracy, whereas the German

police prefer not to take chances and to arrest Dobrygin right away to intercept any possible terrorist attack. The surprise is the American embassy official played by Wright: in meetings with the German spy chiefs she seems at first to be on Hoffman's side, but in a surprise ending she approves of the arrest of Dobrygin, despite the apparent deal worked out by Hoffman to allow him to go free and to focus on the financial trail. As is usual in Le Carré's works, it is not clear who is on the side of the angels – Dobrygin is pictured as a terrorist through most of the film, Hoffman comes across as moderate despite his harsh interrogation techniques and his extra-constitutional status in Germany, Dafoe seems dark and disquieting and yet he appears to be honest, etc. Hamburg is well-presented as a port city with dirty, few memorable buildings, polluted water everywhere, and the traditional home of Islamic terrorists (the attack against the twin towers was planned there). The script is generally excellent, but some important episodes drag out and ring false, e.g., the long sequence in which McAdams uses psychological manipulation and her femininity to get Dobrygin to make the key decision to use his large inheritance to support (supposedly non-terrorist) Islamic causes. Enjoyable film especially for fans of the genre. (2014)

**Mother** 2009 Bon Joon-ho (Korea) 4.0 Kim Hye-ja dominates the film as the acupuncturist mother so devoted to her son that she scares you (“You and I are one!”); Bin Won as her slow-witted but good humored son who is accused of the murder of a slutty neighborhood high school girl; Ku Jin as the son's handsome semi-gangster friend who is one of the viewer's suspects for the murder. First rate genre-mixed Korean thriller doubling as a chilling character study and using some Hitchcockian effects to pump up the tension and intrigue. Although the film narrative is convoluted, it is generally well constructed: Bin Won is forcefully accused by the police of the crime, but since he can't remember what happened the night of the murder, his mother – of course convinced of her son's innocence – undertakes her own investigation to find the real culprit; she explores the local high school society and finds that the murdered girl was promiscuous and took cell phone pictures of her partners—hence a motive for her murder; the plot blows up toward the end of the film when Mom finds a street person who witnessed her son actually killing the girl (more or less by mistake) and she kills the witness with a monkey wrench and burns his shack down to protect her son; meanwhile, the son remembers the same story, but he is freed anyhow because the police are now convinced that the true murderer is another retarded youth from a local asylum; he is arrested because he has the victim's blood on his shirt – which actually came from a nosebleed when he was having (consensual) sex with her; the film ends with the mom beginning a celebratory dance in an old fogey's bus, after she gives herself an acupuncture treatment in her thigh with the needles that her son had rescued from the remains of the street person's house (thus saving her from being inculpated for his murder). Kim Hye-ja keeps the film moving dynamically with her intensely emotional acting (perhaps a bit much whining and crying!); she communicates perfectly the neurotic overly anxious Asian mother. The film is in part a critical satire of Korean society: wealthy people riding in golf carts on a perfectly manicured course; the police investigate sloppily and seize upon any piece of evidence to announce they have found the culprit; the lawyer and his friends carousing drunkenly with pretty prostitutes; the high school students afraid of blackmail from the photos taken of them by the promiscuous girl. Humor is positioned strategically throughout the film, not quite making it into a comedy: the relationship between mother and son, the antics of the police and the lawyers, the chaotic ambiance of the crime scene reenactment, the mother's swaying and dancing to a pop song at the beginning and end of the film. Hitchcock-like plot McGuffins enrich the narrative throughout: the murdered girl's nosebleed – established early in the film – gives the police reason to declare the institutionalized kid the guilty one; Mom's instruction to son to fight back when insulted (illustrated in the prison yard, and then in the final flashback) is the reason for Bin Won throwing the fatal rock; the box of acupuncture needles is the object-clue that almost catches the mom in her crime, but which then allows her to give herself the celebration-enabling acupuncture treatment at the end of the film. The action-appropriate soundtrack sometimes resembles Bernard Hermann. Hard to take one's eyes or ears off this fascinating and imaginative film. (2011)

**The Mother** 2003 Doug Michell (wr. Hanif Kureishi) 3.0 Anne Reid as May, woman in her 60s who loses her husband and refuses to retreat into widowed isolation, Daniel Craig as Darren, young, rather hunky, and sometimes ill-tempered carpenter who agrees to have sex with her, Cathryn

Bradshaw as Paula, May's daughter and tempestuous and self-pitying lover of Darren. Clear-eyed realistic view at contemporary mores in London: focuses on what an older woman does when her husband dies (she has functioned for long time as his caretaker); but also on neurotic singles – Paula's love life and relationships seem to be a mess, which she blames on her mother, who “was never there” for her; May's son Bobby and his wife, who are London yuppies consumed with status (reconstructing their flat in the coolest style) and making money (until things come apart at the end and Bobby has to sell the house to pay his debts); and Darren, a seemingly sensitive, thoughtful fellow, but who suffers from not having enough money, snorts cocaine and shows his true anger in a violent diatribe at the end. Movie is clear-headed and socially realistic, with no contrived happy ending – May does have to leave London to return to her suburban home, but she leaves with her passport and airline ticket to – we don't know where; her future is uncertain, to say the least. Salient feature of the movie is May's reborn sexuality after the death of her husband (who is pictured as an invalid in first fifth of film); she recklessly propositions Darren, her daughter's married boyfriend, who for unknown reasons, accepts; she has terrific sex with him, but of course the affair has no future; May has brief fling with an older man, but his sexual caterwauling frightens and apparently disgusts her (he seems to be dying), and she backs off. Actress Reid has no compunction about showing her nearly nude body in love scenes – not a pretty sight by Hollywood standards, and not something any American actress would have done. Film analyses contemporary culture with no easy resolutions, much the way a short story like Chekhov would have done. (2005)

**Motorcycle Diaries** 2004 Walter Salles 2.5 Gael Garcia Bernal as young, naïve, sweet-tempered, idealist Che Guevara traveling through South America (5000 miles) just before he finishes medical school, Rodrigo de la Serna as his buddy Alberto, older, more interested in partying, less attuned to the plight of the poor and unfortunate. Film follows the two on their rickety old motorcycle (it gives out in northern Chile) all the way to northern Colombia including a three-week volunteer stint at a lepers' colony. Especially the first part of the movie resembles a travelogue through Argentina and Chile with spectacular views of the boys pushing their broken-down cycle through the southern Andes; they have little character-revealing adventures (Alberto as ladies man and con-artist, Ernesto as truthful, shy and more thoughtful); it is disappointing they have few sexual escapades. Film turns socially conscious somewhere in northern Chile, whereupon we encounter one unhappy, capitalist-oppressed Indian after another, culminating in the sojourn in the Amazon leper colony. Ernesto sees his unhappiness at the injustice in Latin America come to the surface: once he tells Alberto that a revolution without guns would be a failure, and when leaving the colony he declares to the assembled nuns, patients and workers that the division of Latin America into autonomous countries is an anachronism; he doesn't remark that it is the nuns (who make the patients go to mass if they want to eat) who run the colony. At the end we know that he has undergone a political transformation, but its essential nature is left vague, and there is no reference to his future revolutionary activities. Film is quite politically correct, since it idealizes Che's sweetness and idealism with no reference to future executions of political enemies nor to the naïve and incompetent revolutionary philosophy that brought suffering and confusion to many. There is a yawning disconnect for viewers who know something about the ruthless Che of later years; it is very difficult for us to believe that Che was that sweet and dewy eyed as a young man. Shot in sort of *cinema vérité* fashion with shaky handheld camera and using what appears to be non-actors for the common people met along the way. A pleasant movie partly undermined by its uncritically pleasant picture of Che in his youth. (2005)

**Mouchette** 1967 Robert Bresson 4.0 Nadine Nortier as sad, poverty-stricken young adolescent suffering in typical small French village; a host of amateur actors. Set in deep provincial France about 1960, tale about unfortunate young girl who doesn't seem to have a chance in life. Mouchette's family is very poor, mother is an invalid; Mouchette has to take care of her mother's baby, father seems to drink too much and is distracted and brutal in his treatment of his daughter; Mouchette is a failure in school and is treated with a mixture of contempt and indifference by teacher and students; everyone in the village is ultimately contemptuous and hostile, calling her a slut even though there isn't good reason for it. Mouchette is not a passive victim, but she returns the village's disdain: she throws mud at her fellow students; she intentionally grinds mud into the carpet of the strange old lady that sympathizes with her at the end about the death of her mother; in the almost murderous rivalry between

Arsène and M. Michel, she takes the side of Arsène since he is also poor and an outcast; and when he rapes her, she accepts it, and defends him when interrogated. Black and white photography is quite beautiful and detailed; beautifully textured night and day shots, and expressive shots of poor Mouchette's face, which appears in every scene. But the world of Bresson seems cruel and even "sadistic" (according to the trailer authored by Jean-Luc Godard); all is suffering and damnation with no hope for salvation ("Pas d'espoir" according to the song Mouchette has to memorize in school). The matter of fact screenplay and filming make it seem that the suffering and destruction is just the way of the world. The ending sequence leaves no ray of transcendence: after the death of her mother, Mouchette is condemned by the lady shopkeeper as a "slut" because of the scratches she sees on Mouchette's chest; Mouchette happens upon a hunting scene in which hunters mercilessly kill hares (as society extinguishes the lives of the unfortunate; recalling the famous scene from "Les règles du jeu"); she then she wraps herself in the frock (a shroud might have been more appropriate) that the old lady had given her for her mother's body and rolls in it down a beautiful hillside, having to repeat the exercise twice before she plops into the water and presumably drowns from suicide. The film is at first puzzling but then very moving on reflection. A portrait of what the world is like without God's grace; there is "no hope" if all you have to rely on is natural knowledge and morality taught in the French secular public school. The film runs very deep. In an interview Bresson said that the process of redemption is only subtly hinted at the end of the movie, but I failed to see it. (2007)

**Moulin Rouge** 1952 John Huston 3.0 Jose Ferrer very verbal, emotional, trying his best to imitate the physical characteristics of Toulouse-Lautrec – a bit hunched over, stunted legs (he appears to walk on his knees at times); Zsa Zsa Gabor very blond in empty glamor role as singer at the Moulin rouge; Colette Marchand (AA nomination!) very annoying as exploitative, drunk girlfriend of Toulouse-Lautrec that drives him crazy; Muriel Smith as the outrageously common Moulin rouge dancer, La Goulue; Jose Ferrer also plays T-L's aristocratic father, always objecting against his son's insistence that he work (below the dignity of the noble family of great lineage). Sometimes smarmy, but entertaining partial biography of Toulouse-Lautrec that has wonderful Technicolor cinematography in the service of a keen appreciation of the painter's art. The first part of the film focuses on Lautrec's love affair with the prostitute Marchand, who can't decide whether to tolerate his physical deformities (one of which is supposed to be over-sized genitals) and who leaves him every five minutes or so only to be found later usually in a drunken stupor. After her departure the film focuses on the development of Lautrec's career, his growing success as a poster maker and painter, his calm, platonic relationship with another Montmartre chanteuse (Suzanne Flon), his unstoppable drinking, which he says is absolutely necessary to deaden physical and emotional pain, and then finally his death in the family chateau, where the film presents – inaccurately – a final reconciliation between father and son. Ferrer is effective portraying his character – flat-footed, mechanical movements, good-hearted friendship with the simple people playing at the Moulin rouge, often unrequited romantic feelings for women, especially in the second half of the film sharp-tongued purveyor of cynical witticisms. The film's color photography is the pièce de résistance: sharp cinematography with uses of bright colors to convey the sprightly atmosphere of the Parisian night life; several montages of his color-accented paintings and posters that convey the joyfulness and the sorrow of the evanescent existences of his subjects in the cabaret. The first several minutes of the film portray the energy and spontaneity of the entertainment at the Moulin rouge; in another sequence the viewer witnesses the production in several colorful stages of one of Lautrec's most famous posters; the final scene has the spirits of Lautrec's former friends glide gracefully and charmingly past him on his deathbed to bid him adieu. Although suffering from an excess of 50s Hollywood glamor and (muffled) scandal, the film succeeds as a tribute by John Huston to the artist. (2007)

**Mr. Blandings builds His Dream House** 1948 H.C. Potter 2.5 Cary Grant his usual charming, handsome self as New York advertising executive living in a cramped apartment with his wife and two daughters – they decide to move to Connecticut; Myrna Loy as his somewhat matronly, smiling, calm, evasive, and unaffectionate wife; Melvyn Douglas witty and tongue-in-cheek as lawyer family friend trying to counsel the rather scatter-brained Grant; Louise Beaver common-sensical and even-tempered as ever as the family's cook and maid. Amusing little comedy about the perils of building a

home in the suburbs of New York: it is a money pit, anything that could go wrong does – trying to save the nearly collapsed existing house on the property, drilling the well, digging the foundation, trying to stay in the budget, the principals lock themselves by mistake in a storeroom, etc.; when they move in, the house is not finished (some windows don't fit) and very cold. Cary Grant is as charming and glib as ever; life seems to be a little beyond him – even after six months he can't think of a jingle on Wham Ham for his ad agency, he seems lost in his financial thicket, he needs a lawyer to tell him what to do, he becomes obsessed with every detail of the construction of the house. Grant's jealousy of his wife's friendly relationship with Douglas, whom she had dated when she was in college, adds a little light-hearted drama to the proceedings; but it never goes beyond Grant's piquant comments and Loy brushing off his imputations (he apologizes after the discussion between them). Amusing to look at Connecticut suburbia 60 years ago – a lot more space! – and to see how little construction techniques have changed. Very appropriate subject matter for the postwar years when the American middle classes were moving to the suburbs and building their new homes. Film has amusing ending in which Beavers unwittingly comes up with the ad slogan that Grant had been stressing over for months. Light-hearted, amusing and trivial; you would never guess that there was any Angst anywhere in America at this time! (2009)

**Mr. Deeds Goes to Town** 1963 Frank Capra 4.0 Gary Cooper, Jean Arthur, Lionel Stander. Capra attacks the sophisticated, corrupt city in behalf of the little guy from a small town. Longfellow Deeds inherits \$20 million and goes to New York (big city) to take possession, where he encounters the wicked city. Deeds comes across at first like a rube, but then shows that he is the salt of the earth – innocent, patriotic, unpretentious, humble, and yet wise with commendable common sense. Capra praises small town values, and pillories the wealthy and sophisticated – greedy (the lawyer and the in-laws), the snobbish (practically everyone), the intellectuals like the poets at the restaurant, the incredible Austrian psychiatrist, who with his neat psychological explanations does his best in climactic courtroom scene to have Longfellow committed as insane (about the same thing as going to prison!). Only sensible and honest big shot is the judge in the final hearing (played by H.B. Warner) who makes sure Longfellow gets a fair hearing; note that the system bends when faced with decency and fellow-feeling, and there is no need for revolution or radical action. Longfellow and Mandrake Falls, VT are “pixilated,” what with their tuba playing, good heartedness, staying in touch with decency and sensibleness. Deeds proposes Depression solution: use his \$18 million to give land to each of about 2000 men – 10 acres, a cow, a horse, and some seed -- and they will become prosperous farmers (what, with those farm prices?). He is a low profile and kind hearted demagogue, who punches the pretentious in the nose (the literati in the restaurant and the lawyer in the trial scene; some mild personal violence seems to be a sign of virtue and good sense!) and has the farmers cheering for him in court. Jean Arthur, reporter, and her editor start off exploiting Deeds for their tabloid story, but turn to defend him when they see what a decent, good man he is. Reporters are down to earth guys, who with all their rough edges are also good hearted folk. Plot has additional complication since Arthur falls in love with Deeds (and vice versa), and her defense of him plays big role in his exoneration. Arthur starts off independent, good-hearted character with no boyfriend, and she enjoys the payoff of romantic love and the prospect of marriage in final scene. Smaller characters are wonderful, as for example the two spinster sisters from Mandrake Falls who speak in echoes and who think being “pixilated” is a good thing. Perhaps a weakness is the usually wooden acting of Gary Cooper, who perhaps makes up for it through his good looks; anyhow the bad acting suits the character. (2004)

**Mr. Holmes** 2015 Bill Conlon (Britain) 4.0 Ian McKellen, 76 years old but made up to look all of 93, living in forgetful retirement in a country house near the south English coast (judging by the white cliffs must be in Kent); Laura Linney dowdy as his reluctant housekeeper, jealous of Holmes' close relationship with her son and wanting to move away to Portsmouth; Milo Parker as the 10-year-old son of Linney, a precocious fan of the Holmes stories; Hattie Morahan as the pretty young woman that Holmes follows in a flashback. Lovely, quietly-paced, meditative film about old age and memory, that brings a significant change to the traditional ratiocative character of Sherlock Holmes, who in the aftermath of World War II has been living in retirement for 25 years. Holmes remarks on several occasions about the inaccurate, strictly fictional accounts of the deceased Dr. Watson – e.g., he never wore a deerstalker cap

or smoked a pipe (I preferred a cigar). The film is shot in a glorious English countryside of pale blue skies dappled with white clouds; a traditional stone-and-timber English cottage set in lovely green fields that stretch away to the sea, where one sees the famous white cliffs; Victorian trains puffing quaintly down the tracks to the nearest country station. The dapper, slightly cantankerous Holmes, is obsessed with the fading of his memory with age; he wants to understand two events occurring in the early 1920s – some advice given to a Japanese public servant working for the English state, and the commission he took from a young man to follow his wife; she was allegedly being scammed by a con artist, who claimed that by learning to play the glass harmonica she could contact and perhaps rejoin her two deceased children. Sensing a great failure, Holmes thinks that he could thus rediscover the reason for his static retirement, which has never made sense to him. The film alternates between the present and the two – sometimes rather confusing – flashbacks. In the present, Holmes tries to rejuvenate his memory by taking “royal jelly” that he takes from the apiary in back of his house or the “prickly ash” that a mysterious Japanese beekeeper has suggested to him; discovering that spending time with the boy is much more revitalizing, Holmes is able to return to his writing desk to complete his story, and thus to solve the mystery by reconstructing an accurate historical account of his last case. The final scene with the woman has her in effect asking Holmes to “share his loneliness” with her (?); when he demurs, she leaves and then commits suicide by stepping in front of a train. Holmes reproaches himself for being selfish and not doing the necessary to save the woman. When his Japanese friend writes to ask about his father, Holmes writes back uncharacteristically making up a story about his accomplishments as a civil servant to make his friend feel better. The viewer is thus presented with an alternative Holmes, who learned in the last months of his life that the intellect alone cannot bring a sense of completion to your life. Sensitive, nuanced, compelling performance by the charismatic McKellen. Quiet, perfectly proportioned clarinet and oboe score by Carter Burwell adds to the thoughtful mood of the film. Reminiscent of Conlon’s and McKellen’s ‘Gods and Monsters’ (1998), this wonderful small film contains much life wisdom. (2016)

**Mr. Skeffington** 1944 Vincent Sherman 2.5 Bette Davis as Fanny, a New York beauty and playgirl who loses her beauty and seemingly her *raison d’être*, Claude Rains as her long-suffering husband who loves her under any circumstances, William Abel as George, the cousin, who occupies the sensible middle ground to help Davis find happiness, Marjorie Riordan as the adult daughter of Davis – sensible and sincere, George Coulouris in small role as a plain-speaking, rather ill-tempered psychiatrist who tries to set Fanny straight. An overly long weeper about the unhappiness that Fanny causes herself by being selfish, flighty and unfaithful (she parties around town even when she is married to Rains), and then the salvation that Hollywood brings her: she contracts diphtheria sailing, and her subsequent facial disfigurement exposes her to the truth, and when Rains returns home from a Nazi concentration camp blind, broken and penniless, she breaks down and follows George’s advice that she will be happy only when she does something for somebody else (she is however reassured that her husband being blind will never see her new face). The film is way too long, and the early and middle sections need major cutting so that the viewer’s attention won’t wander. The ending defies credibility – such terrible misfortune for Davis and unhappiness for Rains, an American Jew who somehow ends up in German concentration camps! then the sudden turnaround of Davis, and the happy ending. Davis looks a little over the hill even as a young woman, but she plays with energy and pizzazz – the clipped accents, the rising and falling inflections, the voice perhaps more highly pitched than in most of her films; her transition to an ugly old hag with a deeply lined and heavily made up face is truly arresting, the touching thing being that, as her husband has said to her several times, “A woman is beautiful only when she is loved;” and she is loved at the end – by Rains and by George. Rains plays it in restrained fashion, and all the other supporting actors are excellent, with Coulouris being the most amusing. The score by Franz Waxman is ridiculously intrusive and obtrusive, calling attention to itself when it is not necessary; he should have studied Max Steiner more carefully. (2010)

**Mr. Smith Goes to Washington** 1939 Frank Capra (Columbia) 3.5 Famous feel-good moral and political fable celebrating the nobility of democracy. Jimmy Stewart as the naïve, although idealistic and intelligent Boy Scout leader, Jefferson Smith, from an unnamed western state; Jean Arthur as the down-to-earth plain folks girl who is also sensitive and resourceful; Thomas Mitchell as her friend, who

would like to marry her but has to settle for a supporting platonic relationship; Claude Rains as the eloquent, silver-haired senator, participating in corrupt schemes but feeling bad about it; Edward Arnold imposing boss of the political machine from Stewart's state; Guy Kibbee very funny as the weak-spined governor who takes orders from Boss Arnold; Eugene Palette his usual gravel-voiced self as harmless heavy; H.B. Warner as the Senate majority leader; Harry Carey giving away the outcome of the Senate confrontation with his empathetic smiles in favor of Stewart; Porter Hall as a senator; William Demarest as mild-mannered henchman of Arnold's political machine. Ultimate Capracorn: Stewart impossibly naïve when he arrives in Washington to replace a deceased senator; all he cares about is furthering the cause of his boy scouts clubs; can hardly contain his enthusiasm when he sees one of the Washington monuments, especially the Lincoln Memorial; soon has to recognize the graft that encompasses Washington when he discovers that Rains and Arnold plan to make a huge profit on land that Stewart wanted for a national boys camp; film ends with famous long sequence in which Stewart resorts to an exhausting filibuster to rally public opinion; it looks awfully like it won't work until Rains breaks under the moral strain and attempts suicide with a gun in the Senate cloak room (rather absurd) and then rushes on to the Senate floor to confess his guilt, thus exculpating Stewart and ensuring the victory of true American values and American democracy; Stewart and Arthur will of course be married, but what about the future of Smith in the Senate and the fate of Rains, who has obviously had a nervous breakdown? The enemy of true American values is political cynicism (everybody is out to get something), machine politics, and using the government to make money; a considerable difference from 2017, where ideology and party domination seem to be more threatening. The US system of government is noble, democratic (all the common people including African-Americans and simple farmers visiting the Lincoln Memorial), and it guarantees freedom of speech. Curiously the Senate filibuster is seen as fair and democratic, a practice that can be used by the minority to make their opinions heard. Upon repeated viewings, the relationship scenes between Stewart and Arthur are a bit drawn out. Heart-warming and hope-inducing for the cynical age of Trump. (July 2017)

**Mr. Turner** 2014 Mike Leigh (Britain) 3.5 Timothy Spall grunting like a pig as the gruff, irascible loner JMW Turner – energetic, gifted painter that enjoys and cultivates his fame in Britain; Paul Jesson as his good-humored, quirky, loyal and attentive father, who dies about halfway through the film; Dorothy Atkinson as the plain, stooped, be-bonneted loyal maidservant that Turner takes for granted but sometimes exploits sexually; Ruth Sheen shrill as Turner's ex-mistress and mother of his daughters (all of them always reproaching him for his inattention); Joshua McGuire as caricature of John Ruskin, lisping his way through voluminous statements on the state of British art; Marion Bailey as the smart, graceful talking, big smile twice widow that Turner takes up with toward the end of the film – surprisingly tender relationship for such an old codger. An essentially biographical treatment of the last 20 years of JMW Turner's life, developed through a long succession of vignettes. They include: Turner painting his light-and color-inspired canvases at his easel and deriving the inspiration for his subject – strolling in the Dutch fields, tying himself to the mast of a ship during a violent storm, watching the old British warship *Téméraire* being towed to her dismantling dock, etc.; Turner quirkily entertaining his colleagues in the Academy (?), where they all hang and work on their paintings (the red smear he adds to his seascape and the use of kitchen products in his works scandalizes the company, especially the sedate John Constable); his scientific interest in color demonstrated by the experiments of Leslie Manville; his visits to Margate to paint – he meets Bailey there and gets romantic (not a pretty sight) after the death of her husband; his visit to a pretty, young prostitute that he sketches hesitantly instead of having sex with (no models in the studio for this man). Much of the end of the film is devoted to his decline and death: knowing he doesn't have long to live, Turner has himself daguerrotyped with Bailey – rather resenting the photography, he is satisfied when he learns that it does not record color; growing paler and pastier, he grunts and stumbles until finally confined to his bed, where visited by his distinguished doctor, he does with dignity in the supportive presence of his lady. Although slow-moving and with an indistinct plot line, the film is engrossing: lovely recreation of British middle class life in the mid-19th century – dark, crowded rooms, historically accurate costumes, all recorded with dark, redolent, often gleaming colors, painterly mise-en-scène when framing outdoor shots on the river, in the fields with the sun and the horizon gleaming in the



background. All the characters are finely drawn in Dickensian depth. The film puts flesh on the character of Turner. A delightful film. (2015)

**Mrs. Brown** 1997 John Madden (Britain) 3.5 Judy Dench as a tight-lipped Queen Victoria in full mourning three years after the death of her husband; Billy Connolly husky, masculine, in full Scottish garb as Victoria's manservant, John Brown; Geoffrey Palmer hirsute, dignified, reserved as the formally dressed head of household; Anthony Sher the spitting image of the sharp-faced, urbane Prime Minister, Benjamin Disraeli. Sensitively and picturesquely produced historical royal drama about Queen Victoria's withdrawal from public life after the tragic death of Prince Albert and her gradual reconciliation with life and her public role as queen under the influence of a former manservant to her husband. Tongues wag all over England about Queen's neglect of her constitutional duties (appearing in public and waving to the crowds!) and Brown's intimacy with her, even, some say, to the point of the two being lovers. Brown is called in to help wean her out of her mourning, and his ministrations soon have their effect -- the queen is dancing the Highland jig and stepping out of Balmoral Castle to visit a humble family that she somehow had previous knowledge of. The bonds of duty and custom turn out to be exceedingly strong, and the queen is soon called back to London by the machinations of a worldly Disraeli and the chance illness of her son, the Prince of Wales. Brown, who is devoted to the security and welfare of the queen, is now relegated to the periphery of her life; and when (in 1883, 15 year later) he is called outside the castle to deal with a potential intruder, he catches pneumonia and dies; his diary, which would have revealed the affective ties between the two, is confiscated by Palmer, and the whole truth of the story will never be known. Although she does not much resemble Victoria, Dench is wonderful as the queen -- severe with her hair pulled back flat over the edge of her forehead, very stubborn, a little impulsive, completely absorbed by the memory of her husband and then by the presence of Brown, who reminds her of her husband. Billy Connolly makes a vital impression as the outspoken man of the people who calls Victoria "woman", often drinks too much, and becomes emotionally disturbed when he is demoted from the graces of her Majesty. After all, he belongs to an inferior class -- he sleeps in a servant's room, eats at the servants' table, and his temporary power is dependent entirely on the good will of the queen and disappears as soon as he has done his work and she returns to her normal royal duties. The cinematography is of course glorious -- panoramic shots of Osborne House (Isle of Wight), Balmoral Castle (severe, misty, and wild on the moors of Scotland), and Windsor Castle; the interiors are all genuinely Victorian with their cluttered decor, Roman busts, paintings hanging on wires on the wall, etc. Good acting, picturesque cinematography, strong political, historical, and emotional issues -- all make for a superior film experience. (2011)

**Mrs. Miniver** 1942 William Wyler 4.0 Greer Garson, Walter Pidgeon, Teresa Wright, Henry Travers, May Whitty. Stereotypical Hollywood product about gallant British civilians standing up to the German attack. Won huge numbers of Academy Awards. British are admirable -- plucky, very white and civilized, courageous under the rain of bombs. Begins with GG shopping spree in London where she buys expensive hat while WP buy expensive sports car. Happens all on home front with WP going one time off to fetch Brit soldiers at Dunkirk. Very well-off middle class family with adorable (too!) children, Beautiful crisp Hwd photography, filmed in studio in LA; Wyler's deep focus and long takes are moderately in force. Garson is admirable, beautiful, good humored, courageous, stoic, loyal, inventive and resourceful when she captures the German flyer. Her scenes with husband are artificially restrained. (She later marries actor who plays her son!) TW also plucky and sprightly, but her Brit accent leaves something to be desired; she has outstanding death scene that she underplays. Scenes between GG and TW often very touching, especially later when one senses the passing of the son on to the next woman/wife. One good special effect when plane crashes in local field. War is brought home with aerial bombardments, hiding out in bomb shelters, son a RAF pilot (mother always afraid that he is going to be killed). Irony in that son is not killed, but the daughter in law when strafed at home by a German plane. British nation, although divided by class structure (May Whitty vs. Travers), comes together when MW gives first prize trophy for best rose to lower class man, who has named his rose after Mrs. Miniver. God is also on the side of the British. Wonderful idealized film that instilled patriotism in both British and Americans in World War II. Art direction, gowns, etc. are flawless. (2004)

**Mud** 2012 Jeff Nichols ('Take Shelter') 3.0 Matthew McConaughey as Mud, leathery, confabulating, somewhat disturbing loner living on an island in the Mississippi in Arkansas; Tye Sheridan as dreamy, romantic, about 10-year-old, Ellis, that discovers Mud and then serves him obsessively; Jacob Lofland as Neckbone, more practical, mechanical-minded friend of Ellis; Ray McKinnon and Sarah Paulson as Ellis' parents, who are alienated and on the verge of splitting up; Sam Shepard in contrived role as ex-Marine sharpshooter and Ellis' stepfather (don't imagine that the sharpshooter business will go to waste); Joe Don Baker as relentless avenger for the murder of his son – he arrives in the area with 6-7 toughs bent on murdering Mud; Reese Witherspoon in subordinate role as Mud's would-be girlfriend. Generally compelling, although often slow-moving coming-of-age drama set in the Mississippi region of Arkansas. Ellis and his friend Neckbone live in a lower income, strip-mall setting near the river: Ellis on a houseboat with his mother and dad on the verge of splitting up and Neckbone in a trailer with his ne'er-do-well uncle, who gropes for catfish on the river bottom. Encountering the drifter Mud on the island, they assist him in retrieving an abandoned motorboat out of a tree (!), so Mud can abscond with his long-time girlfriend, Juniper, who is holed up in a motel waiting for him; the plot's urgency is pumped up by Joe Don Baker, who has arrived in Cadillac Escalades from Texas with a bunch of henchmen to avenge himself for the death of one of his sons (killed by Mud in one of the several dumb things he did for Juniper). The film captures the life of poor and lower income people in the South (lots of pickup trucks, unkempt yards and parking lots, wide four-lane asphalt highway stretching straight in both directions) and the quiet beauty of the landscape (blue skies, flat water, sandy beaches, a pit on the island filled with cottonmouth snakes). The focus of the story is Ellis beginning to understand the ways of the world (Neckbone remains in the background working on building motorbikes): after submitting himself to the whims of Mud, he loses his temper in a memorable scene, and becomes more measured in his loyalty to his mentor; believing at first in the absolute purity of Mud's and Juniper's attachment to one another, he comes to see its limitations and in the last scene he seems to be coming to terms with the separation of his parents and thus the end of their romantic dreams. The principal weakness of the film is the conclusion – a non-sequitur violent shootout between Mud (abetted by marine sharpshooter Sam Shepard dropping one heavy after another with his telescoped rifle from across the river!) and the heavies that ends with Mud diving into the river with a gunshot wound; we find out a little later that he survives and is being nursed by his stepdad as he guides his boat downriver. Mud bursts through to freedom and neither he nor Shepard seems to suffer consequences from the bloodbath. (2013)

**La mujer de mi hermano** 2005 Ricardo de Montreuil 2.0 Barbara Mori as incredibly beautiful housewife yearning for sexual fulfillment and getting it with her (annoying) artist brother-in-law; Christian Meier as good-looking husband of Barbara – he is amazingly uptight and makes love only on Saturday. Highly upscale Mexican telenovela made for distribution in Latin America (financed by Mexico, Peru, USA, and Argentina). Mori is very horny and unfulfilled – she and her husband cannot have children. She finds sexual fulfillment with her jerk artist brother in law, but he hates commitment and family; perhaps it would have been better if she had gone ahead and masturbated (like most everyone else). After tortuous plot developments, the uptight husband reveals that he is gay, but he is redeemed when he agrees to act as the father of the baby that Barbara and her boyfriend have conceived – have you seen this on daytime TV? Film is supposed to take place in Mexico, but it looks much more like a very upscale environment in Europe or perhaps Australia. Everybody has cool clothes (the artist has designer boxers peeking out from his low-slung jeans), all the characters have Hollywood-honed bodies (even the priest who hears Barbara's confession is a hunk), the couple lives in an amazingly picturesque Bauhaus-style house with ubiquitous glass and lap pool, the brother's artist loft looks like a cool refurbished one in New York or London. The characters are wrapped up in their own clichés; no chance to escape from the suffering types prevalent in soap operas. The cinematography and direction are minimalist and arty (areas of color, intersecting lines, etc.) that recall, say, Ang Lee. A dumb downed version of "Ice Storm" or "Lantana". The best thing is looking at Mori, who has a beautiful face, and a stunning body (that we don't get to see enough of). (2009)

**Mujeres al borde de un ataque de nervios** 1988 Pedro Almodovar 2.5 Carmen Maura as excitable voice-over tv actress distressed because her married boyfriend has left her for another woman (not his wife); Fernanco Guillén as middle-aged, sexy married lover who never confronts his girlfriend; Maria Barranco as friend of Carmen, Candela, who is desperate because she has had an affair with a Shiite terrorist sought by the police; Antonio Banderas in early role as hunky, cute, naive guy who comes to see the apartment and who falls for Candela; Julieta Serrano as Ivan's jilted wife dressed up in absurd pillbox hairdo. An absurd farce about a day in the life of a jilted mistress and the nervous crises of a series of absurdly neurotic women. After Maura wakes up with her man gone, she contemplates suicide (she makes a delicious gazpacho loaded with valium but then neglects to take it), gets very angry (and incinerates her bed with a box of matches), rips her phone out and throws it through one of her window panes when Ivan doesn't call her, confronts the ineffective feminist that her man has run off with, comforts her friend Candela when after many phone calls she arrives at her apartment worrying about the consequences of an affair that she had with the terrorist, and is visited by the gun-toting wife of Ivan, but she doesn't fire it until she arrives in the airport. Other absurd, and often amusing, moments include: three times Maura catches a cab that is decorated in garish colors and filled with scandal magazines, a kindly-looking grandmother announces the evening news on television in a gentle, boring voice, Maura does a tv commercial in which the detergent she uses takes all the bloodstains out of the shirt of her murderer son so that the forensic police don't see any clues, a young woman with a horse face falls asleep on the picturesque terrace and dreams – to the delight of Maura and herself – that she lost her virginity, and almost all the inhabitants of Maura's apartment, including two policemen, fall into a dead sleep when they drink the remainder of Maura's gazpacho concoction. The mise-en-scene is filled with bright, carefully arranged colors, pictures of high heels walking impatiently back and forth waiting for a phone call, the carefully decorated apartment with the view of Madrid, artificial and impressive. Keeping track of what is going on is challenging and entertaining, but since nothing in the film seems to matter much, the proceedings are often a bit dull. In the end, Maura realizes that Ivan is a heel and not worthy of her regret; feminists are of no help in dealing with men, and you just have to soldier on your male relationships that no woman will even understand. Maura's hyperactive performance and the farcical surprises are usually entertaining. (2011)

**The Mummy** 1932 Karl Freund 2.5 Boris Karloff grave and distinguished as ancient wrinkle-faced Egyptian man buried without proper mummification ritual because of his invocation of a forbidden resurrection prayer; Zita Johann as minimally gifted mannered actress playing contemporary Anglo-Egyptian woman that Karloff thinks is his resurrected beloved; David Manners good-looking but even less gifted thespian playing Johann's boyfriend; Edward Van Sloan reprising his 'Dracula' role as scholar who understands Karloff's problem – he constantly invokes science. Predictable, although sometimes interesting and evocative, extension of the Universal franchise. All the scenes involving archeologists or flashback scenes invoking ancient Egypt are genuine and fairly interesting and shot in expressionist and evocative way with shadows, chiaroscuro and flickering lights; the scroll containing the resurrection spell with illustrations truly resembles one from ancient Egypt; on the other hand, the contemporary scenes are shot in stock lighting with minimal camera movement and lighting. The religion of ancient Egypt, which is depicted as cruel and implacable, is the source of the horror as it reaches across the centuries to affect the lives of 1930s Englishmen. Karloff looks wrinkled, desiccated, pained, and severe, although his 'mummy' horror face is always in close-up without movement (did they use the same shot every time?); he gives a certain sad dignity to the man subjected to the painful process of resurrection in order to pursue a hopeless love. Aside from Karloff, acting is stilted (typical in films produced just after the invention of sound movies), especially among the English characters who take a long time to understand what is going on and to figure out what to do. One must admit however that the artificial and empty lines don't give the actors much to work with. The film builds to a fairly tense conclusion, as Karloff leads Johann into the Egyptian Museum to kill her with an obsidian knife and then resurrect her with the prayer so they can be together forever (it is unclear whether she has already been resurrected once or whether Karloff just thinks she is his beloved). Of course the English cast of characters arrives just in the nick of time to save Johann from a grisly fate, and when they shoot Karloff, he reverts back to a hokey-looking skeleton

dressed in clothes. Film lacks the shock power of 'Dracula' and 'Frankenstein', although it has moments of creepiness and elegance. (2010)

**Munich** 2005 Steven Spielberg 3.5 Eric Bana as Avner, the morally ambiguous leader of Israeli revenge squad after the Munich massacre, Geoffrey Rush as his soft-spoken but fervently nationalist handler, Daniel Craig, Michael Lonsdale as independent provider of whereabouts of terrorist targets, Mathieu Amalric as his son Louis. Thriller with a soul and moral quandaries about the five men sent by the Israeli government to assassinate the eleven men they think responsible for the murder of the 11 Israeli hostages at Munich. Film is very entertaining as it progresses from Rome to Cyprus to Athens to Paris to London and to North Africa to find and kill the guilty. Each assassination sequence is gripping: the one in Paris has Hitchcockian suspense as a large truck blocks the radio reception between the detonator and the telephone bomb which might kill a little girl if it is detonated at the wrong time; in London the plot to kill the Black September mastermind is foiled by a (chance?) encounter in the street, and one of the Israeli agents is murdered by a seductive lady; in the most touching sequence, the survivors go to her barge in Holland and murder her shooting small, gushing holes in her beautiful, nude body that lies spread-eagled and exposed in a chair; in Athens (?) a mistakenly large bomb does too much damage endangering civilians; in the first assassination in Rome, Avner and his colleague's hands shake when they should be pulling the trigger to kill the mild-mannered 'Scheherazade' translator; their attempt to kill the organization's mastermind in North Africa is interrupted in the usual frenzy of automatic gunfire when a young guard happens upon them. Throughout the film the moral rightness and the efficacy of terrorist retaliation for terrorist acts is raised by various characters. Golda Meir has moral qualms about the mission, but she has no doubt that it is necessary – Israel must not be perceived as weak. Palestinian terrorists are mostly faceless fanatics, but at least they talk, and on occasion they explain their side of the story. It becomes obvious that in their mutual strikes Israel and Black September are engaged in a seemingly fruitless war of tit for tat without end. Many of the five, who were mostly honorable men from modest walks of life, object to the morality of what they are doing, and at the end when he and his family are settled in New York, the repentant Avner is not even able to communicate with Rush, so far are they now separated on attitudes toward terrorism. The movie is gripping – Spielberg knows how to hook us into a story – and morally courageous; he received a lot of criticism for not taking the straight Israeli line. (2006)

**Murder!** 1930 Alfred Hitchcock 2.5 Herbert Marshall talking non-stop as upper-class individual crime investigator in his first sound film; Norah Baring with a stilted voice delivery as falsely accused woman; Edward Chapman as Marshall's foolish sidekick in the investigation. Creaky early Hitchcock sound film. Baring is accused of murder, but she was unconscious while it was being committed and she doesn't deny that she did it; a fairly interesting jury scene convicts her of murder (but why does Hitchcock have the jurors shout at holdout Marshall in unison?); Marshall, who is smitten with the condemned undertakes to find the real murderer; after endless long takes and run-on conversation, Marshall discovers that the real murderer, who is an actor and trapeze artist, sneaked into the room disguised as a woman and a policeman, and murdered the woman to hide his great secret -- he is a "half-caste"! Film ends with fairly impressive Hitchcock-style public scene with the conscience-ridden guilty man committing suicide in the circus by hanging himself from the trapeze where he is performing. The film has potential interest because of the script's intertwining and contrasting the worlds of reality (the narrow streets and shabby lodgings of some of the principals) and the world of the theater, where all is pretense and drama (see also the underrated 'Stage Fright'). The film is a whodunit, with the emphasis on finding the real guilty person and clearing the cute-looking innocent girl rather than the classic Hitchcockian emphasis on danger and suspense. Some expressionist shots -- e.g., the shadow of the gallows on the cell wall when Marshall is visiting Baring in jail. Hitchcock also includes some humorous bits, most of which seem to be at the expense of balmy, cockney-talking lower class folk. The main drawback of the film is the early approach to sound recording: the film is in bad condition both visually and the sound track; primitive sound recording techniques require long takes, swish pans from one character to another to avoid cutting of the sound recording (classical editing would make it more difficult), and most often a static feeling as characters, especially the loquacious Marshall, ramble on at

great length. Interesting as transitional Hitchcock. But isn't it possible to restore the old films better? (2008)

**Murder!** 1930 Alfred Hitchcock (Britain) 3.5 Entertaining early Hitchcock sound (1930) whodunit featuring his signature wrong man (woman) theme. Herbert Marshall as Sir John Menier, theater man with a strong conscience and sense of justice; Norah Baring as the amnesiac woman accused of murder; Edward Chapman as the theater stage manager who assists Sir John in the investigation; Phyllis Konstam as his wife, less foolish than she seems; Esme Percy as stage actor who plays cross-dressing parts. Film mostly follows the whodunit pattern popular at the time – a murder followed by an investigation that collects clues and suspects and reveals the culprit at the surprise ending. The murder appears to have been committed by a member of an acting troupe; incriminated in large part by inability to recall the details of the crime, she is tried and convicted after a lengthy discussion among the 12 jurors. One of them, an upper class man played by Marshall, does not think she is guilty, and he gathers Chapman and Konstam to follow clues (such as a neighbor having heard a high-pitched woman's voice or the appearance of a suspicious policeman). Their investigation eventually leads to a cross-dressing actor/trapeze artist, who clubbed his girlfriend with a poker when she was about to reveal that the boyfriend is a "half-caste" (presumably 50% Indian), a cause of shame at the time. The film ends with two well-conceived Hitchcockian scenes: by writing a theatrical scene describing the murder scene, Marshall instills insecurity and guilt in the perpetrator; when he returns to the circus to do his trapeze act, Percy knots a noose around his neck, and plunges to his death from the trapeze platform (fitting since hanging was the British method of execution for capital punishment at the time). The film has no musical soundtrack, and the dialogue is long-winded and sometimes hesitant. Some of the sound experiments misfire, such as having the eleven jurors browbeating the hold-out Marshall by speaking in unison, but Hitchcock creates good humorous scenes – e.g., Konstam trying to get her knickers on while the window she is looking out of keeps closing on her head; the obnoxious children shtick when the children, baby, kitten, and overwhelmed mother harass Marshall while still in bed. Scenario constantly plays with the theater theme, e.g., introducing some of the suspects by having them run on and off the stage while the police stand around amused asking unanswered questions. The last shot begins close in showing the now released Baring having her hand kissed by a gallant Marshall (suggesting of course romance), but the camera then withdraws to reveal the proscenium arch, thereby informing the viewer that Marshall has just invited her to perform in a play with him. Rough in places, but shows Hitchcock getting his voice. Film is immensely more enjoyable once restored (see GSC's 2008 review). (January 2018)

**Murder in Thornton Square** 1940 Dickinson 3.0 Diana Wynyard as lonely heiress who moves into her murdered aunt's house with mysterious new husband; Anton Walbrook tries to scare her into insanity with his expressionistic Central European acting style; Frank Pettingell as older Joseph Cotton figure providing the counter momentum to the insanity story; Cathleen Cordell as the very flirtatious and not particularly attractive housemaid who is delighted to step out with the master but there seems to be no questions of sex between them (compared to MGM vehicle, at least they flirt). The original version of the 'Gaslight' story that was bought by MGM and then remade in the famous 1944 version (LB Mayer was reported to have ordered his underlings to destroy all prints of the original film – the production company that made the original was owned by MGM). A less florid, less star-studded, and more plot-focused version of the successful play. Although polished (the traveling shots that begin in the green square and then crane into #12), the direction is straightforward and brisk, devoted to building up the suspense and advancing the story. Wisely the film starts with a scene depicting the murder of the aunt, which fixates the viewer on the danger provided by Walbrook to Wynyard. A bit more hard-hitting than Bergman version since, for example, the maid actually flirts heavily with the Master. Pettingell as the savior is older and avuncular compared to the romantic Cotton. Film suffers in comparison to the sumptuous art direction of the MGM version and the stunning star quality of Bergman. Bergman is more convincing than the cool Wynyard as the woman in serious distress on the verge of insanity. Still, works just as well, and perhaps better, as a straight thriller. (2007)

**Murder, My Sweet** 1945 Edward Dmytryk 3.0 Dick Powell, Anne Shirley, Claire Trevor, Mike Mazurki. Philip Marlowe private eye film adapted from Raymond Chandler. Exactly same genre as 'The Big Sleep,' except perhaps a little clearer, less nonsensical, less trying on the patience. We follow Marlowe all the way through: hard-boiled, cynical, never takes anything at face value, infinitely patient, determined to follow the trail to the end of the line, stands up under adversity (drugged by the shady doctor), but has a sense of honor (he isn't going to give up once he has taken someone's money), and has a soft spot for a pretty woman (Shirley, even though much younger); generally well dressed, boyish early middle age good looks. Plot is serpentine, and so complex that viewer tends to get impatient and to quit paying attention: we start with two or three apparently separate cases, but they coalesce into one. Involves an old wealthy man married to a beautiful babe (Trevor), blackmail since she has a seedy past, a fake theft of a jade necklace, intense jealousy between Thelma (wife) and the wealthy man's daughter (Shirley), etc. Well directed, alternating between "Buckingham Palace" of the rich to the seamy alleys of bars, seedy apartments, etc. Doesn't focus much on the typical film noir dark, shadowy lighting. Voiceover all the way through with lots of purplish Chanderlesque prose and wisecracks like "face of mud." Trevor a kind of femme fatale, but she does not have a fatal effect on Marlowe, who rides away in a taxi at the end with the prospect of marriage to a pretty, wealthy girl. Is he going to give up the profession? Rather annoying unrealistic ending, in which three of the main characters kill selves off, and Shirley doesn't seem to care that her dad is gone. (2005)

**Muriel's Wedding** 1994 P.J. Hogan 3.0 Toni Collette, Rachel Griffiths, Bill Hunter, Jean Drynan. Kind of romantic comedy about fat, badly educated loser girl (Collette) living in suburban Brisbane area (Porpoise Spit); she considers self complete failure, since her dad calls her and her siblings "useless;" her ambition is to get married, but she doesn't even have a boyfriend; after stealing money from her family, she goes off to Sydney, where she gradually liberates herself from depressing past. She does not get married and live happily ever after, but supposed comedy is laced in second half with large dollops of tragedy; her best friend becomes paralyzed, her dad divorces and remarries Deirdre, and her mother dies (suicide). (So where is the comedy?) Very hard on Australian suburban, provincial life—empty and materialistic. No-good layabout children are hilariously passive and helpless; they have to have someone to take care of them; Muriel refuses to do it in the end, since her duty is not to take care of herself, and she chooses her friend (future?) over her past. Collette is spunky and hilarious with incredibly broad, almost panicked smile; when she finally starts to have sex with a guy, she giggles the whole time, and then guy falls through the window trying to take off her pants. Kind of mixed genre with some satire, good humored romantic comedy, and life-corrected hardships and tragedy. Bill Hunter as Dad is convincingly maddening; Mom (Jean Drynan) adds bit of true sadness as lost spouse driven to suicide. (2005)

**Mustang** 2015 Deniz Gamse Ergüven (Turkey; France) 3.5 Team of Turkish actors portraying five teenage girls and their adult relatives. Outstanding is Günes Sensoy, who plays the observant, rebellious 13-year-old Lale, from whose perspective the story is told (she sometimes narrates). The film was a hit at Cannes 2015 and was the French entry for Academy Award, Best Foreign Language Film. It has rather confusing beginning, but soon settles down to the predicament of five Turkish teenage girls living in a provincial area under the supervision of their grandmother and their angry, violent uncle, who is often seen carrying a pistol. Although sympathetic to the girls, grandma is very anxious about the impact their free-wheeling mores will have on their marriage prospects – there is no alternative in their lives except perhaps somehow moving to Istanbul, the beacon of freedom and individuality. Although the film has often a light-hearted vibe, it is a cutting indictment of traditional (patriarchal?) Turkish sexual and marriage mores. Because of some horseplay with boys, the girls are locked in their large, well-appointed house (the family appears to be middle-class); when the girls persist in escaping out the window for adventures – attending unchaperoned a soccer game or meeting a boyfriend for sex – grandma brings in workmen to install fortified doors and bars on the windows. The marriage customs emphasize the girls' lack of free choice in the process: they have no exposure to the company of men outside their family; the parents choose a single man for the wedding; the girls are not asked their opinion, except in the case of one of the sisters, who embarrasses her grandmother into allowing her to

marry her boyfriend that she has been sneaking out to meet (she is the only one happy to be married). The girls are subjected to various indignities: since the absolute precondition for marriage is virginity, they are subjected to hymen inspections by doctors; when one of the girls does not bleed on her wedding night (the relatives knock at the door asking to see the bloody sheets), she is hauled to the hospital to verify again that she is a virgin (the doctor says that she is). The last part of the film is an exciting escape organized by the precocious Lale to enable her sister to escape marriage with a guy she doesn't even know; ironically they are able to fortify themselves against the adults in their house, and with the help of a sympathetic local truck driver, they travel the 1000 (?) kilometers to Istanbul, where a joyful embrace with their beloved former teacher promises hope for the future. The central image of the film is the five girls lying idle together in their underwear or pajamas in their house, a sisterhood of young women under attack by their own families. The film's appeal is heightened by a leaven of light-hearted optimism. (2016)

**Mutiny on the Bounty** 1935 Frank Lloyd (MGM) 3.5 Charles Laughton as nasty Captain Bligh; Clark Gable as the rebellious but pleasant Lieutenant Christian; Franchot Tone as idealistic midshipman torn between loyalty to the captain and friendship with Christian. Excellent unfaithful adaptation of 'Bounty' story. Screenplay focuses on three main characters. Bligh especially, who is depicted as cruel and tyrannical, something of a sadist, although he is a good sailor, courageous and he prays sincerely. Byam (Tone) is the upper class fellow client of Joseph Banks, who is not a mutineer, but who is captured and then convicted when Bligh incriminates him at his trial. The young seaman, who is impressed by Clark Gable, but participates in mutiny and must be punished at the end. Story suffers some from incredibility since it is hard to imagine the British navy allowing a sadist like Bligh to be in command of a ship. Story sanitized. There are hardly any villains; the Tahitian women all wear tops and bathing suits when they swim; the sailors are clean and never swear, and they read the Bible before execution; the men on Tahiti are married to their women and have babies; Christian leads the mutiny out of duty to the crew. Excellent black and white photography, much of it on location; wonderful shots of the ships. Story is British patriotic: sure there was a single cruel commander, but the event led to a closer relationship between officers and men that still holds true in the British navy. Byam stands out in his peroration before the court; he speaks about the freedom of all Englishmen and denounces tyranny ("ten coconuts and ten cheeses!"); and then he is pardoned to cement a closer understanding between officers and men. Movie takes many liberties with the story, mostly for simplification; but Bligh is allowed to be present at the trial of the accused mutineers. Ends mostly upbeat: Christian men burn ship at Pitcairn; Bligh shunned by fellow officers; Byam pardoned and welcomed warmly aboard his new ship. (2007)

**My Beautiful Laundrette** 1985 (Britain) 3.0 Stephen Frears; Hanif Kureishi Daniel Day-Lewis, Gordon Warnecke. Engaging, slightly offbeat film about Pakistani entrepreneurs in London under Thatcher. Realistic texture (originally made for TV) – working class outcasts (native Britishers) and middle class, materialistic Pakis. The Brits are racists, but it doesn't seem to matter much since they are going nowhere and the Pakis are prospering. Characters very vivid and differentiated, not always easy to get your hand on them. DDL has virtuoso acting performance, quite different from Cecil in 'Room With a View!' Dialogue is often enough oblique and hard to put together. But the movie keeps you engaged all the way through. The Brits are on their way out; the Pakis are the ones who are making money. Forbidden fruit since the two leads are homosexual lovers, and movie fades with them closing the door as prelude to sex. Very good small movie with gifted writer, director, small budget, and attractive (most competent) cast). Updated quirky version of British kitchen sink realism. After 2005 bombings in London, one can't help but wonder whether Pakistani (Muslim) immigrants are so thoroughly socialized. (2005)

**My Best Friend's Wedding** 1997 P.J. Hogan ('Muriel's Wedding') 3.0 Julia Roberts surprisingly sincere and effective as New York food critic who wants to sabotage Diaz's wedding with Roberts' ex-boyfriend; Dermot Mulroney good-looking but a bit passive as the guy the two women are fighting over; Carmen Diaz drop-dead cute and beautiful with wide-mouthed cupid bow smile and terminally vivacious personality vying with calmer Roberts for Mulroney's attentions; Rupert Everett tall,

handsome, entertainingly witty, and also vivacious as Roberts' gay friend, who is at her side to help her be a decent human being. Surprisingly entertaining standard Hollywood romantic comedy that chronicles Roberts' sometimes ruthless and immoral maneuvers to separate Mulroney from Diaz and then focuses on her bad conscience ending with her acquiescence in the marriage. Roberts was pretty brave to star opposite the attention-getting Diaz, who has one of the most charming and adorable images on the screen. Everett is almost equally charming with his good looks, his faithful and sensible personality (he is shocked at Roberts' ruthlessness and counsels her to do the right thing at the end of the film), and his wittily descriptive dialogue. How many American films allow a character to manipulate language like that (but of course the actor is British, which makes it ok). Film is generally well-written, not letting us know what the ending will be: at the beginning the viewer is convinced that Roberts will get her man (can such a determined movie star fail?), but the twists and turns of the plot result in the triumph of her adversary; Diaz's victory is deserved because she and Mulroney are strongly in love with one another. Some faltering in characterization and situations: Everett doesn't come across as a gay guy, but he is good-looking enough and his attachment to Roberts is strong enough for some in the audience to wish him success with her; Mulroney's response to Roberts is sometimes maddeningly ambiguous -- if he loves Diaz so much, why doesn't he clarify it? Still, an entertaining hour and a half. (2009)

**My Best Girl** 1927 Sam Wood 3.5 Mary Pickford, Buddy Rogers (whom she will marry after her divorce from Doug Fairbanks). Wonderful print – clear, textured – with great new symphonic score mixed in with a little Chopin. Wonderful romantic comedy with viewer's attention engaged from beginning to end. Largely because of MP's adorable personality – cute, engaging, sincere, innocent yet determined and with honest indignation, etc. Roger a little too innocent and devoted, but also engaging. Cinderella story as the two (he rich and she a shop girl) overcome all obstacles finally to make it to the ship that will take them to Hawaii on their honeymoon. Rich are snobby and aloof, but the men at least are human – father of BR relents and regrets trying to bribe MP (\$10,000) not to marry his son. A lot of quirky, well-defined characters, and nice small gags and quirks (mother attends funerals for kicks and always needs smelling salts, the snobby butlers, etc.). Generally, women are snobbier and more unforgiving than the men. Terrific outside photography, particularly of lovers walking through busy urban streets (LA or SF?) in the pouring rain. Good source for studying Pickford's late silent career – she is more adult, but she retains and exploits well her innocent, juvenile image. This is probably Pickford's last good film. (2005)

**My Brilliant Career** 1979 Gillian Armstrong 4.0 Judy Davis energetic and arresting in her debut role as Sybylla of the New South Wales outback, Sam Neill in an early role as wealthy planter of the neighborhood – he woos Sybylla and offers her a good deal, Wendy Hughes also arresting as Neill's open-minded and humorous mother, Robert Grubb as dorky English visitor who very unsuccessfully courts Sybylla at her grandmother's. Marvelous early Australian movie based on the famous Miles Franklin book; glories in the outbackish rolling hills setting – grasslands, horses, peaceful ponds, graceful and elegant houses of the Australian country gentry, clouds moving across the sky, dogs chasing Sybylla as she runs across the garden, dust storms, sitting in spreading orchard trees, revolting pigsties of the outback poor (matching the feral ways of the McSwain family that Sybylla babysits for toward the end of the movie). Davis is constant focus of the film – she is supposed to be "plain," but she is rather arresting with her long kinky red hair, her flashing eyes, her wicked smile, possessed of coltish energy as she spreads a mischievous chaos around her. She comes from a poor family (since her mother married "for love" and thus poorly), and the issue is whether she will marry for love (Sam Neill is the almost perfect prospect – handsome, wealthy, influential, smart, attentive and supportive of her literary ambitions) or whether she will spurn marriage, which she sees as servitude to a man, and thus pursue a literary career; and this despite her having no experience as a writer aside from penning a few lines while sitting in a tree. She has her own mind, to the point that she swats Neill on the face with a riding crop when he gets a bit romantic and tries to kiss her by force. She wins her man, but then rejects his proposal when he offers her marriage with even long periods in the city (Melbourne) so that she can hobnob with the literati. Film ends poetically with her sending off her manuscript to a London publisher. Wonderful movie that combines script, mise-en-scene, natural scenery, skilled acting, even effective and simple



music soundtrack in an almost perfect low-budget amalgam that leaves big budget Hollywood romances in the dust. Film does leave one wondering why Sybylla, after showing how bonkers she was for Neill, would sacrifice a perfect love match for a life of independence as a writer (grandmother – "loneliness is such a big price to pay for independence"). Couldn't she have decided to write as a married woman with all the money her husband had, and write about the things one experiences as a married person? (2005)

**My Cousin Rachel** 1952 Henry Koster (20c Fox) 2.5 Richard Burton pulling out the stops as the emotional, passionate Philip, chagrined about the death of his cousin Ambrose; Olivia de Havilland a bit too Hollywood glamorous as the charming, classic, impeccable Rachel, half Italian and half English; Audrey Dalton as the fresh-faced Louise, a contact with normality in the highly charged atmosphere created by the two principals. Worthy, although perhaps overly Hollywoodized screen adaptation of Daphne du Maurier's famous novel. The film is essentially a thriller about whether Rachel is or is not a murderess. After Ambrose's mysterious marriage while away in Italy, Philip responds to his epistolary pleas for help by going to Italy, arriving after he has already died from some mysterious ailment. He is instantly suspicious of Rachel as a social climber perhaps responsible in some way for Ambrose's death, but when she arrives mysteriously on his Cornish estate (Ambrose has left his whole estate to Philip), he falls instantly and passionately in love with her, to the point of giving her everything he has inherited (!). The rest of the film is devoted to teasing the viewer with contradictory indications of whether Rachel is a scheming murderess. On the one hand, she is invariably charming and correct in her behavior, she never asks for a thing from Philip (she doesn't have to, since he is completely balmy over her), there is never proof that she committed the crime, and she refuses to marry Philip even after the latter gives her his whole fortune. On the other hand, Philip falls into a lengthy illness similar to Ambrose's. It is clearly implied that she is plotting against Philip's family with her Italian lover, Guido, and spending the night with him in local inns. Philip eventually discovers that there is a tree in the garden that bears poison berries and that he had seen similar trees when he visited her villa, and in the climax of the story Philip and Louise discover an envelope with the berries in her chest of drawers. Then however the writers block the momentum of the story by affirming that Rachel was not having an affair with her Italian friend Guido. Philip then races to keep Rachel from falling through a dangerous bridge, but arrives too late, only to have Rachel asking "Why did you do it?" (one presumes to sabotage the bridge in order to kill her); the ambiguity is preserved until the end. The story translates some of the mystery and suspense of the novel, and the performances of the two principals are formidable especially when they are confronting one another. The adaptation would probably have worked better if the Philip character were not such a raving romantic and if the screenwriters had provided more clarity for the Rachel character: ambiguity is appropriate for the first two-thirds of the film, but the film should have ended with a clear case against Rachel and a chastened Philip kneeling over her body. (2011, January 2018)

**My Cousin Rachel** 2017 Roger Michell (Britain) 3.0 Another version of Daphne du Maurier's famous novel that plays up the ambiguities of the story more than ever, while affording beautiful views of the precipitous Cornish coast with ancestral estates sitting atop overlooking bluffs (obvious reference to du Maurier's *Menabilly*). Rachel Weisz the most striking part of the production as the sensuous, inscrutable cousin who arrives at Philip's ancestral Cornish mansion after the death of her second husband, Ambrose; Sam Claflin as Philip, good-looking naïf with a bad temper who seems out of his thespian depth; Holliday Grainger as normal, sensible young woman who expects to marry Philip. This version of 'Rachel' follows the usual story: Philip arrives in Florence right after the death of his beloved cousin Ambrose; he returns to his dilapidated house in Cornwall, where he is surprised by an impromptu visit by Cousin Rachel (the exact relation between them is never clarified). The urge for vengeance is soon dissipated, as Philip becomes so besotted by his cousin that he starts by giving her an allowance; before long he has arranged through the family's reluctant lawyer to donate to her his entire estate. His unrealistic mooning over the suspicious Rachel soon tries the patience of the viewer, who can perhaps understand the "bolt out of the blue" falling in love, but not his heedless alienation of his estate and anyhow, why does he climb up the outside wall of Rachel's bedroom (still in his own house) to have sex with her? As in the previous Richard Burton version, the bulk of the narrative is taken up with playing the viewer: Is she an honest woman obviously wronged in her life, or – as is emphasized by her

constant handling of the tisanes she prepares in her teacups – is she a murderess bent on easing Philip out of this world; Philip even passes through a lengthy illness from which he barely escapes with his life. Just as it seems that Rachel’s ill intentions will be unmasked, the narrative makes an about face: her putative Italian lover turns out to be a homosexual, and while riding horseback Rachel falls to her death with her horse – not clear whether it was an accident or she committed suicide (out of despair of being so unfairly suspected?). In a postscript Philip is seen riding in a carriage with wife Grainger and two children, still appearing depressed and preoccupied: the Rachel experience makes happiness impossible – “Rachel, my torment.” The film script’s indecision is symbolized by the two times Rachel and Philip have sex: the first one romantic and gallant with her full consent in her bed (she loves him); the second one the next day that she barely endures so that it resembles a rape (she puts up with sex to get her hands on his money). There are even several (rather out-of-context) references in Rachel’s dialogue to feminist points of view – Why can’t she make her own decisions and choose her own route to happiness (and not what some man decides for her). Film has strengths – particularly the seductive allure of Weisz, but its weaknesses are obvious – Claflin’s acting, the character of Philip, the irritating indecision of the narrative. (December 2017)

**My Darling Clementine** 1947 John Ford (20cFox) 4.0 Henry Fonda, Victor Mature, James Garner, Linda Darnell, Walter Brennan, Tim Holt, Cathy Downs, Ward Bond, etc. Excellent Ford western. Flagrantly fictional account of how the Earps cleaned up Tombstone in the 1880s. Earp is calm, virtuous, soft-spoken, dignified. Theme is building/civilizing of the West: Tombstone is uncivilized and wild, but the Earps commit to bring order by Wyatt’s undertaking the marshal’s job (admittedly they are motivated primarily by clan revenge – family honor). The civilizing process is symbolized by the famous church dance scene, when wild Wyatt, having fallen in love with Clementine, takes her to the dedicatory dance and on the floor of the unfinished church exposed to the sky and the surrounding mesas, he dances with her – somewhat awkwardly, suggesting that it will be a while before Tombstone is a sophisticated city. A sign of settling down is Wyatt leaning back in his chair on the porch and balancing self with his feet on the post in front of him, and his getting a shave and a haircut – his cologne is mistaken by Clementine for honeysuckle. Editing pace is measured and slow until the action scenes when the confrontation between the Earps and the Clantons require a speeding up of the pace. The Clantons are the true bad guys – Walter Brennan with his four sons in tow; a dedicated dad who has however no further heart to fight after the four of them are shot, and Earp does not insist on arresting or killing him. Usual beautiful, big sky photography shot in the grandeur of Monument Valley that gives movie its epic character; photography is unusually lyrical, majestic and moving even for a Ford movie; the black and white photography seems even to emphasize its beauty. Wyatt’s walk down Main Street before the shootout is memorable: big sky with the Monument Valley mesas in the background, all quiet – no music – except for the sound of footsteps and the clanking of the spurs. Less of the Ford sentimentality, and nice touches of light humor surrounding Wyatt’s falling in love, getting a shave and a haircut that makes him look like a city slicker. Linda Darnell a little heavy on the Mexican spitfire, straining credibility a bit; Downs somewhat vapid, but appropriate, as sweet, slight girl who represents the arrival of civilization. Mature convincing and even moving as the ill Doc Holliday; it is good to have a character that is not so flawless and virtuous. Excellent, exciting final showdown at OK Corral, where fighting takes place behind cover and with horses and stages racing between the antagonists, who have to fire through the dust. Bloodbath with Wyatt losing two brothers and Doc Holliday, and Old Man Clanton all four of his sons. Wyatt tries to show his mercy to Old Man Clanton and let him go (to suffer), but Clanton pulls his gun... Touching final scene, in which Wyatt shyly takes leave of Clementine, “Mam, I sure like that name – Clementine,” and rides off toward the buttes to the accompaniment of folk song; but he has already said that he will be back to visit Clementine, who is staying on as schoolmistress. Shot with perfect taste and tact. Despite the bloodshed, movie is at times gentle, nostalgic, poignant, poetic. (2004)

**My Favorite Brunette** 1947 Elliott Nugent (California National) 2.5 Moderately amusing and entertaining parody of 40s hard-boiled private eye films (Mickey Spillane, Raymond Chandler, etc.). Bob Hope as hopelessly incompetent would-be gumshoe wisecracking his way in and around the San

Francisco Bay Area; Dorothy Lamour glamorous as sometimes mendacious beautiful woman that hires Hope in the beginning of the film to find her missing uncle; Peter Lorre as tough-guy comic thug, always threatening with a knife; Lon Chaney Jr. as dim-witted, muscle-bound, slow-talking enforcer with however a heart of gold – he cracks walnuts by closing the crook of his elbow; Charles Dingle, Reginald Denny, and B-Picture star Jack Larue in various supporting roles; Alan Ladd has a brief, surprise cameo in the first scene. Lots of routine twists and turns in the plot, ultimately revealing the hunt for a map that will enable a posse of (more or less harmless) thugs to close a real estate deal so they can get their hands on some uranium ore. Most entertaining scenes are in a palatial Monterey estate (supposedly belonging to the Crockers) used to represent a sanitarium. Some good running gags: Lorre repeatedly planting evidence right under the nose of the heedless Hope as he searches for clues in an apartment; golf charade on the sanitarium gold course – Hope loses because his mentally ill opponent plays with an imaginary ball (thus sinking every putt he takes); after Hope in the sanitarium cons Chaney into bending open the bars on the window, upon leaving the room the latter returns to straighten them again for the sake of neatness. Lamour is lovely and competent, but Hope is the only reason to watch the film: constant wisecracks, some of which are amusing; he is bumbling and incompetent, failing ever to handle the pistol he is carrying; jittery and cowardly, jumping in fright, running from danger when it appears; comic attempts to be macho, e.g., declaring shots of whisky “smooth” while smacking his lips, then crouching and coughing desperately when he swallows. Fun, superficial, a one-man show. Watching more than one Hope film must be pretty repetitive. (2016)

**My Life as a Dog** 1985 Lasse Hallström 3.0 Anton Glanzelius in affecting performance as conflicted Swedish kid Ingemar; Tomas von Brömssen as his happy-go-lucky, breast-obsessed uncle Gunnar. Famous optimistic, sometimes awfully cute, film about a 1950s 11-year-old who has a lot of problems, primarily that his mother is dying of consumption; he is sent to pass the summer at his Uncle’s house in small-town Sweden, where he comes into contact with a lot of eccentric, colorful characters straight out of ‘Amarcord’ or ‘The Grand Meaulnes’; he establishes a premature romantic relationship with a girl of his age (battle of the sexes symbolized by the boxing matches they engage in periodically); his mother dies at the end, but he has learned that life moves on, that he can have a friendship with his “girlfriend”, and that there are always compensations. Film’s ambiance is divided into two parts: the first where Anton worries about his mom, drives her crazy with his hyperactive antics, and he reflects on the injustices and sorrows of the world – mainly that the Russian Cosmonaut dog Laika was left in space to die – while the film pictures the stars in the heavens; the other is the entertaining and light-hearted part of the film that takes place in his uncle’s town. There in a tone of magical realism (again Fellini-influenced) he encounters a community that supports all its members and is completely tolerant of everyone’s eccentricities: the worker in the glass-blowing factory that rides his cycle on a tight rope; the man who constructs a play spaceship that the kids use eventually (after an initial failure) to ride across the road; the old man who works every day on repairing his roof until he decides at the end of the film to take a swim in the ice-covered lake; his uncle who is busy building a gazebo in the garden to escape from what there is of the real world in the town and who plays a music hall-type song that drives his wife crazy; a voluptuous blond who agrees to pose nude for an eccentric (of course) local artist and who brings Anton along so that nothing scandalous will occur during the posing sessions; a children’s society where everyone is laughing and playing almost all the time and which encourages boxing sessions in a barn as ideal recreation; an immigrant Greek family that is brought into town society by an invitation to watch the barely functioning new television set in Uncle Gunnar’s house. Life is hard what with the death of the mother and a lot of frumpy frowning from city relatives, but not so bad that it can’t be overcome by a fundamental cheerfulness, an openness to experimentation and novelty, and a refusal to take things too seriously. Perhaps facile optimism (can sorrow be so easily transformed?), but nevertheless a charming film. (2007)

**My Little Chickadee** 1940 Edward Cline (Paramount) 3.0 Mae West dressed in her Gay 90s finery somewhere in the West, W.C. Fields in pin stripe suit, white gloves, and silly grey stovepipe hat with thick ribbon around the base, Joseph Calleia as the greaser town boss, Donald Meek as a stammering gambler, Margaret Hamilton as local prude. West is kicked out of town for hanging out with the Masked Bandit, not to return until

she is respectable and married; persecuted by the Ladies' Vigilante Committee (Hamilton). Vigilantes and the local bigwig greaser (Greaseville) run the town, but the general trend is toward civilizing the town with schools, etc. WCF – "Flowerbelle. A euphonious appellation. Easy on the ears and a banquet for the eyes." When Indians attack train, West shoots them all. Fields is useless cynical blowhard alcoholic, making usually loud literary wisecracks out of the side of his mouth demeaning women or referring to his own alcoholism; rather incompetent and easily fooled; often uses the double take; likes to tell a tall story, which is sometimes contradicted by another character. West's fingers are "a little quick on the trigger"; she likes being courted (especially if her suitor has a bunch of cash in his bag) despite veneer of respectability. Fields: "It's not good for a man to be alone." West: "It's no fun for a woman either." The town boss appoints Fields sheriff! Lots of dumb Indian jokes directed to an Indian follower, who doesn't say much more than "Ugh"; "you redskin aborigine!" Fields is a gambler: "Is this a game of chance?" "Not the way I play it. No." When West has love scene with Masked Lover, they kiss and part (the Hayes Code is only six years old); only plot point is who is the Masked Bandit. Loud knock at the door, Fields yells "Cease!" When he goes to bed: "Sleep the most beautiful experience in life...except drink." MW "I generally avoid temptations, since I can't resist it." When Salvation Army lady tries to collect donation from Fields, he almost puts his sheriff's star in the tambourine. Fields dresses up as Masked Bandit to court her, but West recognizes him by his nose. His come-on: "The way you walk, the way you talk, the way you wave your little pinky." When about to be hung: "Any last wish?" "Yes, I would like to see Paris before I die.... Philadelphia will do!" End: West "Anytime you got nothing to do and plenty of time to do it, come on up." Parting: Fields, "Why don't you come up and see me sometime?" West: "I sure will, my little chickadee." Film is amusing mainly for the tandem of Fields and West. A lot of flat scenes, such as West teaching a class of unruly boys, and Fields trying to get laughs out of a drunk woman at a bar. (2005)

**My Name is Julia Ross** 1945 Joseph. H. Lewis 3.0 Nina Foch cool and innocent as young English woman drugged and kidnapped by a family trying to cover up the murder of their daughter-in-law; Dame May Whitty looking like she just stepped off the set of 'A Lady Vanishes' as the not-always-convincing ringleader trying to protect her son; George Macready as nearly psychotic son, who plays viciously with knives in his spare time but usually obeys his mother; Anita Sharp-Bolster a good turn as felonious cockney scouring maid. Fairly enjoyable damsel-in-distress, low budget film in which Foch is kidnapped and imprisoned in a luxurious seaside Cornwall mansion reminiscent of Mandalay in 'Rebecca' – Foch imprisoned in a neo-Gothic pile rising above the cliffs with surf crashing against the dark rocks far below. The film also has debts to 'Suspicion' – Macready climbing the dark steps outside of Foch's room with something to drink for her; and 'Gaslight' – glamorous actress imprisoned by husband intending to do her harm. Lewis does a good job of establishing Foch's hapless aloneness; the bulk of the film takes place in the mansion, where Foch tries various tactics to escape from her gilded prison, all of which are of course foiled; until she finally succeeds by a clever stratagem (switching letters inside an envelope, all conveyed in carefully photographed [Hitchcockian] close-ups) to inform her fiancé (Roland Varno) where she is; he comes running just in time to save her from the evil intentions of Macready on the beach below the house. Some of the action is pretty silly: every time Foch screams, Whitty and Macready come running into her room like a team; Macready's play with knives – sometimes pulverizing upholstery cushions – seems childish and contrived; Foch discovers a secret door in her room that she puts to good use to access the beach at the end and convince Macready momentarily that she has committed suicide. By no means a masterpiece, but has interesting cinematography, impressive locations, and keeps the viewer often in suspense. (2014)

**My Neighbor Totoro** 1988 Hayao Miyazaki 4.0 Animated masterpiece from Miyazaki, intended for children but appealing also to adults. Beauty is in the images, not the characters or the plot. Animation is clean and detailed; a lot of movement and little details (the shadows, what happens to the girls' shoes); splendid deep blue skies with thunderheads rising high; downpours with raindrops descending in ever growing size on the people looking up; bugs flitting around the lamps; individuals less detailed with rather blank faces, but distinctive dynamic, graceful running motions (especially Satsuki); magnificent multi-hued sunsets; lush thickets of trees and brush; picturesque lanes winding through the woods; drops of water falling off pine needles. A distant suburban wonderland, a kind of natural paradise; nature – animal and plant life – blooms and proliferates all around. Ideology is a bit pantheistic and Shinto – shrines in the countryside that the children respect, the countryside inhabited by

spirits; Mother Nature is bountiful and kind, and we must respect her. Children are charming – adventuresome, enthusiastic, laughing and good humored, pretty fearless (e.g., little five-year old Mei roaming through the countryside and then taking off at the end to take an ear of corn to her mother); two girls are buddies, and older Satsuki assumes parental responsibilities for her little sister in her mother’s absence; girls are rambunctious but respectful of their environment and of their elders. Everybody – friends and neighbors included – is helpful and kind. Little spirits are charming, harmless, cute, cuddly, with pointed ears, and they have natural powers: e.g., the big sprite Totoro has the power to speed up the growth of trees. They can be seen only by children (although game dad believes in them if his girls say so). There is no evil in this world. Characters are happy and superficial, none with even an evil thought. Plot tension comes from sickness of mother (the reason they have moved to the country), and a momentary alarm about her health, but all returns to happy calm. Masterpiece is the cat bus that with its centipede legs glides and floats across the countryside; it has a Cheshire cat grin, a furry comfortable inside, piercing yellow headlights, and an adjustable destination sign above the windshield. Wonderful experience coming mostly from the visual presentation. (2008)

**My Perestroika** 2010 Robin Hessman 3.5 Top-rate documentary that traces the development of the Soviet Union/Russia from the late 1970s to the present under Putin by extensive interviews with five people that grew up under the old system and survived and evolved to the present; the film also includes extensive excerpts from official Soviet films and home movies to make interesting points. Olga, who is described by Lyuba as the prettiest girl in the class, now lives her sister and two children in a shabby Soviet-era apartment; she has some nostalgia for the old days, when there was a certain security in knowing that one’s basic needs were taken care of. Ruslan was always the rebel in the class: he despised the Soviet limits on the availability of outside culture (rock music, etc.); he was a member of a popular punk rock band in the Yeltsin era, but quit out of disgust with the band’s commercialism; now he is a free-lance artist playing a banjo in the metro and hanging out with his good-humored 10-year-old son. Andrei took advantage of the new capitalist opportunities and opened a chain of high-end men’s haberdasheries that support for him and his wife a chic Western-style lifestyle; very skeptical of Putin’s rule, he refuses to vote in the Medvedev election (2008). The film’s central characters are Lyuba and Borya, both of whom teach History in nearby School #57 and who provide most of the insightful discussion of Russia’s development; they married young and live with their independent-acting son Mark in the little (also Soviet-era) apartment where Borya grew up. Coming from a Jewish family (Meyerson), Borya is quite skeptical of the Soviet-Putin establishment, but he has settled for a rewarding lifestyle in devotion to his school and life with his affectionate little family. The film gives an excellent picture of the different stages of the evolution of Russia in this period: the secure, happy days of the children’s lives under the soviets (Pioneers, Komsomol organization, marching out to do public service, etc.); the decline and collapse of the Soviet system under the weight of its economic inefficiencies (hardly any food in the stores) and its cultural deceptions (the huge gap between propaganda and reality in Russia); the resistance to the 1991 coup (announced to Lyuba by the playing of ‘Swan Lake’ on state television!); the rather chaotic Yeltsin years when the rock bands flourished; and the present, which is presented as reasonably prosperous (the well-appointed school, the well-tended streets, the chic shop of Andrei, etc.) and diverse in its opinions – most of the participants express disillusionment and fatalism about the way Putin runs the country. All of the main characters are likable and articulate. The official Soviet propaganda films are fascinating (everything seems so well organized, the young people in them so happy), the home movies are touching and interesting (kids in the country play celebrating the funeral of Brezhnev in 1982!). The film does a great service in humanizing Russia; all Americans should watch it. (2012)

**My Week With Marilyn** 2011 Simon Curtis (Britain) 3.5 Michelle Williams doesn’t really look a lot like Marilyn, but make-up, wardrobe and acting are convincing and endearing; Eddie Redmayne as Colin Clarke, wide-eyed, innocent upper class kid dying to get into the movies (his father is asrt historian Kenneth Clarke!) and then bedazzled by the vulnerability and beauty of Marilyn; Kenneth Branagh as a blustering, witty Laurence Olivier pushed to the wall by Marilyn’s neurotic, dilatory personality; Zoë Wanamaker as Marilyn’s possessive coach, Paula Strasberg; Julia Ormond as cynical Vivien Leigh throwing barbs at her husband Olivier; Judi Dench as experienced dowager actress trying to

humor Marilyn; Emma Watson as wardrobe girl Lucy, who has to compete with Marilyn for Colin's attention. Very enjoyable film chronicling the experience of Marilyn Monroe, Laurence Olivier, and a 3rd assistant director (Redmayne) while making the "Prince and the Showgirl" in England in 1956. The film focuses on Colin's burning desire to be a part of the movies (which he initially achieves by becoming Olivier's gopher) and on his infatuation with Marilyn, which is reinforced by her affection for him and by her near inability to act or to even show up on time without Colin's company. The verbal and emotional fireworks in the film is provided by Olivier, whose straight-laced traditionalism is constantly challenged by Marilyn's kittenish nervousness, her compulsive dilatoriness, and marginal acting skills (quite aside of course from her star power in front of the camera); he delivers his frustrated lines with relish and pizzazz, obviously enjoying the opportunity to portray a famous British thespian. Williams is wonderful – seductive, endearing, vulnerable – as Marilyn: she does a seductive, mincing dance that charms not only the audience but also Olivier, who was at that point at the end of his patience. Her (platonic) affair with Colin is endearing, if a bit sentimental: she calls him to her bed when she feels insecure, and he sleeps next to her fully clothed, they walk hand in hand in the park, much to Marilyn's delight and Colin's discomfiture they go skinny dipping in the Thames River, they hug one another with conviction; and it works – Marilyn is reassured, she lets her professional side shine through and she finishes the film. The film ends with a double wrap-up: Olivier is delighted that the film is completed, and Marilyn decides to return to her husband Arthur Miller and from now on be a loyal and faithful wife; Colin has had his initiation into the world of film and he can move on to adult achievements (which, according to the postscript includes documentary films and the memoir that served as the basis for this film). Enjoyable film even if characterizations may not be completely accurate; spot-on evocations of two famous 50s actors. (2013)

**Mysterious Lady** 1928 Fred Niblo 3.0 Greta Garbo as the virtually the only reason for the film's existence, Conrad Nagel playing second fiddle to his lover. MGM star vehicle for Garbo at the very end of the silent era. Virtually everything is focused on the film image of Garbo. Many loving close-ups often starting in profile and then progressing to frontal shots of her face with her natural tight curly hair providing a natural halo around her face; she often throws her head back and parts her lips slightly so we can see her teeth and her smile. She wears a kind of tight sleeve around her bust (you can usually see one of her nipples) with a flowing gauzy top over it and then fairly tight satiny skirt that shows her buttocks. When we don't see her, we are watching the reactions of men to her, either in her presence or not. Plot is nominally a spy story, in which Garbo falls in love with the Austrian officer she is supposed to extract information from. She betrays him, he is cashiered and thrown in prison for espionage; but then he is freed, sent to Warsaw, where he wins her back from her proud but rather easily fooled Russian general lover, gets the plans back, and then escapes with her over the border to Germany. An opulent production with large numbers of extras attending the Vienna opera or dancing and socializing in high society in Warsaw. Last third of movie is largely a series of suspense bits that has the audience (supposedly) tense waiting to see if the General will discover Garbo's betrayal of him (it must be in her blood: she first betrays Nagel, and then her steady boyfriend). One has Garbo putting a note in Nagel's music (he is posing as a musician) and the General rifling through the pages with us waiting to see if he will discover the note; another has her holding the note crumpled up in her hand as he puts his hand on top of it, etc. (one wonders whether Hitchcock used this conceit in his famous key sequence between Ingrid Bergman and Claude Rains in 'Notorious'). A polished and entertaining star vehicle that is very dated, that drags for lack of live dialogue (so many reaction shots!), but that holds one's attention because of the star attraction. (2009)

**Mystery Road** 2013 Ivan Sen (Australia) 3.0 Aaron Pederson as Jay, a handsome, light-skinned aboriginal detective working in a small town in the Queensland outback (actually the town of Winton); Hugo Weaving, Ryan Kwanten, Jack Thompson, Tony Barry as various characters, mostly local policemen. Detective story about Pederson's dogged investigation of the murder of a teenage girl found in a road culvert in the parched Queensland landscape. The investigation could have been a lot more interesting: completely linear, the film simply follows Pederson from house to house as he tries to unravel the mystery; very little character development; Jay finally uncovers a conspiracy of criminals connected

to prostitution and drug marketing (although one wonders who in the Godforsaken town could afford to buy drugs); the perps are connected to the police department, but because the screenplay does not clearly identify who is involved and who is present at the final shootout in the desert, the suspense is mitigated. The film often seems more interested in Jay's failed relationships with his white wife and his daughter, who it is hinted is falling into prostitution, and in the attempts of the shady policemen – whether white or aboriginal – to warn Jay from pursuing his investigation. While questioning local residents, Jay runs into some interesting and seedy characters, some of whom are racist (including the rancher kid who refers to Jay as “that Abbo policeman”), and most of whom give him very little information. A suggestion that wild dogs might have something to do with the goings-on is never followed up; they are there perhaps just to provide a ‘Picnic at Hanging Rock’ frisson. The interest of the film derives mostly from the quietly charismatic principal and from the arid, forbidding landscape with its ramshackle ranch houses, its “roo” pickup trucks with caged dogs in the back, the poor but capacious town where Jay's car is usually photographed from a high helicopter, the picturesque but abandoned-seeming Dusk til Dawn motel, where the woman at the desk takes a shine to the good-looking Jay. Perhaps most appealing to viewers with an interest in the Australian Outback. (2014)

**Mystic River** 2003 Clint Eastwood 3.5 Sean Penn, Tim Robbins, Kevin Bacon, Laurence Fishburne, Marcia Gay Harden. Very dramatic film. Is a detective story, as Bacon and Fishburne labor to solve the murder of Sean Penn's beloved daughter; good twists with the usual mental involvement exploited by this genre. But film focuses more on the psychological/ metaphysical aspect. Robbins sexually molested as a child; the event leaves scars on the three principals. Robbins is a remnant of a man, suspected of the murder, but turns out is not guilty. Bacon plays the most normal of three, and is more or less happy when his wife returns to him at end. Penn has criminal past; turns out he has already murdered one man for vengeance (but then sent his family \$500 a month); he then conducts vigilante justice and murders Robbins erroneously. Idea = world is mysterious, inexplicable, evil lurks everywhere and rears its ugly head; Eastwood is quite pessimistic. He composed the main theme (repeated many times). Great sense of place = blue collar Catholic Irish Boston; small, crowded houses, almost potholed streets; the intense clan loyalties. (2007)

**Naked** 1993 Mike Leigh 2.0 David Thewlis as possibly educated, philosophically voluble, anti-social, hopeless lower class guy wandering the streets in despair, Lesley Sharp as former girlfriend who gives him a cool welcome when he arrives in London, Katrin Cartlidge as sexy, thin gothic chick strung out on drugs who has sex with Thewlis when he arrives, Greg Cruttwell as thin, sexually abusive guy in a Porsche who spends much of the movie walking around in black thong underwear. Quite unusual Leigh effort that lacks the single family focus and the upbeat look at the English lower classes. Very bleak movie that focuses on the movement of the alienated Thewlis through London, failing to connect with anyone (several women are attracted to him, but none develops a relationship), and talking at great length to anyone he runs across – he is a regular motor mouth on subjects like evolution, the relationship of the past, present, and the future, God's way with men, etc.; he say things like in his life he is walking down the "via dolorosa." He is unhappy and disillusioned, but it doesn't seem to have anything to do with class structure, British snobbishness, etc., but more with the human condition and how we are all abandoned by God without signposts in this world. All of the characters are poor, directionless, most without jobs or with very lowly ones. Décor is claustrophobic inside small apartments and up and down depressing slum streets. No one has fun or barely smiles; Thewlis does not change or make progress, but in the end he leaves the women's apartment and then walks down the street for over a minute toward the receding tracking camera. There is essentially no plot. Thewlis was much honored for his performance, but this viewer stays strictly on the outside. (2006)

**Naked City** 1948 Jules Dassin 3.0 Barry Fitzgerald competent, colorful and endearing as New York City police detective investigating a brutal murder; Howard Duff as a primary suspect, somewhat marginal acting especially when he is angry or threatened; Don Taylor as engaging homicide investigator treated rather like a son by the paternal Fitzgerald. Well-known documentary-like detective

drama set in New York City right after World War II. Film has celebrated voice over narration that introduces us to the city and to all the "stories" in the city, leads us through the complicated investigation with all of its false leads and dogged footwork (e.g., looking at virtually every jewelry store in the city), commenting somewhat poetically on the events and their ironies, and then signing off after the perpetrator has been shot on the Brooklyn Bridge – “There are eight million stories in the city. This has been one of them.” Film was made into TV series at the end of the 50s; it in fact resembles the matter-of-fact 50s TV drama 'Dragnet' (although Joe Friday's voice over is more dead pan. Fitzgerald is excellent as calm, canny and colorful detective lieutenant wielding his little platoon of devoted detective assistants; Taylor enlists our affection as tall, young, handsome family man who gets some of the investigation's breaks. Many of the cast are somewhat less than convincing in their roles; Duff's performance is particularly distracting. Dassin moves events along efficiently. He includes beautiful black and white shots of New York c. 1949 – some of them are starkly realistic (chasing the bad guy along the sidewalks of Chinatown), some of them are moody (the night shots and particularly the one looking from high down over Fitzgerald's shoulder through the window framing a small bunch of girls playing jump rope). The plot is pretty standard police whodunit. The film is part of the realistic, shot-in-the-streets detective dramas of the late 40s. Not much noir here – Fitzgerald is too cheery, there is no femme fatale, the cinematography is almost all sharp and high key. (2010)

**The Naked Civil Servant** 1975 Jack Gold 3.0 John Hurt in award-winning performance as the famous and beloved “effeminate homosexual”, Quentin Crisp. Colorful and entertaining treatment of the first half of the life of the outrageous and flamboyant homosexual from his childhood until the 1960s (he is in his 40s) – his conflict with his father, his short stint as a male homosexual, his mistreatment by prejudiced British males (he gets beaten up quite a bit), his faithful friendships with men and women, his being turned down for the army because he is “afflicted with sexual perversion”, his run-ins with the police but his fair treatment by the British judicial system, his growing fondness for Americans when he experiences their good-humored lack of prejudice during World War II, his rejection by “normal” homosexuals who do not wear outrageous costumes, his posing as a male model (“naked”), etc. Hurt does a great, over-the-top job of imitating Crisp's extreme mannerisms and dress – enormous wide collars, pastel shades, long hair dyed red, broad-brimmed hat perched rakishly on his plentiful hair, sashaying walk, limp wrists, dramatic body movements, etc. Excellent delivery of the pithily witty lines that made him famous – and quite popular in Britain – when he published his autobiography in 1968. Plenty of other characters, but the film is essentially a one-man show. Crisp pushed constantly for public recognition and acceptance of homosexuals, but he is no militant. He is prissily self-indulgent and loves to be in the limelight and to be accepted by famous members of straight society. After the film Crisp moved to New York and until his death at 91 he remained the darling of the press and the gossip columnists. (2010)

**The Naked Kiss** 1964 Samuel Fuller 3.0 Constance Towers looking very Tippi Hedren as young woman who cannot decide whether she is an angel or a whore; Anthony Eiseley as police chief in Granville who can't decide whether he wants to have sex with Towers, run her out of town, or defend her; Michael Dante not very convincing as local rich boy with a heavy secret; Marie Devereux as nurse's assistant who thinks she might want to be a whore; Karen Conrad as another pretty nurse who is contemplating an abortion. Bizarre, shocking, in-your-face, often hysterical melodrama about a prostitute who beats the shit out of her pimp in the first scene (very famous raw scene shot in point-of-view that leaves the guy unconscious but not before Towers has her wig yanked off leaving her head completely bald); and then moves to a small town where she decides to go straight. There she becomes a Nurse (without credentials?) working in a hospital that cares for crippled children (never a doctor seen), is harassed by the police chief who wants to keep his town clean (and yet supports the local whorehouse and hangs out there a lot), meets a rich guy who loves Beethoven and Venetian glass and who agrees to marry her although Towers tells him about her past; and then – gasp – discovers that he is a child molester attracted to the prospect of spending a life with a prostitute; she murders him in a fit of rage (with one whack from a telephone receiver!); and then has her case dismissed when Towers finds the little girl that Dante was molesting (somehow she goes scot-free although she has murdered a man!). The naked kiss is the sign that the guy (the john to the prostitutes) is a pervert. Film is over-the-top, often ridiculous, and amusing, and yet imaginative and



daring. It attacks small-town American mores – a police chief whose morals are ambiguous, a whorehouse on the edge of town, its most respectable citizen is a secret child molester, etc. Sets are often threadbare (shot down the street at the beginning and end of the film with no one in it except Towers walking and the same bus rolling through), but their effects are maximized by imaginative cinematography, rapid, shocking cutting (especially in the beginning bravura sequence), and intense short-duration close-ups. Dialogue varies from the nearly ridiculous (the lingo in the whorehouse) to the succinctly insightful and eloquent (when Towers convinces Buff not to become a prostitute and Towers tells Eiseley in the school that she has already told Dante about her past profession). The main characters are unpredictable and contradictory: Eiseley starts off as exploitative and hostile toward Towers, but in the course of the murder investigation (conducted by him alone with no lawyers, defense counsel, etc.) inexplicably he becomes her advocate and is delighted when she walks out of jail free through an immobile crowd. Towers' character is even more divided: on the one hand she is violent and cold-blooded, and yet under the influence of her kindly landlady (Betty Bronson) she turns into an angel who, since she is "born to take care of children in crutches", she is hired with no references or degree, and whose virtues are celebrated by a pretty but impossibly maudlin song celebrating the beauty of the children (Towers gets the opportunity to use her lovely voice). Interesting and mavericky but always on the edge of absurdity. (2008)

**Nannerl, la soeur de Mozart** 2010 René Féret 3.0 Marie Féret, René's daughter, as Nannerl, a plainly pretty 14-year-old overshadowed by her younger brother; Marc Barbé as Leopold, Nannerl's and Wolfgang's affectionate but proud and ambitious father; Delphine Chuillot looking way too young and svelte as the mother of the children; Lisa Féret, apparently another Féret daughter that plays the charming young daughter of the French king; Clovis Fouin as the melancholy and somewhat unhinged French Dauphin (later to die before his father), who has a kind of love affair with Nannerl; 10-year-old David Moreau bowing the violin like a virtuoso as Wolfgang. Slow-moving meditation on the fate of Nannerl, a gifted young woman relegated by her gender and circumstance to not pursue a music career. The film follows the Mozart family (united, affectionate, and gay) through a few months of their musical tour in France around 1767. Nannerl becomes acquainted to the royal family, first of all by making the acquaintance of Lisa Féret and then of her brother, the dauphin, who recognizes Nannerl's musical talent and apparently falls in love with her, although it is not clear whether they ever have sex; Nannerl also briefly takes up sole residence in Paris and attempts to make a living as a music teacher. Nannerl's tentative steps toward a career as musician and composer are broken partly by the prejudices of her father, who focuses relentlessly on the career of his son and insists among other things that women should not play the violin; her chances at success at the French court are dashed by her unexpected rejection by the Dauphin. The film ends with Nannerl returning to her family, burning her composition manuscripts, and listening quietly to her father as he lays plans for Wolfgang to write an opera buffo. The film moves slowly through scenes inside carriages, dim candle-lit interiors of various chateaus, always with only a few actors present in the scenes even when shooting inside the actual Chateau of Versailles; the period costumes and wigs seem painstakingly accurate even if lacking the magnificent impact of old Hollywood blockbusters such as MGM's "Marie Antoinette". The music played on the harpsichord, clavier, violin, and in small orchestras, is beautiful and moving; particularly memorable are the first performance of a brilliant violin piece that comes as a surprise after the low-key first ten minutes of the film and the distinctive harpsichord piece composed by Nannerl for the Dauphin. In its focus on the frustration of Nannerl's gifts, the film is a quietly feminist one that eschews stereotyping and soap-box denunciation. (2012)

**The Narrow Margin** 1952 Richard Fleischer 4.0 Charles McGraw as tough-talking, conscientious and honorable cop sent to Chicago to bring back a mobster's widow to testify in a grand jury proceeding, Marie Windsor as equally tough-talking, in-your-face woman with a sour opinion on everything, Jacqueline White as Eva Marie Saint look-alike (and the film seems to be a root for the Eva Marie Saint/Cary Grant sequence on the Twentieth Century Limited in 'North by Northwest' and for the train scenes in 'From Russia with Love') who gradually seduces McGraw in the course of the movie-long train trip on the Super Chief, Dan Beddoe as McGraw's partner, a rather noble cop who is killed in the beginning of the film. Excellent B-movie, semi-film noir that made the reputation of Fleischer. Down-the-line thriller expertly done: script is taut with lots of piquant dialogue, especially between McGraw and Windsor – the former calls Windsor "a 60-cent special, poison under the gravy"; direction and editing is efficient with no slack moments, but compelling momentum giving the audience little time to think about some script improbabilities; amusing side characters that keep us involved, e.g.,

the obstreperous, very loud son of White who at first is accusing McGraw of being a thief – "Mommy, he has a gun!" -- but then is on his side after McGraw tells him a secret that the audience never learns, the very fat mystery man on the train that we first wonder is just another passenger, then perhaps a gangster, and then we learn that he is a railroad policeman. The set is terrific – sharp, detailed and accurate photography of the interior of the train, creating a limited field of action for the drama; the train set, which occupies all but the very beginning and the end of the 72 minute film, is realistic and convincing, unlike, for example, the sets in Hitchcock's 'The Lady Vanishes'. Film begins with a lot of ambiguity: the hoods don't know what the widow looks like, and McGraw doesn't know who the hoods are, how many are on the train, etc. (two leave Chicago with the sergeant, and another one joins the party in Albuquerque). The biggest surprise is when we discover that the widow is not Windsor, who has been whiling her time in the supposedly empty compartment next to McGraw's and who is shot and killed by the bad guys when they break into her room, but the seemingly clueless White; the police authorities back in LA have put a dummy police woman in place of the widow without telling the cops! A lot of fun watching Windsor and McGraw trade ill-tempered insults, and White put the moves on McGraw. Cinematography is outstanding: quick editing when appropriate, long shots with some deep focus when it is needed; one cut from Windsor filing her nails to the drive road of the streamlined stream locomotive driving the wheels; a scene in which action in the contiguous compartment is reflected from windows on another train sitting on the next track, etc. The film has some noir elements, but Windsor is not really a femme fatale but a victim, McGraw is upbeat and honorable, and the film ends happily with the promised union of McGraw and White.... The viewer sometimes wonders why the lone cop doesn't ask for help from anyone on the train; the script rather heartlessly dismisses the two dead cops (Beddoe and Windsor) without a mention at the end; and the ending is a little flat with romantically linked White and McGraw deciding to walk to LA City Hall rather than ride in a special car. Nevertheless, a prime example of American action/suspense movies at their best. (2007)

**Nazi Medicine** 1997 John Michalczyk 2.5 Reasonably thoughtful documentary about the nature and activities of Nazi doctors. Rehashes a lot of the same material one sees in books (e.g., even Shirer) about Mengele participating in selection, performing inhumane experiments on prisoners, especially unfortunate children. Interesting points include the debt that Nazi racist eugenics owed to American examples in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, where compulsory sterilization was performed in the thousands in states such as Virginia and California. Nazi leaders were inspired by this example, although they of course went much further in their pursuit of racial purification. The author asserts that as many as 50% of the physicians in Germany were members of the Nazi Party, and that many of these were actively involved in compulsory sterilization, euthanasia, elimination of the Jews, and involuntary experiments performed in concentration camps (many of them hare-brained, e.g., injecting dye into brown eyes to try to turn them to blue); many of them were members of the SS. The motivation was the salvation of the German race; the purity and dynamism of the clearly superior German race was threatened by mental defectives, Jews, gypsies, etc., and it was a patriotic duty to eliminate these genetic threats for the sake of the future of the nation. The film ends with the doctors' trial conducted by German authorities in 1947, which condemned perhaps 20 doctors to penalties ranging from imprisonment to death; the trials helped establish the principle of one's responsibility for crimes against humanity and reaffirmed the ethical responsibilities of the medical profession – the preservation of human life. Again the impression that Germany was a nation run amok in der Nazizeit. Can a nation that gives in so completely to such inhuman beliefs and practices be trusted? (2012)

**Ne le dis a personne** 2006 Guillaume Canet ( based on a detective novel by American writer Harlan Coben) 3.5 François Cluzet as nervous, driven French pediatrician haunted by the possibility that his wife – supposedly murdered eight years ago – is still alive; Marie-Josée Croze in rather small role as his pretty, devoted wife; André Dussollier as Croze's father and the key to solving the mystery; Philippe Lefebvre as a sympathetic police inspector; Kristin Scott Thomas as a close lesbian friends of Cluzet; Nathalie Baye in small role as hard-nosed lawyer; Jean Rochefort as bigshot senator and fan of steeplechase competitions. Excellent fast-moving thriller that begins with the murder of Croze, and then plays out eight years later when Cluzet begins to receive video emails from her; the film takes us through many fast-moving, often confusing situations until a final happy and romantically satisfying conclusion where the couple is reunited in tender fashion. Their relationship is treated in romantic, sentimental

fashion with flashbacks to when they were twelve years old and holding hands next to the Lake (Charmaine) that appears several times in the film. The film takes place in a picturesque and busy sunny Paris and its environs. Characters are carefully delineated and developed: they include a gangster father of one of Cluzet's patients – he kills a couple of people who were apparently trying to kidnap Cluzet near the Parc Monceau, but we never straighten out who the kidnappers were (were they the police?) and why the gangster friend is willing to kill; also Cluzet's sister is the lesbian lover of Thomas, and we are dealt a red herring about perhaps the original murder was about them. The viewer follows Cluzet as he races around town, sometimes pursued by suspicious people, sometimes by the police, and with the help of Dussollier and Lefebvre obsessed with finding out if his wife is still alive and gradually uncovering the mystery. It turns out that Rochefort was responsible for the murders which were committed in revenge for Dussollier's murder of his no-good son, who was beating up Croze; the film ends with Rochefort being arrested and the tender reunion of husband and wife. Almost certainly there are serious plot inconsistencies in the film, but it is better that the viewer not worry about them and just allow himself to enjoy the ride. Sometimes one has the impression that the film should have been shot in the USA. (2010)

**Near Dark** 1987 Kathryn Bigelow 3.0 Adrian Pasdar, a somewhat marginal actor, as nice-kid 20-year-old in Oklahoma that finds himself turning into a vampire when he is bitten by a cute girl he picks up outside the convenience store; Jenny Wright, gentle and waif-like as that girl who is a rather reluctant member of a prairie vampire family; Lance Henrikson as the senior vampire in the family; Bill Paxton as the most vicious member of the family -- with his intense eyes and rictus smile he seems be to channeling Jack Nicholson; Tim Thomerson as Pasdar's dad determined to find and recover his son. An original take on the vampire genre that features a Hollywood ending and a strong, expressive mise-en-scene. Pasdar finds himself turning into a vampire after he makes out with Wright, who however runs from him when she sense dawn is coming; Pasdar is kidnapped by the family, but he frustrates them since he is unwilling to kill to get his life-giving blood; after several violent scenes, he is taken by his father who then returns him to human status by a blood transfusion (how come he has blood and transfusion apparatus in his truck?); Pasdar performs the same service for nice-vampire Wright, and after the rest of the band self-destructs in smoke and fire on a daylit road, the two walk off hand in hand to live happily ever after, surely among the few vampires who return to their original selves. The film has some excellent action sequences: perhaps the best in a country dive bar where the "family" survives gunshot wounds and murders and sucks dry several patrons and the bar owner; a shootout outside a motel where the befuddled deputy sheriff cannot understand why the vampires fall and get up again when they are shot (when shot in the stomach, Henrikson even coughs up a bloody bullet and hands it to his would-be killer); and the finale in which the whole family except for our loving couple is consumed by smoke and fire until their van detonates in a spectacular explosion. The film excels in mise-en-scene, evoking the dark night prairie with the flat horizon, the seedy bars and abandoned warehouses, the oil wells pumping away in the background as the vampires feed on their victims. Limited amounts of blood and gore -- most of the time a little blood around the mouth or on the arm. Perhaps vampire films with Hollywood-style happy endings don't work that well, since the return of the sweet couple to normal humanity drains the horrifying drama and tragedy out of the genre. Not much Angst. (2011)

**Nebraska** 2013 Alexander Payne 3.5 Bruce Dern in the role of his life as elderly, crotchety, stubborn (and probably dying) geezer looking for his pot of gold; Will Forte as his soft-spoken, low-achieving, fundamentally empathetic son; Bob Odenkirk not taking advantage of his comic gifts as Forte's older brother; June Squibb hilarious and irrepressible as the boys' outspoken, foul-mouthed mother – she says she has had enough of Dern; Tim Driscoll and Devin Ratray as bovine, delinquent, slow-brained cousins of Forte; Stacy Keach looking bloated and old as evil, grasping old friend of Dern that is trying to extort money from him; Rance Howard as addle-brained brother of Dern – his alertness improves as the film progresses. Ambiguous, multi-faceted semi-masterpiece by Alexander Payne that follows the experiences of Dern and Forte as they drive the 900 miles from Billings, Montana to Lincoln, Nebraska on a mission to claim a supposed \$1,000,000 prize that Dern is convinced he has won in a Publisher's Clearinghouse-type of scam; they spend much of the film in Dern's fictional home town of Hawthorne, Nebraska interacting with numerous family members and old friends – or at least

acquaintances. The narrative focus of the film is the relationship between Dern and his son: estranged in the beginning by the former's alcoholism and paternal inattentiveness, Forte spends much of their time together trying to convince his dad that they are on a wild goose chase; Forte has to take care of his father, take him twice to the hospital, help him find his lost front teeth next to some railroad tracks, protect him from the more predatory of his friends and relatives. Even as Dern stubbornly refuses to acknowledge (at least consciously) that there is no prize, Forte takes him to Lincoln to learn the bitter truth, buy him a new truck, and then allow his father to drive it (dangerous since his license has been revoked) through Hawthorne to have his moment of proud glory – a lump-in-the-throat moment. The film ends ambiguously with a rear shot of the truck stopping in the road while the two men emerge from their respective doors – Forte will not allow Dern to drive farther. The two experience a limited, qualified reconciliation. The film is very humorous: scenes of the Hawthorne folks sitting in couches and upright chairs watching television (which we never see but only hear) exchanging only the briefest and most inane of comments (perhaps the best is the discussion about one of the brother's Chevrolet Impala, which however might have been a Buick); Dern and Forte looking for the former's teeth and the two teasing one another when they find them; Squibb talking trash about her friends and relatives buried in the local cemetery – she even lifts up her skirt in front of the tomb of one of her old boyfriends and tells him he should look at what he could have had if he had just stopped talking about wheat; the incident in which the boys steal what they think is Keach's old compressor from his barn, but it turns out to belong to a friendly family – the mom made a mistake in identifying the house. The film also paints an ambiguous picture of Nebraska, Payne's home state. On the one hand, he includes many "pillow shots" Ozu-style of beautiful prairie landscapes, some of the hometown folks are happy for Dern and openly congratulate him for his good fortune, and despite Dern's grumpiness and Squibb's snarkiness about her former townsfolk, the four-person family is loyal to one another. On the other hand, jealousy and opportunism lurk everywhere in the Cornhusker state: the towns themselves are plain and desolate if mostly neat; everybody seems to be old and they have nothing to say to one another; and many of the family members and friends are concerned mostly with getting a cut of Dern's supposed windfall – Keach, who actually threatens father and son's physical safety, is the meanest and scariest of the lot. Despite everything, though, the film gives one hope at the end – even if he dies soon, Dern will have had his moment of glory. The black-and-white aesthetics of the film recall Bogdanovitch's 'The Last Picture Show'; the road film across prairie states toward self-discover recalls 'About Schmidt'. Challenging, interesting, and multi-faceted film. (2014)

**Network** 1976 Sidney Lumet; wr. Paddy Chayevsky 3.5 Peter Finch (AA) as mentally ill latter-day prophet, Howard Beale, who launches a critique of modern American culture on the evening news; William Holden (AA) as decent head of the news bureau, a hold-over from the Morrow generation; Robert Duvall as hard-nosed, combative executive, whose only concern is the bottom line; Faye Dunaway (AA) as chief programmer in the Entertainment Division, who would feature Hitler's follies if it gets good ratings; Ned Beatty as evangelical, apocalyptic corporate CEO preaching a multi-national culture dominated by huge businesses; Cindy Grover good performance as Holden's jilted wife. Apocalyptically dramatic and often farcical critique of network television and what it represents in the world. The film focuses on Finch, who goes off his rocker, receives revelations from the Lord, coining the famous phrase, "I am mad as hell, and I am not going to take it anymore!" With a huge popular TV following shouting his motto out their windows, the suits cannot at first fire him; he then becomes a ratings sensation, and Dunaway fashions a nightly news show that includes a soothsayer and Mata Hari, as well as Howard the Prophet; the few old-fashioned newsmen left are horrified (and fired). A second narrative line tracks the corporate maneuverings behind the scenes – executives competing for power (Duvall in, Wesley Addy out), international corporations buying the TV network, the Saudis then taking over the multi-national. When Howard with the support of Beatty turns against the business shenanigans, the executives decide to have him murdered on the air – it will get fabulous ratings, says Dunaway! The film ends with four TV monitors playing – one of Beale's bloody body lying on the stage, and three others playing commercials. The film is compulsively dramatic – always something confrontational and exciting happening with the principals screaming and banging their fists on the table, giving long speeches expressing their point of view (notable ones from Finch, Dunaway, Holden, and Ned Beatty) in very colorful language: a mixture

of obscenities and seldom heard words, like “peccant” and “adamantine”. The mood is often amusing, even farcical: the Communist party leader hired by Dunaway to develop the “Mao tse-Tung Hour” turns into a bitch holding her own with Dunaway shrieking about her ratings and her position in the network line-up. The film has also an improbable romantic subplot, in which Holden and Dunaway move into together, leaving Holden’s wife in tatters; Since Dunaway is married to her job, the two don’t last very long, and Holden returns to his wife reaffirming his decency and honesty (he is “human” not ‘humanoid’) in a long denunciatory speech to his lover. The film is a penetrating analysis of TV culture, the obsession with ratings and profits, the vulgarity, the loss of independence to conglomerate buy-outs – much of which is prophetic of the situation in 2015. It portrays in exaggerated fashion the pessimism and demoralization of American public opinion in the years following Vietnam and Watergate. The film – sometimes over the top – makes one’s head reel with its multiple themes, verbal violence, lurid drama, and farcical comedy. Very entertaining. (2015)

**The New World** 2005 Terrence Malick 3.5 Colin Farrell as Captain John Smith, driven by thirst for adventure and discovery more than romantic love; Q’orianka Kilcher as radiant romance-bitten child of nature with charming flat upper lip; Christian Bale as the gentle farmer John Rolfe who marries her after Smith’s departure; Christopher Plummer as crusty commander of the new Jamestown settlement. Beautiful, elegiac, slow-moving, picturesque, and romantic film about love, contrasting cultures, and exquisitely beautiful nature in 1607 with the founding of Jamestown. The author modifies the historical events by making the connection between Smith and Pocahontas intensely romantic, and after Smith’s betrayal of her (rather than stay with her he sets off in search of the Northwest Passage), Pocahontas finds the gentle savior in Rolfe; when she dies of disease shortly after her visit to England, she is redeemed by love and family (she has a son). Basically frustrated/betrayed love redeemed by a good man. Pace of film is extremely slow with much attention to exquisite mise-en-scene of unspoiled, virgin Virginia nature: the flatland rivers bordered by grasses and trees, ravishingly beautiful skies, tall, cathedral-like trees, geese and other birds flying past, etc. Sensitive use of music throughout – e.g., water music from ‘Rheingold’ as camera observes water in the beginning of the film, lyrical slow movement from Mozart’s A Major Piano Concerto when the lovers are together. Humans who inhabit nature are not nearly so beautiful: the Indians are dirty, painted over all their bodies and faces, and they are superstitious in religion and cruel in warfare; the exception is of course Pocahontas, favorite daughter of King Powhatan – she is clean-skinned, lightly tattooed, dressed in modest buckskin leggings with an open, innocent face. The English settlers, on the contrary, are presented as Neanderthalish ruffians – dirty, dressed in rags, unkempt hair, half-rotten teeth, usually demoralized through hunger or crazed by fear of slaughter at the hands of the Indians. Film appears to feature the power of love spanning very different cultures: Pocahontas’ heart is captivated by Smith the moment she sees him; she has minimal trouble making the transition to English society; she pines and withers on the vine when Smith abandons her; she enjoys herself immensely when presented at King James’ court; she gradually warms to the good man (Rolfe) who loves her selflessly and ultimately redeems her with fidelity and a child. (2007)

**New York, New York** 1977 Martin Scorsese 3.0 Robert DeNiro, Liza Minnelli, Mary Kay Place, Lionel Stander. Scorsese’s homage to the MGM musical and to postwar popular culture. Seems to owe a lot to ‘A Star is Born.’ Strong acting from DeNiro, who, handsome with slick-backed hair, is unbelievably self-centered, ill-tempered, manic, aggressive, violent, unpredictable, maddeningly persistent, loony, like a bomb ready to explode; and from Minnelli, who tries a bit hard to imitate her mother, has a very brassy voice, and is not very attractive; she is rather ambitious herself, but is basically sensible and mild-mannered and one wonders how she puts up with Jimmy’s antics. Opens with lengthy set-piece in which Jimmy tries to pick up Minnelli in ballroom (Tommy Dorsey playing) at end of World War II; much of beginning of movie moves slowly; we get tired of repetitive illustration of Jimmy’s weirdness. Most of film taken up with violently antagonistic relationships between two principals; gulf between them deepened by Minnelli’s soaring success, while Jimmy can’t seem to take off; it wears a bit on the viewer. A lot of music, focusing on jazzy edge of big band sound (Jimmy is a gifted tenor saxophonist, who at times leads a band) and on big voice songs adapted to Minnelli – showstopper is her singing of “NYNY” toward the end, when Jimmy reappears in her audience; also includes ‘Blue Moon,’

‘Honeysuckle Rose,’ ‘Takin’ a chance on Love,’ ‘You are my Lucky Star.’ Big production number, the unremarkable ‘Happy Endings,’ reinserted in this copy; film probably better off without it. Filmed as musical fantasy – almost all sets have the Technicolor artificial feel, the wet, shiny streets of the Big Apple, sometimes carried to extremes as in the exterior snow scenes, when DeNiro has discussion with Minnelli in the South. Story, which moves slowly and too carefully in the beginning, gets very sketchy in middle and toward end because of need to cut the original 4.5 hour length of the feature. The ending when the two meet again after several years of success (big for her, modest for him) is tentative and ambiguous; one has impression they are together again, but are they? And if so, what has changed to make it work better? (2005)

**The Nice Guys** 2016 Shane Black 2.5 Humorous private eye caper-buddy movie taking place in a smoggy 1970s Los Angeles. Russell Crowe as private investigator who specializes in beating up people; Ryan Gosling as the kind of P.I. that runs into doors; Angourie Rice as his cute, about 13-year-old smart daughter who helps him with his investigations; Margaret Qualley as the object of the guys’ quest – she has a striking yellow dress; Kim Basinger in cameo-style role as (apparently) the chief bad guy. The movie gets four stars for its impersonation of 1970s Los Angeles: a blanket of smog occluding the horizon, smog alerts, big, clunky cars bouncing wildly when they go around corners, long hair, mustaches, blue leather coats, bell bottom trousers, garish colored Hollywood haunts, disco music strains. The first scene is memorable: a car crashes all the way through a suburban house and comes to rest upside down in the back yard; a beautiful nude woman is found lying on the ground (turns out she is a porn star; never any explanation why she is sans clothing); the local 12-year-old boy covers her breasts sensitively with his bathrobe. The rest of the film has little to recommend it. The narrative is hidden somewhere under the 70s environment and the playful buddy banter between the two stars; it has something to do with rapacious Detroit automobile companies (some funny bits with 70s car commercials), the porn industry, and the machinations of a Justice Department official whose aims are unclear. There are amusing early scenes revealing Crowe’s penchant for beating people up and Gosling’s clueless professional failures, and the two do develop an amusing repartee-laden buddy relationship through most of the film. Smart-Alecky, intelligent Angourie Rice is perhaps the brightest comic light in the film. The last 20 minutes are overwhelmed by endless shootouts, the two principals somehow escaping extinction from the swarm of bullets. There are several potential satirical targets in the film – LA, the 70s, big business intrigues – but the screenwriters don’t exploit them. The film might have been more enjoyable if the runtime had been cut by 30 minutes to an hour and a half. (June 2017)

**Nightcrawler** 2014 Dan Gilroy 4.0 Jake Gyllenhaal as Lou in memorable performance as ambitious, intense, glib, completely amoral drifter that sets out to make his living filming gory scenes for Los Angeles television news; Renée Russo as older news director at an LA TV station – she is insecure about her job; Riz Ahmed as Rick, timid unemployed kid that becomes Jake’s assistant out of desperation; Bill Paxton as low-life TV crime reporter that gives Gyllenhaal the idea, but then dies miserably in an auto accident. Blood-soaked look at the free-lance crime profession and at the appetite of the LA public for violence and gore, all through the eyes of one of the most original and disturbing characters in recent movies. The backdrop is the crime-ridden streets of Los Angeles, almost always filmed at night, the fearful fascination of middle-class Angelenos for the violence that seems to be creeping into their neighborhoods, and the success of the unscrupulous Gyllenhaal in taking advantage of the opportunity. Gyllenhaal starts as a lonely, small-time crook with a tendency for obnoxious aggressiveness and a gift for glib speech: he talks like a salesman and is an expert at American business speak (reminiscent of David Mamet) – he is “CEO”, gives performance reviews to Ahmed, dangles promised salary increases, indulges in poker-faced hard bargaining. He cruises the streets of LA in a red muscle car, monitoring the police channels, and doing all he can to get to crime scenes before other TV reporters, and even before the police. His hard-bitten corruption soon becomes completely unmoral and in the final sequences criminal. The depths of his amorality is brilliantly illustrated by the long final sequence: he arrives before the police at what seems to be a home invasion robbery in a posh suburb; ignoring the perpetrators, he cruises through the house filming the bloody victims in gory detail; using license plate data, he tracks down the perpetrators at their home, follows them to a cheap Chinese

restaurant, and then with cameras ready calls the police; things then goes a little “wrong” – one police officer is seriously wounded by the bad guys (captured of course on video), and when Lou chases down the guy trying to escape, he sets up his assistant to be shot so that he can then film him dying; when Rick reproaches him for setting him up, Lou replies, “I can’t jeopardize my company’s success to retain an untrustworthy employee.” Russo, although flabbergasted by Lou’s ruthlessness, is delighted to get the footage; when a colleague objects that scenes of a man dying, etc. “are beyond all broadcast standards”, Russo replies, “I think Lou is inspiring all of us to reach a little higher.” The investigating detective knows that Lou is a slime ball and responsible for the death of Rick and the wounding of a police officer, but Lou is an accomplished liar, he has a credible narrative, and the film ends with him still on the loose. The film is tense, compelling, and suspenseful throughout; the viewer looks on with horrified fascination at the hyperactive intelligence and steady moral decline of the Gyllenhaal character – arrogant, depraved, hypocritical, and ruthless, a kind of idiot savant of ambition. (2015)

**Night After Night** 1932 Paramount 2.5 George Raft as the top billing; Constance Cummings as lonely girl, pretty awkward with faux Weltschmerz but nice early 30s breasts –she is looking for excitement on the other side of the tracks; and Mae West as loud, cheeky, wise-cracking Maude in subordinate role in one of her first films – she comes in over halfway. Allison Skipworth entertaining as Raft’s somewhat balmy etiquette and diction coach. Raft – small, quick-moving with slicked back hair, smooth face, straight teeth – has gangster background and owns a speakeasy; but he wants to move up in life, takes diction lessons and courts a society girl; seems like a sweet guy despite his gangster talk. West – “Goodness! What beautiful diamonds!” “Goodness had nothing to do with it, Dearie!” A lot of loose women hanging out and drinking too much in the Speakeasy in the pre-Code movie. “Oh Maudie, do you really think I could get rid of my inhibitions?” “Ah, sure. I have an old truck you could put them in.” Amusing scene between West and Skipworth – the latter assuming that West is a prostitute, until West puts her straight. Encouraging Raft, West – “Snap out of it, you dog.” The plot focuses on the developing romance between Raft and Cummings; when the two are alone, things get slow with wooden dialogue; and she decides to marry stuffy old Louis Cahern whom she doesn’t really love; whereupon he tells her off, saying he has “contempt” for her. She comes to his office, trashes the décor, he rape kisses her because he knows that she really loves him; she gives in, “I love you,” whereupon he refuses to go downstairs to shoot it out with a rival gang! Run of the mill A-ish production. (2007)

**Night and the City** 1950 Jules Dassin 3.5 Richard Widmark jittery, nervous, frantically active as Harry, a conman in London; Gene Tierney shoehorned into the film as nice girl who can’t get unstuck from Widmark; High Marlowe as another shoehorned Hollywood semi-star who plays Tierney’s nice guy boyfriend; Francis L. Sullivan as fat, strong acting owner of London night club; Googie Withers as his wife yearning to get away from him; Herbert Lom looking young as shady wrestling promoter; Stanislaus Zbyszko in moving performance as has-been wrestler and father of Lom. Outstanding noir film about a hyperactive, incompetent American-speaking London con man itching to get rich and lead the easy life without having to work honestly with the people around him. He races around the darker parts of London working out get-rich schemes, primarily starting a wrestling promoting business in competition with one of the most powerful gangsters in the city (Lom); he pretends that he is interested in Sullivan’s wife, gets her a fake business license so that she can leave her husband, whom she despises. The first tragedy arising out of Widmark’s machination is the suicide death of Sullivan, who shoots himself after his wife leaves him – he mistakenly believes that his wife is also having an affair with Widmark; when Sullivan’s wife returns to him after discovering that she does not have a valid permit, she finds him dead in his office. Widmark suffers a cruel blow of fate when one of the wrestlers he is promoting – Zbyszko – dies in a vicious fight with another wrestler, the Strangler; Zbyszko’s son, Lom, then puts out a contract on Widmark, and he is chased down at the end of the film. The ending of the film is strong: Widmark is chased off the screen, Marlowe rescues Tierney, and it is unclear whether Widmark is successful in his quest to secure Tierney some of the hit money that Lom will pay out. Cinematography is outstanding: contrasting light-and-dark night shots of London on location, imaginative angles of a terrified Widmark running down stairs or across a construction site, shadowed close-ups of Sullivan, Withers and Widmark in the dark, sleazy interiors, imaginative combining of characters in

single shot, etc. The performances are all moving and often wrenching. The proffered anti-capitalist bias of the film is not apparent; it is really about the efforts of an incompetent crook to do well in the criminal underground. Neither Tierney nor Marlowe belongs in the film: too nice and upstanding; Tierney of 'Laura' looks dowdy and out-of-place. Film misses full noir status only because of the lack of a femme fatale. (2011)

**A Night at the Opera** 1935 Sam Wood 3.5 Marx Brothers, Sig Ruman as the besieged opera impresario, Kitty Carlisle as the pretty opera singer looking for a chance, Allan Jones as the clean-cut singer who is Kitty's boyfriend. MGM version of a Marx Bros. movie that mixes destructive, anti-Establishment Marx humor with syrupy romantic plot about Carlisle and Jones, music (both the opera, which isn't too bad, and the boring piano and harp of Chico and Harpo), and a more or less consistent plot. Thalberg insisted on this genre; but compare to the Paramount films such as *Horse Feathers* and *Duck Soup*, where the comedy completely dominates, and which are much funnier and more subversive. Consistently funny and mildly subversive (it makes fun of the upper classes and their characteristic pastimes, e.g., wearing evening clothes, traveling in luxury ocean liners, going to operas), although Groucho's wisecracks are pretty dated and corny. Great scenes are the contract, where negotiation leads to tearing most of the document up; the stateroom in which Groucho stuffs a large number of people with Harpo creating additional anarchy by pawing the young women; and of course the opera scene at the end, which is extremely funny for people who don't like opera, since the boys completely disrupt/destroy the performance – swashbuckling Harpo with his violin bow conducts a 'swordfight' with the conductor's baton, Groucho and Harpo play baseball in the orchestra pit while the orchestra plays 'Take Me Out to the Ballgame', the extinguishing of the electricity, the raising and lowering of inappropriate backdrop scenes while Harpo swings through the theatrical proscenium on Tarzan-like ropes, the anarchical shenanigans of the brothers as they disguise themselves as peasants in a scene from "Il Trovatore". There is no finer example of Marx Brothers anarchy. (2009)

**Night Moves** 1975 Arthur Penn 3.5 Gene Hackman natural and convincing as private eye plagued by personal failures and aggressive tendencies; Jennifer Warren as hippie, undercover trickster he meets in the Florida Keys – he falls for her; Susan Clark as Hackman's two-timing wife; Edward Binns as Hackman's apparent good buddy; James Woods as jittery mechanic who turns out to be involved in the scheme; Melanie Griffith charming in some nude moments as nymphomaniac 16-year-old trying to get away from her mother and getting into trouble. Early 70s film product that stands *film noir* on its head and deals us a negative, cynical, and critical view of American society and of human nature. Film begins like a Chandler novel: Hackman is a two-bit LA private eye hired by a boozy ex-actress to find her runaway daughter (it turns out she wants her back only to keep the inheritance money from her first husband); meanwhile, his own personal problems take center stage when he discovers that his wife is having a (meaningless) affair with some guy; he finds the girl (Griffith) and brings her back to her mother, but things go from bad to worse with practically the whole cast dead at the end. There are plenty of surprises in the film (Griffith is having sex in Florida with her stepfather; she dies in a stunt car accident, etc.); and when Hackman returns to Florida, he finds that there is some skullduggery about selling archeological artifacts from the Yucatan; the crisis leads to four quick deaths thus clearing the stage for Hackman circling in a seedy motorboat in a final shot that leaves no doubt as to the hopelessness of his situation. Despite a reluctance to part, his relationship with his wife has no future; his detective skills are marginal; the girl that he "saved" is dead; and he has witnessed the death of the woman (Warren) that he was in love with but only after discovering that their *nuit d'amour* was designed to distract him from her group's criminal activity. Quite a bit of symbolism, e.g., Hackman's fascination with a chess game that caused the despair of one player who lost by negligence. Generally well directed with realistic seedy locations, ancient cars that spew clouds of blue smoke, rusted motorboats, etc. Some imaginative mise-en-scène, e.g., shooting twice through the bottom of the seedy motorboat, the first time to watch Griffith's nude swimming, the second time to watch Binns' drowning. Fits right in with the likes of "Bonnie and Clyde", "The Parallax View", which in the late 60s and early 70s contradict the inherent optimism of American movies. Film suffers some from an inextricable plot; like "The Big Sleep", it's hard to keep straight who kills who and why. (2010)



**Night of the Demon** 1957 Jacques Tourneur 3.5 Dana Andrews as skeptical psychologist ("If the world is a dark place ruled by Devils and Demons, we all might as well give up right now.") who comes to London to debunk the powers of a necromancer to conjure up demons, Peggy Cummins as niece of another researcher who is killed at the beginning of the film, Niall MacGinnis as Karswell, who lives in high style on elaborate English country estate at the expense of other members of the coven, but who in conjuring up the murderous demon has bit off more than he can chew, Athene Seyler as the well-intentioned mother who is however devoted to her beloved son. Low-key, atmospheric horror movie (reminiscent of the 40s horror movies of Val Lewton) about the irruption of murderous supernatural forces into the modern world. Karswell is the leader of a coven; he seems interested in power and making money and living high off the hog at the expense of his followers; and he is threatened by press attention and the skepticism of visitors such as Dana Andrews. The best way he has to defeat Andrews' debunking is to call up the monster: he informs Andrews at the beginning that he has exactly three days to live and that he will die at 10:00 PM on the third day. Andrews then goes through two stages: 1) continues his debunking thus provoking the viewer to urge him to pay attention (we have already seen the monster and his filthy work in the very beginning of the film); 2) he finally takes it seriously and then works feverishly on a way to avoid being slaughtered by the Demon. Satisfying conclusion that takes place in a railroad station between London and Southampton: Andrews manages to slip the marking slip of runic characters back into Karswell's coat, and the latter is then hunted down by the Demon in a bit of poetic justice. The Demon arrives (twice) in several stages: a noise, followed by sparks (fireworks?) in the sky, then a roiling cloud that approaches at high speed, and finally a realistic (puppet), literal, in-your-face monster with snaggly teeth and articulated tongue that smokes from all sides and that tears the marked victim to pieces (a bit less of the rather ridiculous demon, especially in his first appearance, would probably have been more effective). Some poor visuals (the Lockheed Constellation bumping through the sky!) and some poorly presented scenes (Andrews visiting the followers of Karswell). *Mise-en-scène* is compelling: the creepy drives in autos through the floodlit woods; the Escher-like shots of the central foyer of Karswell's home and especially the staircase and even more especially when the mother's hand mysteriously appears on it; and the "Lewton bus" at the end, when after visiting the smoking body of Karswell, in the midst of quiet the train darts through the screen with the whistle screeching, and then followed by the end credits (i.e., the shocking, sudden appearance of an object from the side of the screen where it is least expected)! One can't help but wonder whether Hitchcock three years later imitated the scene in the conclusion to 'North By Northwest'. (2006)

**Night of the Generals** 1967 Anatole Litvak 2.5 Peter O'Toole as General Tanz, a fanatic, psychologically unstable Nazi fanatic, who is the obvious choice for responsibility for the murder committed in the beginning of the film; Charles Gray looking distinguished as on-the-fence general who is one of the suspects; Donald Pleasence too low-key as decent, Hitler-hating general who is also suspected; Omar Sharif delivering strong performance as German intelligence officer with a passion for justice and finding his man; Tom Courtenay in thankless role as unheroic corporal serving as Tanz's orderly; Joanna Pettet as Courtenay's uninteresting love interest; Philippe Noiret as French inspector with a deep respect for Sharif – he carries the investigation ahead 20 years after the war to finally get his (Sharif's) man. All-star, big budget cast in top-heavy 60s semi-epic treatment of a scandalous murder mystery – the murder of prostitutes in Warsaw (the red stripe of the perpetrator is observed by a local from a toilet), Paris, and then Hamburg after the war, and Sharif's blind, unrelenting, hierarchy-defying, and unexplained campaign to find and arrest the guilty man; and this despite multiple obstacles such as being transferred away from the scene of the crime, and then unexpectedly being murdered by Tanz when we least expect it; Tanz is imprisoned for war crimes after the war, and upon release he is confronted by Noiret, who allows him to commit suicide. The murder mystery with its piquant environment of the upper reaches of the German Wehrmacht during World War II is potentially a good subject (e.g., Tanz's frame of Courtenay toward the end of the film is fairly ingenious), but the film's focus is clouded by an empty and sometimes embarrassing love affair between Courtenay and Gray's daughter and by a lengthy and unoriginal treatment of the army's plot against Hitler in July 1944 – it seems like every German general in France was on the side of the conspirators. O'Toole's character is handled awkwardly in the

script – of the three generals, he is virtually the only credible guilty candidate since the beginning; and the viewer definitely tires of his heavy make-up, his queer behavior, and the trademark trembling upper lip and darting eyes. The first 20 minutes give much promise, but the film then becomes inconsistent and often empty. The spectacle of the German generals is entertaining. A film trying too hard to be an epic – too many stars, too much budget, too much spectacle. (2007)

**The Night of the Hunter** 1955 Charles Laughton 4.0 Robert Mitchum, Shelley Winters, Lillian Gish, James Gleason, Peter Graves. Tour de force by Charles Laughton, his only directorial credit, about a predatory, Landru-like fake preacher, who preys on lonely widows; he batters on histrionic Winters, and then pursues her children, who know the whereabouts of \$10,000 hidden by their executed father (Graves); throughout the movie it is in little Pearl's doll. Winters perhaps a little over the top ("I feel so clean!"), but Mitchum is subdued, relentless, eerie, threatening, unintentionally funny, dressed to the T in his dark preacher's uniform with the little bow tie and wide brimmed hat. Gish is also very effective with her determined, purposeful goodness in defending children and saving them from threats of evil. Cinematography is one of a kind: shot on stylized sets in German Expressionist style with simplified shapes and elongated shadows, beautiful contrasts of black and white in perfectly restored film (it would not have same impact if in old fuzzy, grainy condition); the skies are always stylized, simple with gradated shades. The shadow of Harry appearing on the wall in the children's room; the incredible scene in Winters bedroom with the vaulted ceiling and Mitchum in an attitude of (Christ-like) agony before he gets his pocketknife out of his coat pocket and murders his wife; the children hiding in the cellar and identified from outside through the cellar window by the DW Griffith iris, and then Mitchum appearing at the top of the stairs backlit by the light in hallway; the poetic underwater shot of the flowing weeds and then camera pans to the beautiful, pristine body of Winters also with flowing hair sitting upright in her convertible car; Gish on the porch of her foundling house with the shotgun in her lap, and camera revealing Mitchum in background singing "Leanin' on His everlasting arms" and then Gish joining in with her own version but adding the word 'Jesus.' Film is extremely mythic. Part of it is religious with the initial quotations from the Bible, and the continuous playing of the dark angel (Mitchum) against the angel of light and salvation (Gish). Part is a fairy tale of the two children in dire danger from the evil stepfather, and then saved by a fairy godmother/Mother Goose type played by Gish. Centerpiece of film is the kids floating down the Ohio River (West Virginia?) in dreamlike, studio sequence as boat passes by several species of animals (turtles, rabbits, spider webs, etc.) in their escape from Mitchum; in a scene recalling the finding of Moses, Gish then discovers the two kids when their skiff grounds next to her house. Some of the business toward the end (lynch mob, Ruby pining after Mitchum) is a bit hokey. Music (Walter Schumann) adds a lot to movie: the portentous trombones are a bit overdramatic; but wonderful use of children's songs and Southern gospel songs, like "Leanin'." (2009)

**The Night of the Iguana** 1964 John Huston 2.5-3.0 Richard Burton darkly tanned and dynamically expressive as tortured ex-Protestant minister now conducting tourist tours on the west coast of Mexico; Sue Lyon as teenage hottie lusting after Burton; as flat-voiced, aggressive, intolerant tour leader who can't abide Burton (AA nomination!); Deborah Kerr as elegant (of course) poverty-stricken lady traveling around the world with her elderly poet grandfather; Ava Gardner trying her best to be informal, off-hand, and insouciant as the proprietor of a tumble-down Puerto Vallarta hotel – she has the hots for Burton, but won't admit it. Intense, talkative, and usually stagy adaptation of Tennessee Williams play about variously unhappy, even tortured people looking for permanent connections, but disguised as sex. Burton has been excluded from his New England (?) parish for having sex with a young parishioner; Sue Lyon constantly pestering Burton for his body and even for marriage (Daddy back in Texas will get him a job); Gardner looking good for her age, but sexually frustrated (when she has nothing better, she apparently has sex with a couple of Mexican guys prancing around playing their maracas) and struggling with her connection with Burton; Deborah Kerr apparently sexless – she has had some unspecified misery in her past (she is about 40), and she acts as Burton's father confessor and psychological counselor. Film ends with Lyon gone with the annoying old ladies to Acapulco, Kerr gone after grandfather completes his (beautiful) poem and dies happy on the terrace of the hotel, and Burton somewhat reluctantly agreeing to couple with Gardner, while she reassures him she will "get him back

up” when he is stuck down at the ocean. The film has too many stars for a filmed play: Burton and Kerr provide classy performances (although Burton seems at times to be sleep-walking in his role); Lyon however is just a cute little sex object, is annoyingly bitchy, and Gardner always seems to be trying to be something that doesn’t come naturally. The film suffers from being made right at the end of the Hays Code era: despite the importance of the theme of sex, it is referred to in coded language (“Did you ever have an experience...of the...loving sort?”), Lyons has to talk continuously about marriage to Burton, a man twice her age, Burton has to object strenuously to her advances, and there is very little kissing or other sexual activity. Huston shows himself the visual master (he’s a painter, testified Humphrey Bogart) with tasteful, detailed cinematography (the film is extremely well preserved) and wonderful framing: the pictures of the bus traveling through the rain forest, the colorful, dilapidated interior of Gardner’s hotel, the shots off the terrace of the sea and the Mexican coast. Huston did a good job adapting a typically intense, pseudo-existentialist Tennessee Williams stage effort. (2008)

**Night of the Living Dead** 1966 George Romero 2.5 Duane Jones as the black guy in the house who is the coolest head, Judith O’Dea as the sister of the first victim – she acts catatonic almost the whole film. Legendary horror movie of the late 1960s. Certainly a trendsetter, since it was the first zombie movie (‘I Walked with the Zombies’ [1943] doesn’t count), and with the demise of the Hays Code in 1966, one of the first to put explicit gore in an American film – particularly the scene toward the end of the film, when the zombies chew on the intestines, the inner organs, and the bloody limbs of the two characters who had been incinerated in the pickup truck. Film is reasonably well made – acting is credible, the narrative exploits the paranoid atmosphere of being trapped in the farmhouse, the zombies are pretty well made up, etc. The film misses being in color – the bright red of bloody flesh always makes a big impact in zombie movies. In addition to being slow, the zombies are inexplicably lazy; it takes away some from the sense of danger, since it is hard to understand why the live humans can’t just walk fast through the woods to get away from them. The film is in a grainy black and white (apparently shot intentionally) that works well since it reproduces a documentary, “you are there”, feel. Since one spends so much time besieged in the farmhouse with the zombies lolling around passively outside, the movie sometimes drags – some of the descriptive soliloquies of Jones are wordy, although well acted – but the film picks up toward the end, when there are a series of horrifying confrontations. It ends with a nice twist – the policemen and vigilantes who are hunting the zombies seem to take a great pleasure in shooting them down, and the trigger-happy rednecks shoot Jones when he – the only survivor of the zombie feast – appears at the farmhouse window. Thus, the police are shown to be morally corrupt and they enact a last racist outrage. Film does seem to draw a parallel with the political and social situation in the USA in the late 1960s. (2006)

**Night Train to Munich** 1940 Carol Reed 4.0 Rex Harrison tall, slender, dry approaching sarcasm as English secret service agent; Margaret Lockwood pretty, dark-haired, sometimes sharp-tongued Czech woman with perfect English accent (as do all the German characters in the film); Paul Henreid as Czech sort-of rival for the affections of Lockwood -- he has gone over to the Nazis; Basil Radford and Naunton Wayne as the classic Charters and Caldicott duo who are caught in Germany just before the outbreak of war. Delightfully entertaining, sprightly, and even suspenseful semi-remake of ‘The Lady Vanishes’ after Hitchcock had left for the USA. First half of film is a bit complicated describing the escape of Lockwood and her scientist father from Czechoslovakia and the slippery Nazi search to bring him back to the Reich to exploit his knowledge of armored plate for the sake of the Vaterland. Second half of film has Lockwood, Harrison, and Henreid in a delightful and suspenseful train sequence from Berlin to Munich just as war is breaking out in 1939 – it rivals ‘Lady Vanishes’ in grace and suspense. Film is a ‘safe’ thriller with a lot of comedy (especially with the shenanigans of Charters and Caldicott) and fairly tepid romance between Harrison and Lockwood; you are never really in doubt that things will turn out ok. The plot is often facile and scarcely credible: Harrison appears in Berlin in a German officer’s uniform and bamboozles everybody with marginal credentials; Charters and Caldicott manage to knock out two guards on the train and steal their uniforms without making a fuss; the five fugitives escape to Switzerland on a cable car connecting the two countries that the German government has left in place. The politics of the film is much more specific than in the generic ‘Lady’: the bad guys

are clearly the humorless Germans, who march in lockstep like robots to the orders of their harsh superiors and obey immediately despite the occasional grumblings of a couple of characters. They are in vivid contrast with the English, who are light-hearted, diverse, outspoken, humorous, and yet loyal and patriotic: Charters and Caldicott decide to play an active role in the escape plot when their national character is insulted by a German officer, who says that the English should crawl on their bellies like animals. The screenplay also pokes fun at English class divisions, especially when Charters decides that Harrison must be a loyal fellow since he played on the amateur (and therefore upper class) cricket team at Balliol. Lockwood is potentially a delightful romantic partner, but her final embrace with Harrison at the Swiss cable car station fails to resonate because of the latter's stand-offish, somewhat sardonic personality; the two of them never develop romantic chemistry. Marvelous uniforms (Harrison is perfect disguised as the quintessential German officer), excellent sets (particularly the grand Reichkanzlei rooms and the train), and intriguing miniatures (the Czech factories, the concentration camp model, the delightful model of the cable car hanging over the abyss with the Swiss Alps as backdrop). The film's piece de resistance is the train sequence: an entirely realistic set that really seems to be in motion, excellent editing to illustrate the intrigue (e.g, when Harrison confiscates the warning note pretending it is the bill), and the Caldicott-Charters duo actually playing a key role in the events instead of just providing an amusing backdrop as they did in 'Lady Vanishes'. Some good twist-switches, as when we discover in the London optometrist's office that the supposed pro-English Henreid is actually a Nazi agent. Delightful film that recalls the glory days of '39 Steps', 'Lady Vanishes', and the first 'The Man Who Knew Too Much'. (2009)

**Nightmare Alley** 1947 Edmund Goulding 3.5 Tyrone Power handsome (a little over the hill) circus performer with no conscience constantly on the make; Joan Blondell full-figured as circus gypsy performer who has the "code" for mentalist acts; Coleen Gray as slight, pretty wife of Power, who abandons her for bigger fry; Helen Walker as conscienceless big city psychoanalyst who has perhaps less conscience than Power. Unique film noir the first part of which is set in a traveling circus; Power breaks out to make his reputation as mentalist in a nightclub act, and then teams up with Walker to bilk rich Chicago types by making them believe that they are putting them in contact with their dead loved ones. Power is quite good playing the twin levels of nice-guy respectability and ruthless underhand schemer, and he is even convincing as a dirty drunk toward the end of the film. The women are all good: Blondell wields tarot cards to inspire film noir dread in Power, who can't help but take them seriously. Walker is terrific as glamorous, sexy and ruthless, manipulative femme fatale; she turns the tables on her "partner" Power when for some reason he thinks it ok to trust his nest egg with her, and she drives him over the edge of sanity making him think he is fantasizing. Film bathes in the culture of carnivals and trickery – mentalism (two performers pretending they can read one another's minds to impress an audience), magic cards that predict the future, ghosts of beloved ones walking in white gossamer gowns through the woods, etc. Filming is excellent: plenty of heavily shadowed shots especially in the carnival location; Director Goulding keeps the shots close and tight – a lot of tight two shots and rather than cut, he shifts the camera to keep the interlocutors in sight. The first 45 minutes or so is slow, and plot and character development seem to turn in circles – 15 minutes worth of cutting would have been appreciated. The ending has great potential: "the geek" is the human savage act of the circus which everyone holds in contempt; when power returns to the circus, the only job available is that of the geek, and he then goes berserk and has to be chased down with a straight jacket. The ending is rather ruined when Power catches sight of ex-wife Gray, and they hug uncertainly – a kind of half redemption. Ending the film with Power humiliating himself as the geek on stage would have been more satisfying. (2008)

**The Nightmare before Christmas** 1993 Henry Selick (story Tim Burton) 3.5 Voices of Danny Elfman, Chris Sarandon, Catherine O'Hara. Superior early stop motion fable whose success gave rise to many others ('Coraline', 'Fantastic Mr. Fox', 'Frankenweenie', etc.). The animation is not perhaps as smooth as the later productions, but the texture of the films is lush and convincing – three-dimensional feel, convincing motion, vivid dark colors. Jack, the rather egotistical and maniacal Pumpkin King, conducts Halloween expertly from his ghoulish headquarter; but he is melancholy, since something inside of him yearns for something more wholesome and positive; visiting Christmasland by chance, he decides

he will change holidays and take over Christmas from Santa Claus (whose name he misspells as Sandy Claws); he has his child ghouls kidnap Claws and sets his camp in motion to prepare for Christmas; but the attempt ends in disaster – the toys he delivers to homes throughout the world are scary and obnoxious; and of course Jack must return to what he knows best – scaring people in his good-natured way. You can't be something contrary to your nature. The happy ending is confirmed by Jack's finally noticing Sally's love for him and singing a love duet with her. The film is delightful, except perhaps for a few moments in Christmasland. All the Halloween creatures are ghoulishly charming and interesting – the two-expression mayor with the spinning conical face, the clown with the tear-away face, Dr. Finkelstein, the Frankenstein-based creator of the stitched-together, corpse-like Sally who is Jack's love interest, the three rambunctious Halloween kids (the Addams Family?), who delight in their commission to kidnap Sandy Claws (the kids in 'Frankenweenie' seem to be descendants). The editing pace is fast and always entertaining. The mise-en-scène in Halloweenland emphasizes hilltops shaped like a breaking wave and pictures of the bright yellow moon, perhaps through an ornate iron gate or with Jack outlined against it as he leaps across the sky. Surely the most delightful element is the music: the melodies are rather featureless and rhythmic, recalling perhaps the music of Kurt Weill ("Oh, the shark, dear..."), but the lyrics (also composed by Elfman) are entertaining, clever, descriptive and expertly rhymed ("What's this?", "I, Jack the Pumpkin King, have grown tired...", "Kidnap the Sandy Claws", "What Have I Done?", "Jack's back, everybody sing", etc.). The film is full of allusions and little homages – Addams Family, the vision-reflecting water from the Wizard of Oz, Frankenstein with Igor lurking in the background, of course vampire creatures, the Oogie Boogie man's voice right out of "The Little Shop of Horrors", the Victorian Angel of Death in the cemetery, the little ghost dog, Zero, playing the role of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer as he leads Jack's sleigh through the fog, etc. Hard to imagine better good-humored ghoulishness. (2013)

**Nueve Reinas** 2000 Fabian Bielinsky 4.0 Ricardo Darín as good-humored but duplicitous conman operating in Buenos Aires of the 90s; Gaston Pauls as his innocent- and decent-seeming partner; Leticia Bredice as tall, striking but bitter sister of Darin. Highly entertaining, ingeniously constructed con game film that is obviously influenced by Mamet's 'House of Games' and other American con movies; it also has interesting characters and highly atmospheric shots of Buenos Aires in the late 90s. The film begins with Darin apparently roping Pauls into partnership with himself to pull off some small cons – maybe he would be able to teach the younger man something. After a few initial successes, the viewer meets Darin's angry sister, and then an older ex-partner of Darin (Sandler) who suggests a big con to sell some counterfeit stamps to a wealthy Spanish businessman (it was wonderful to be able to understand his Spanish!). There seems to be a bump or a twist a minute; the Spaniard is interested, but then some motorbike thieves make off with the stamps and throw that worthless garbage into the harbor; then a renewal of Darin's ingenuity, when they visit Sandler's sister, extract the "real" Nine Queens from her when a desperate Darin comes up with \$200,000 that he has stolen from the family's estate; at the last minute the Spaniard insists that he also have sex with Bredice and that only she come to the hotel room. After she emerges from the Spaniard's room the next morning, the principals realize that the cashier's check he has left them is worthless. Then in the payoff, Pauls walks into a warehouse where we see ... other copies of the Nine Queens lying around, many of the principals including Sandler and the Spaniard are sitting around playing cards, Sandler's sister teases Pauls some before handing over the satchel containing the money that Darin had given her, and then Pauls and Bredice greet one another with a passionate embrace. Well, it dawns on the viewer that the whole thing was an elaborate con with many players dreamed up by Pauls and Bredice (they have been together as lovers for a year) to get even with him for the way he has treated Bredice and her little brother and to screw him out of the \$200,000 that he had stolen from the family estate. The \$450,000 price that the Spaniard apparently paid to Bredice was all smoke and mirrors and the real money exchanged was Darin's to his sister and her boyfriend. The ingenious puzzle fits together yielding many "ah-has" when you think about the true meaning of certain scenes, although certain points don't make a lot of retrospective sense – the first scene in which Darin and Pauls meet in a convenience store supposedly by accident, and the function of the motorbike theft, which is a bit hard to integrate. The pleasure of the film is enhanced by the tour we get through the picturesquely photographed neighborhoods of Buenos Aires; and by the well-developed characters. Darin

is charming and good natured on the surface, but a weasel and a sneak underneath, which makes credible the bitterness and hostility of his sister toward him and the revenge she has plotted; the script goes to great lengths to establish Pauls as an inexperienced naïf and a decent man with a deep affection for his father (also a conman in prison), and yet there are moments when we notice skills and initiatives that suggest something deeper. The film may not move the viewer as drama, but is infinitely pleasurable as a beautifully constructed puzzle piece with characters and a location that help make it credible. (2011)

**Ninotchka** 1939 Ernst Lubitsch (MGM) 3.5 Greta Garbo this time laughing (promotional slogan), Melvyn Douglas as smooth French playboy type who falls for the Soviet functionary, Ina Claire as the glamorous White Russian princess who sues the Soviets (always called “the Russians”) for the jewels they are trying to sell in Paris, Sig Ruman, Felix Bressart and Alexander Granach (the former two appearing in many Lubitsch films in the 1930s and 1940s) as the three Soviet emissaries who are easily corrupted by sybaritic capitalist culture wherever they are. Film focuses obsessively on Garbo, the more or less last hurrah of the 30s’ greatest star. You really have to like her – be under the charm of her thin, wistful, elusive good looks. First part of film is best – the three comical Soviet functionaries, the stern-faced, deadpan speaking Garbo reacting impassively to the luxurious, self-indulgent Paris environment, the wonderful “Lubitsch touches” as the three men are corrupted: successive waves of waiters and cigarette girls passing through and closing the doors of the royal suite behind them, every time the arrival of the pretty girls being met by louder “ahs;” and finally the shot of their three comrade hats on the hat rack, fade out, fade in, and three formal top hats have taken their place. After, the film focuses on the thawing of Garbo under the influence of Douglas. The scene in the bistro when she finally laughs when Douglas accidentally makes a fool of himself is probably the best – her sudden change is charming and her laugh infectious. Otherwise, her progress seems pretty predictable and standard Hollywood fare – again if you are not under the Garbo spell. Douglas is competent without being compelling. Garbo’s wardrobe is quirky proletarian and then dowdy young woman. The hat she buys to symbolize her transformation into a loving, desiring woman is fairly absurd, and doesn’t look good on her. Dialogue has its good moments, but does not shine all the way through. The moral of the movie is that, in producing automatons, the Communist regime is battling against human nature; homo Communisticus will always be easily tempted by luxury, pleasure, champagne, sex, love, etc., and love must triumph in the end since Garbo is incapable of resistance. A post-1934 film (after enforcement of the Code): although good, Lubitsch is not as piquant and irresistible as when he is being naughty and suggestive. (2005)

**No Country for Old Men** 2007 Coen Brothers 3.5 Josh Brolin as very stubborn and compulsive good ol’ boy who finds a suitcase full of money in the Southwest desert and tries to get away with it even if it costs him his life; Javier Bardem unforgettable as poker faced bad guy with Prince Valiant haircut who stalks Brolin implacably and murders many innocent bystanders for usually no apparent reason; Tommy Lee Jones as decent bemused sheriff who rather half-heartedly pursues Bardem while laconically reflecting on bad times (hard not to think of Frances McDormand in ‘Fargo’); Woody Harrelson as humorous hired gun who has a lot more principles than Bardem; Kelly Macdonald as the pretty, naïve wife of Brolin. Rather indecipherable film set (again as in ‘Blood Simple’ and ‘Red Rock’) in West Texas – flat, barren terrain, big skies, cheap motels, wide streets lined with fast food joints and service stations, characters talking with picturesque Texas country drawl. Superficially has the form of a thriller as we root for Brolin to get away with the money, but the film does not follow any standard story line: we follow Bardem in his quest to recover the money, and en route he murders people with almost monotonous regularity; Brolin does not get away – he is murdered toward the end of the film after being lured into a motel room by a temptress apparently cooperating with Bardem (?); Macdonald is disconsolate and we later learn that her mother has died of “the cancer”; at the end Bardem has a car accident in which he suffers a compound fracture – he constructs himself a sling with a boy’s shirt and then hobbles off never to be seen again; in the last scene Jones enters an unidentified friend’s (relative?) home, has an inconclusive, pensive conversation, and . . . the end credits roll. The film is incredibly violent with many shots of mangled bodies, blood spreading slowly across the floor (whereupon Bardem moves his foot so as not to soil his boot), people knocked down by the impact of bullets (the poor guy in

the high-jacked truck), explicit shots of gunshot wounds and compound bone fractures. At the same time, it can be funny – the wisecracks of Harrelson, the rueful humor of Jones, the blind trust of Brolin that he will succeed, the rather childish nature of his relationship with his wife, even the crooked smile that inexplicably appears on the face of Bardem when he is contemplating some irony, and his inexplicable actions, such as when he has a general store clerk flip a coin to see whether Bardem will kill him. Marvelous individual scenes that show a mastery of mise-en-scene, editing and sound editing to generate suspense – a good example being the one in which Brolin is waiting in a hotel room for Bardem to arrive, and we hear his footsteps outside the door, we see the shadows of the feet pass the door, we hear the light bulb unscrew, etc. Overall, however, the film does not hang together. We don't know whether it is a character study (the characters are vivid and interesting); a commentary on the decline of America and particularly of the American West; a gloss on the corruption of the times (the violence and moral chaos generated by the drug trade); an exercise in Existentialist philosophy; or whether the good ol' boys Coen Brothers are just having fun, like they did with their first film 23 years before. Still very entertaining and packed with engrossing characters and head-turning filmmaking expertise. (2008)

**No Highway in the Sky** 1951 Henry Koster (Britain, MGM) 3.0 James Stewart as shy, stammering, anti-social, genial aircraft scientist working for the RAF in Britain – he is however passionate about airline safety; Janette Scott as his cute, precociously intelligent daughter, Lisbeth; Jack Hawkins prominent in first part of film as Stewart's boss; Marlene Dietrich rather neutral role that take s liking to Stewart but then steps back for Glynis; Glynis Johns pretty, baby voice, convincing performance as try-blue stewardess that falls for Stewart; Kenneth More as cool and collected co-pilot; Wilfred Hyde-White in cameo as civil aviation official. Well-made aviation thriller whose second half includes a lot of romantic hand-wringing by the two women over Stewart; based on a novel by Nevil Shute. Stewart is an absent-minded mathematical genius (the absent-minded scientist absorbed in his universe of calculations), who predicts the tail of the new Reindeer aircraft will sheer off after a certain number of hours; he suffers grievously when on the plane heading from England to Gander, but is puzzled when the tail does not fail on time either during the flight or in the tests he performs after his return to England. Both John and Dietrich fall for him – largely because of his sincere concern for the safety of the passengers; the film moves to a satisfactory conclusion when Dietrich removes herself from romantic competition, Johns makes it clear that she is going to marry Stewart and take care of him, and after much delay the tails start failing (safely of course) to vindicate Stewart, who remarks in the last shot that he should have taken the variable of temperature into consideration. Stewart is sincere and endearing as usual at the center and the British cast members deliver their habitual excellent performances. The first part of the film is compelling as the principals worry and share details of their lives waiting for the catastrophe (repeated of course three years later in John Wayne's 'The High and the Mighty'); it is somewhat less interesting after the plane lands safely and the focus of the film shifts to Stewart's romantic destiny – which one of the his pretenders will land him? Interesting picture of the plane – double tail (!), luxurious cabin with crystal glass and lots of empty seats, passengers smoking on board, and a very large crew for a small complement of passengers. Special effects are good looking out the window of the plane or shooting it from the outside. One of the earlier examples of the disaster movie. (2016)

**No Man of Her Own** 1950 Mitchell Leisen 3.0 Barbara Stanwyck remarkable playing an emotional unwed mother who makes moral compromises for the sake of her baby; John Lund fairly handsome but clunky and inexpressive as the man who falls in love with Stanwyck and "saves" her; Jane Cowl as the affectionate and sincere "grandmother" of the baby; Lyle Bettger suitably nasty as the snarling bad guy who blackmails Stanwyck; Richard Denning in brief appearance as the real father of the baby. Pretty good woman's picture plus film noir about an "abandoned" and pregnant woman that is injured in a train wreck, assumes a false identity, and then has to deal with the complications. After the accident, Stanwyck wakes up in the hospital with a new mistaken identity; she travels with her baby to Illinois to live with the parents of the couple killed on the train; during her happy stay in the large house, the dead father's brother falls in love with her, and although he realizes that she is not the real daughter-in-law, he keeps her identity a secret; her old lover Bettger discovers her whereabouts and blackmails her into marrying her so he can get his hands on the inheritance; Stanwyck decides to kill him since there is

no other way out; she shoots him while lying on the bed in his seedy apartment; in an unconvincing conclusion, the police come for the couple, only to tell them that Bettger was already dead when she shot at him and that she missed anyhow; they live happily ever after. The film script is rife with improbabilities ranging from the mistaken identity to the circumstances of the murder and the conclusion. Although not one of her better films, Stanwyck's performance is as usual notable. The film is primarily a woman's film focusing on the plight of (unwed) mothers when faced with the strictures of society – abandoned by a man and with no means of support, Stanwyck has virtually no choice but to exploit the identity mistake for the sake of her baby, over whom much cooing and fuss is made in the central part of the film by mother and grandmother; Stanwyck is then rescued from her new dilemma by her dream man. The film combines the woman's film characteristics with film noir: the dark shadows used by the director in the middle and the end of the film; the film is recounted in flashback by the thought of an anxious Stanwyck awaiting the arrival of the police in the film's first sequence; and of course the seedy Bettger and the murder. However, the forced happy ending would never fit into a true noir. The kind of solid entertainment that Hollywood was able to turn out effortlessly in the classic period. (2007)

**No Time for Love** 1943 Mitchell Leisen (Paramount) 2.5 Charming Colbert romantic comedy that plays like a TV show. Colbert charming, pretty sexy, a bit horny as fashion photographer in big city; Fred MacMurray as "sandhog", brawny working class guy who elicits concupiscence in Colbert; June Havoc as ditzy, tough-talking chorine who challenges Colbert for MacMurray; Ilka Chase as Colbert's sister and confidante; Richard Haydn as rather snobby, panty waist colleague of Colbert – he serves as contrast to MacMurray's beefy maleness (the latter does have a good body). Totally predictable romantic comedy – the viewer knows from the beginning that, overcome by romantic attraction, the opposites will eventually meet. Film has usual Paramount polish – impeccable upper class costumes, believable sets, witty repartee; although situations are familiar, we enjoy the path of the two principals toward romantic union. A Daliesque dream sequence has Colbert pursued and rescued by MacMurray in a tight-fitting Superman-style costume (superman had debuted in the late 30s). The most interesting aspect of the film is the contrasts of class and maleness. On the one hand, you have the Irish working class guys in New York – good-humored, plain spoken, brawny, ever ready to start a fight, covered with mud in the underwater construction site; on the other, the sophisticated set employed by Colbert's magazine – impeccably dressed, grammatically correct speech, an aversion to physical violence, fond of elegant restaurants and bars, in some cases a bit wimpy – "panty waists" (applied to Haydn, who is reluctant to get his clothes dirty in the final [memorable] mud scene). An amusing scene has a jealous MacMurray attempt to humiliate a half-naked body builder during one of Colbert's photography sessions. In another Colbert's attempt to get the workers to play musical chairs quickly degenerates into the usually ethnic-based brawl. The cultural distance between Colbert and MacMurray is reduced toward the end when the latter uses engineer-style knowledge to solve the construction problems in the tunnel; Haydn and Chase also put the pressure on. Perhaps they are not so different anyway. One thing for sure is that they will live happily ever after. (2015)

**No Way Out** 1987 Roger Donaldson 2.5 Kevin Costner giving an unconvincing, unfocused performance as naval intelligence officer working in the Pentagon during the Cold War; Gene Hackman looking distracted and unsure in his role as Secretary of Defense who doesn't know what to do; Will Patton over the top as assistant to Hackman – he evinces fanatic loyalty partly because of suppressed homosexuality; Sean Young sexy and light-hearted as Hackman's mistress and Costner's lover (!); Fred Thompson as nondescript head of the CIA. Misconceived thriller set in the Cold War Pentagon where a Russian mole is reported to be worming his way in on the Secretary's secrets. In a jealous rage Hackman pushes mistress Young over the balcony railing of her apartment and kills her. In an attempt to cover Hackman's tracks, Patton hatches an outlandish plot to identify Costner as the supposed Russian mole and blame him for the murder; equally improbably Costner is put in (partial) charge of the investigation, and most of the rest of the movie is devoted to the search of the Pentagon to find the "guilty" Costner, while Costner is caught in the middle shadowed by two goons put on his tail by the wily Patton; there are a couple of boring chases, the first through the Washington metro and the second up and down stairs in the Pentagon, the latter enlivened by Costner banging the face of one of the goons with a fire extinguisher



and then getting his wrist cut with a straight razor (where did that come from?); suspense is supposedly added by having a computer scanner gradually reveal an incriminating photograph of Costner and Costner having his wheelchair-bound friend (George Dzundza) search the State Department data base for a receipt that would incriminate Hackman (it really doesn't). The climax has Patton shoot himself, Hackman's goose apparently cooked, and Costner running off for a rendezvous with a mysterious interlocutor...who turns out to be his Russian handlers! Costner is a Russian agent (apparently a Russian since he seems to speak Russian), who is the mole planted in the Pentagon a long time ago! He had taken up with Young on purpose in order to have access to Hackman (awkward that he falls in love with her and Hackman then murders her). The film ends with Costner driving away. The film does not have the ingredients of a good thriller. The middle part of the film reads like a TV program with lots of chases, car crashes, goons hanging around the edges, and artificially pumped up pseudo-suspense. The shocking switch at the end is inauthentic since aside from the mention of the mole it is not integrated with the rest of the film; the film follows Costner throughout the film as an all-American guy with nary a suspicion that he might not be what he appears. This is the sort of end surprise that creates anger and frustration rather than true shock and disorientation in the viewer. (2013)

**Nobody's Fool** 1994 Robert Benton (also writer) 3.5 Paul Newman as Sully, a good-natured working class stiff with a bad knee, a bad temper, a prickly relationship with everyone, an aggressive mouth, and a flaky, unattached life style; Bruce Willis as womanizing construction business owner, who has a combative relationship with Sully; Melanie Griffith as Willis' wife, who knows her husband is philandering and who flirts with Sully; Gene Sachs as Wirf, Newman's incompetent lawyer and friend with a false leg; Jessica Tandy as Sully's eccentric elderly landlady – she was his eighth grade teacher; Josef Sommer as Jessica's embattled businessman son, who is Sully's biggest enemy; Dylan Walsh as Sully's embattled college professor son – he splits from his wife and holds a grudge against his father; Philip Seymour Hoffmann as small town cop with a running feud with Sully, who has contempt for traffic citations; Pruitt Taylor Vince as roly-poly dependent friend of Sully – he gets very jealous when Sully begins to get closer to his son. Film is shot in dreary working class environment in upstate New York in the winter – cold with squeaky snow everywhere; small town atmosphere where the main entertainment is to watch TV and drink a Bud in the bar and where the police let Sully out of jail for a few hours to be a pall bearer. Light-hearted touch in most scenes. Perhaps funniest situation is relationship with cop Philip Seymour Hoffmann – in big scene Sully defies him, Hoffmann fires his gun, then Sully walks up to the shocked Hoffmann and punches him in the face. He once says to Wirf: "Really? You're a Jew? I didn't know that. How come you ain't smart?" Film focuses on Sully's character and development. He is like a high school student – irresponsible and he loves pranks – e.g., drugging the watchdog and sending his son over a chain link fence to get back the snow blower he needs; but we sense that underneath he is a thoughtful man – he understands Griffith's plight and refuses to take her up on her romantic invitation despite the obvious chemistry between them; he starts to bond with one of his grandsons; he helps take care of the demented old lad who walks in the middle of the snowy street in her nightgown. Meeting his son and his grandson Will unleashes smiles and introspection – he starts to bond with his son and grandson and he reflects on his own father with emotion in his voice; and when he makes a mistake, he confronts it headlong and apologizes. Film slows down toward the end as Newman processes toward redemption. In an affecting scene, he declines to accompany the fetching Griffith to Hawaii, when she finally has had enough of her husband. He encourages his son to return to his wife, and he makes peace with Tandy and thanks her for her gift to him (she paid the taxes on his old abandoned house). It ends with a close-up of Newman smiling beatifically while napping in an armchair. Film is sentimental, quiet, humorous, and often moving. It drags a bit toward the end. A winning combination of Benton's low-key, sincere story and direction and Newman's natural and unobtrusive settling into his role. (2010)

**Nocturnal Animals** 2016 Tom Ford 4.0 Violent West Texas horror-thriller set within an LA-cool story about regret and revenge. Amy Adams projects deep feeling as tony LA museum curator in a bad marriage with...; Armie Hammer has minimal screen time as failing hot-shot businessman who is unfaithful to Adams; Jack Gyllenhaal in dual role as Adams' "weak" ex-husband and the man in the second story who survives the brutal murder of his family on a deserted West Texas highway; Michael

Shannon (AA nomination) pungent and entertaining as local sheriff who is dying from cancer and does not stop at legality to secure “justice”; Aaron Taylor-Johnson scary but somehow charismatic as the sardonic leader of the murderous trio. After establishing Adams’ elite lifestyle (her home resembles an elite art gallery), the offensive flair of the upper crust LA art scene, and the deep unhappiness of Adams, she receives an advance copy of a disturbing novel written by the man she left 20 years ago. Most of the film plays as a thriller in a deserted area of West Texas: a trio of disturbed delinquents terrorizes Gyllenhaal and his wife and daughter, rape and murder the women as described in horrific detail, and leave Gyllenhaal behind to seek justice with the help of police detective Shannon. Gyllenhaal and Shannon pursue the perpetrators and finally kill two of them including Taylor-Johnson by gunshot. It becomes apparent that Gyllenhaal has sent the novel to Adams as revenge for her betrayal years before – not only did she leave him, but she told him repeatedly that he had no gift as a writer, and she aborted the fetus of which Gyllenhaal was the father. There is also a psychological issue: Adams and her mother (a high society Laura Linney in a memorable scene with her daughter in a New York restaurant) brand Gyllenhaal as “weak” and destined never to amount to anything; the story that he sends Adams asserts his competence with the death of the surrogate wife and daughter, and then has a relentless Gyllenhaal bring the perpetrators to justice. In his final act of self-assertion and revenge, however, he stands her up in a restaurant rendezvous: she waits and waits, the camera watches, she looks at the door, and then finally fade out and end of the film. The film is compulsively watchable from beginning to end: the thriller subplot has the viewer on the edge of his seat horrified at the violence, amused by Shannon, and rooting for the avengers; the Adams framing story has gleaming surfaces and textures (reflecting Ford’s designs and commercials), satire of the pretentious LA art scene (the opening scene of the grotesquely fat women dancing), and a moving dramatization of Adams’ distress and regrets. Great surfaces and intriguing depths underneath. Surrender yourself (Peter Travers)! (2017)

**Le nom des gens** 2011 Michel Leclerc (France) 4.0 Sara Forestier very cute and sexy (we often see her fully nude or exposing a breast in one of her scoop-neck blouses) as free-spirited daughter of Algerian immigrant living in Paris; Jacques Gamblin as straight-laced, reserved epidemiologist specializing in the avian flu. Endearing satirical romantic comedy focusing on the developing relationship between the chaotic Forestier and the reticent Gamblin. Due apparently to being sexually abused for several years by her piano teacher, Forestier feels free to use her body to have sex with rightwing guys (“fascists”) and convert them to proper leftwing ideas – denounce French colonialism, anti-nuclear, pro-immigrant, hostile to capitalism, etc. Gamblin is the first guy she really likes, but her promiscuousness constantly bewilders Gamblin and gets in the way of their romance, especially when she momentarily hooks up with a Muslim “fasho” and adopts the garb of an orthodox Muslim woman. After the predictable breakup, Forestier decides to be faithful to her boyfriend, they get together at the end and are seen walking down the street with a child. Forestier and Gamblin are effectively paired as opposites – the spontaneous Forestier who once gets on the metro completely naked (except for her shoes) since she was in such a hurry when she got dressed (big laugh when she sits opposite a Muslim with his impassive wife, who says she should be ashamed of herself), who reopens the metro doors to let an elderly couple in, who buys seven crabs from the street market and then goes to the seashore to return them to the water (she got crabs instead of lobster since with the crabs she could save seven animals instead of just one); the normal, impassive Gamblin who, half-Jewish, half-Catholic observes Forestier’s antics with bemusement and a shrug of his shoulders. The film satirizes French politics: the passionate devotion to a particular cause or political leaders (Forestier is a fanatic partisan of Socialist leader Lionel Jospin), Forestier’s hysterical panic when by accident she votes by accident for Chirac in 2007, and her penchant for using the word ‘fascist’ for anyone just slightly to the right of her. Film also satirizes French family dynamics: especially the refusal of Gamblin’s father and mother to discuss any subject dealing with their origins (she being a Jew saved from the Nazis by French gentiles during World War II) or any other subject that might arouse controversy; Gamblin gives Forestier a long list of taboo words before taking her to dinner with them for the first time; the conversations between Gamblin’s and Forestier’s parents over dinner are hilarious in their halting awkwardness – Forestier manages to use too many of the taboo words referring to Gamblin’s mother’s wartime Jewish experiences – “oven”, “freight car”, “camp”, etc. The backbone of the film is the tender relationship between the two principals, who have genuine chemistry despite their

glaring differences; the viewer is moved and delighted when they finally make the decision for one another at the end (touching each other's butts as they look away from the camera). Heart-warming romantic film where opposites are brought together in the context of rich family color and hilarious social and political satire. (2012)

**Nordwand** 2008 Philipp Stölzl 3.0 Benno Fürmann striking, existential, serious, dedicated sportsman as Toni Kurz, the leader of the German duo planning to conquer the Northface of the Eiger in 1936; Florian Lukas as Andreas Hinterstoesser, his quieter friend; Johanna Wokalek as Kurz's former girlfriend and aspiring Berlin newspaper reporter; Ulrich Tukur as newspaper editor who cares more about getting the story than the fate of the climbers. Exciting, tense, and tragic story about two German men who set out to conquer the north face of the Eiger in 1936; they bull ahead despite impending bad weather, meet up with two Austrians, one of whom is badly injured and causes the four to turn back; and then all die on the face of the monster. The most touching scene is the end where the lone survivor, Toni, is on a rappelling rope only a few feet from his rescuers and his girlfriend (she has climbed out from the gallery on to the face of the mountain!), but he is too weak to bridge the gap, and he dies dangling on the rope frozen to death (his body remained there for several weeks in full view of the telescopes at Kleine Scheidegg). The strongest point of the film is the climbing scenes, which are extremely realistic with snow and mist swirling about, dizzying views several thousand feet down the cliff, the men attaching pitons and ropes, belaying one another, catapulting themselves across a cliff face in order to attach a rope to cross (the Hinterstoesser Traverse), close to freezing to death wrapped in their sleeping bags in a small gully on the side of the mountain, etc. The beautifully executed studio shots are combined with stunning real shots of the mountain, sometimes clear, sometime in the fog. The back stories could have been developed more fully: the viewer is never sure exactly what Toni and his girlfriend really feel about one another; the journalistic heartlessness of Tukur, while convincing because of good acting, is something of a cliché; and Wokalek's foray on to the face of the Eiger and her reaching out into the void to her beau seem incredible. And really not much is made of the intentions of the Nazi government to claim a propaganda coup on the eve of the Berlin Olympics; in any case, the two kids from Berchtesgaden don't give a damn about National Socialism (they wave off-handedly and mumble "Tchuss" when fellow soldiers shout "Heil, Hitler" and give the Nazi salute). Because they are so clean-cut and appealing, the tragedy of the brave, even foolhardy duo is keenly felt at the end of the film. (2011)

**Normal** 2003 Jane Anderson 2.5 Entertaining, well produced, well acted movie about fellow who gets sex change operation, but who wants to stay in his family, and whose wife and daughter (and soon, finally) accept him despite what he goes through. Quite heart-warming, although perhaps strains credulity that people could be so faithful. Teenager played by Hayden Panettiere, charming and gets it just right. Jessica Lange is good and emotes over top a couple of times; she is so made over she is practically unrecognizable. Tone is usually humorous with darker interludes. Roy (becomes Ruth) is lower manager in Midwest tractor firm, and thus gets a lot of shit from fellow workers when he starts to wear perfume, etc. (2006)

**The Notebook** 2004 Nick Cassavetes 2.0 Ryan Gosling as lumber mill worker who falls deeply in love with McAdams and who never wavers in his devotion, even building a Southern mansion and then patiently waiting for the return of his beloved; Rachel McAdams as middle class offspring who can't decide between her working class guy and another guy from a wealthy Southern family (the hunk James Marsden); James Garner genial and heartfelt as the older guy that is in command of the narrative frame reading the story about young love to...; Gena Rowlands as the older woman in the nursing home that Garner is reading to. Get out the handkerchiefs and get ready for the romance cliches in this flashback romance drama. The action takes place in the South mostly during and after World War II: Southern mansions with big colonnades, some wan attempts at Southern drawls, the class divide between the redneck crowd and the proper denizens of the suburbs; lots of big 40s sedans lumbering along the streets, the usual heartbreaking destinies and dilemmas. The charming McAdams is not allowed by her mother (Joan Allen) to pursue her true love with Gosling, and she eventually plans to marry the wealthy alternative. The script holds us in suspense while Rachel makes up her mind (in the process having her first sexual encounter with Gosling), and she eventually opts for Gosling. Meanwhile, the narrative frame also holds us in suspense. It is revealed that reader Garner is Rowlands' husband, although Rowlands

unfortunately is suffering from dementia and doesn't realize it; she finally recognizes Garner as her life-long love, and a flashback cut to the main romance story reveals that Garner is the older version of Gosling and not Marsden, as perhaps the viewer thinks because of physical resemblance. In the ultimate cliché, Garner, who is suffering from heart disease, lies down in bed with Rowlands, and when the nurse returns to her bedroom in the morning, she finds both of them lying in bed -- blissfully dead. The nursing home narrative is extremely saccharine, but the flashback narrative of the young lovers is often charming and peppy: Gosling has good scenes (this viewer is not a fan); the pretty McAdams is fierce in her pursuit of her lover and in her defiance of her controlling mother who is determined that Rachel will marry someone of her own class (the more understanding dad has a bad Southern accent and sports a dashing plantation mustache). The Rowlands character is hard to accept -- she is so far gone that she doesn't even recognize her husband and children, and yet she is perfectly made up and coiffed and has no trouble following Garner's story. This manipulative and mawkish story is hard for at least this viewer to relate to. (2013)

**Notes on a Scandal** 2006 Richard Eyre 3.0 Judi Dench as history teacher in British underachievers' high school, who has a roving eye for vulnerable young women; Cate Blanchett willowy and seductive, married to an older man and with two demanding children -- she is the vulnerable young woman, who also decides to have a sexual affair with one of her 15-year-old students; Bill Nighy as the good-humored but rather clueless husband. Personal/sexual melodrama that is notable mainly for giving two excellent actresses the chance to blow the lid off the acting kettle. Blanchett is excellent if a little annoying -- she suffers from normal anomie of the bourgeois housewife, and responds to it by having a torrid sexual affair with one of her students, and then allows herself to be seduced away from her nice-guy husband by the predatory Dench. Dench injects a literary element into the story by keeping a diary and then reading from it to provide an always self-serving voiceover and commentary on events. She sets out to get Blanchett, and she uses her chance discovery of Blanchett giving the kid a blow job, the death of her cat (to evoke sympathy from her beloved), and then the clueless behavior of one of her fellow teachers to spread the story of Blanchett's illegal affair... all to separate Blanchett from her husband and get her to live in her flat. Quite a bit of high octane acting, and suspenseful marveling at the resourceful ruthlessness of Dench, but in the end she fails -- Blanchett despises her (she returns to her husband), and she goes to prison for her exploitation of the minor. Story entertaining (but with some improbabilities!); the main thing to watch is the thespian fireworks. (2010)

**Nothing Sacred** 1937 William Wellmann 2.5 Carole Lombard, Fredric March, Walter Connolly, Charles Winninger, Sig Ruman. Run of the mill screwball comedy in color (quite faded). Ben Hecht's writing/dialogue is cynical and negative, making fun of New York and the cult of celebrity in the USA. Another cynical newspaper story: New York paper cooks up publicity stunt about girl from Vermont poisoned by radium; only she isn't (she has been diagnosed by a quack alcoholic doctor), and the truth eventually comes out in the end. Performance of principals is predictable: CL tries too hard (although everyone else seems to think she is a comic genius), and FM is flat as always begging to be sent back to play another Vronsky; WC blows his top in a torrent of abuse. Screwball characteristics peak at end when the two lovers successively slug one another in order to fake an illness (much about deception and hypochondria). The fight is a metaphor for the future relationship of the couple, since they seem very combative. Movie obviously owes a lot to 'My Girl Friday,' 'Front Page,' and 'Mr. Deeds Goes to Town.' In fact, seems rather derivative. For once, a screwball comedy doesn't deal primarily with the idle rich. Sig Ruman does his gig as Viennese doctor with his usual hilarious aplomb -- the best thing in the film. (2005)

**Le notti di Cabiria** 1957 Federico Fellini 3.5 Giulietta Masina as Cabiria, the down-and-out prostitute with a cheerful, trusting disposition; François Perier as lonely looking bachelor who pursues her at the end; Amedeo Nazzari as the movie star, Aldo Silvani as the hypnotist, Franca Marzi as Wanda, Cabiria's fellow prostitute and best friend. Famous 1957 film that prepares the way for the more baroque fantasies of "La Dolce Vita". Like "La Strada", still anchored in Italian Neo-realism -- gritty and sometimes depressing surroundings on the outskirts of Rome (recalling Moravia's 'Racconti romani'),

simple poverty stricken characters, etc. But Fellini's preference for fantasy comes through. Masina's performance is pure baroque and fantasy – her style draws on Charlie Chaplin with the heavy facial makeup and exaggerated facial expressions, which she somehow manages to maintain throughout the film; her manner is outgoing, disputatious with much waving of hands. She is akin to the prostitute with the heart of gold – except that she is innocent, good-humored even when she is telling someone off, and has a childlike trust in humanity that endures to the bitter end; she also has a basic sense of respectability (bourgeois?), since she is proud of owning her own home. The viewer often winces knowing how vulnerable she is – film starts with her boyfriend grabbing her handbag and pushing her into a river, where she almost drowns; and after many experiences in which she meets the man who she thinks will be her Prince Charming, it also turns out that he is a con-man after her money (she has sold her house to give him the money), and although in a last-minute fit of remorse he does not push her over the cliff, he runs away with her money. Cabiria is momentarily crushed, but she brightens up again, and apparently convinced still that things will turn out in the end, the last shot shows her face again radiant and alive. The viewer is not sure whether to admire her faith or to feel queasy and disdainful of her self-immolating naiveté. A very touching moment is when she enters a magic show, and defying the howls of the male audience, acts out her own character while under hypnosis – she falls in love with an imaginary character and is courted sweetly by him. (Her character here is reminiscent of “La Strada”.) Scenes that do not work well are the ones with religion in them – What are we to think of the Good Samaritan that travels from cave to cave handing out alms to the outcasts of modern society. And should we be moved by the visit of Cabiria and her prostitute friends to a shrine of the Virgin, where they encounter all sorts of religious hysteria and hucksterism, and after which she is disappointed that her prayers have not led to a change in her life? Just another Felliniesque swipe against Catholicism? Remarkable film that does not have quite the visceral impact of “La Strada”. (2009)

**Une nouvelle amie** 2014 François Ozon (France) 2.0 Difficult to define and fathom melodrama/romantic comedy/fantasy film in upper bourgeois French suburb. Romain Duris creditable job as David, cross dressing woman (walk, speech, dress, underwear), but somehow unattractive with heavy lipstick, caked makeup on shaved chin, etc. Anais Demoustier as the pretty, petite, small-breasted, freckle faced friend, Claire, the opposite feminine type from sexpot Duris; Raphael Personnaz as the handsome, generally clueless husband of Claire; Isil Le Besco as Claire's bosom buddy, Laure – she appears only for a short time in the first part of the film. Bizarre, difficult-to-interpret film about friendship and sexual preferences; even though the film is set in the most Americanized of bourgeois neighborhoods and circumstances, the narrative flaunts most bourgeois standards of sexual behavior. When Laure dies leaving Claire bereft, she vows to take care of Laure's widower, David, and her baby. In a surprising scene, Claire discovers that David, who is feeding his little baby, is a cross dresser. The two develop a close friendship (shopping, makeup etc.) based on David's alternate identity as Virginia, but in a visit to David's parents in law's country house, the relationship begins to develop sexual characteristics, although it is not clear whether it is heterosexual (with David) or Lesbian (with Virginia). The two eventually meet in a hotel (Hotel Virginia), where they begin to make love, but Claire leaves horrified when she (fully?) realizes from touch that Virginia has a penis. The ending is quizzical: Virginia (completely feminine and pregnant – from her husband or from David-Virginia?) and Claire arrive in front of school seven years later to pick up David's little girl, and the three walk off down the road as a happy family. But is it real? The road looks mythic, like a version of the Yellow Brick Road in 'The Wizard of Oz'; so, are they married, or are they just play-acting and they are walking home to deliver the girl to her father? The film treats an interesting subject – the permeable boundaries between friendship and sexual love and between heterosexual and homosexual love. But the changes in tone and treatment are wild and untrackable. Interesting fantasy when Claire revives David in a hospital from a deep coma by dressing him up as Virginia, a reflection of the teaser beginning when (without the viewer understanding what is happening) David strokes his dead wife's body and dresses it in her wedding gown before her funeral and burial. Anti-bourgeois scenes, which Chabrol might have been proud of – the perfect suburban homes, the clueless straight husband David and the foolish, wide-eyed wealthy parents of Laure. Lurid melodrama when Virginia and Claire are making love, but the latter bolts when she brushes her hand over David's swollen penis, visible to the viewer's eye. In the above scenes one often

wonders whether Ozon is parodying his own penchant for making films about sexual issues in bourgeois films. Could have been an interesting film, but it needs discipline and boundaries. (2016)

**Now Voyager** 1942 Irving Rapper (Warners) 3.0 Bette Davis in usual show stopping role as despised old maid aunt with caterpillar eyebrows and dowdy clothes who gets transformed by magical psychiatrist Claude Rains into glamorous woman looking for love; Claude Rains in supporting role as avuncular, good guy psychiatrist; Paul Henreid as a somewhat effeminate love interest (slight foreign accent) who is married to a terrible, mentally ill wife (whom we never see); Gladys Cooper in also show stopping role as tyrannical, puritanical mother of Davis who resorts to any stratagem to manipulate her daughter into submission; Bonita Granville as vivacious niece who first mocks the maiden aunt and then is won over when she reappears in glamorous incarnation. First class, many-hankerchiefed weeper about the transformation of Charlotte (Davis) into a beautiful woman and then her relationship travails with Henreid. An obvious post-Breen film with the lovers eschewing sex in scene where they spend the night together in a stable near Rio de Janeiro; Davis has a perfectly good, respectable Boston suitor that she eventually turns down (he agrees with her) in favor of a sublimated relationship with the still married Henreid (apparently you can't even get a divorce to marry the woman you love in 1942); toward the end of the film, Davis has a long sequence back in the (idyllic) mental hospital, where she – by accident/fate! – meets Henreid's daughter (played wonderfully by an uncredited Janis Wilson) and then takes her on as a surrogate mother (her birth mother is apparently too mentally ill to fill the role). The idea is that the two lovers cannot be united sexually and in matrimony, but they can share parenting and occasionally get together for various platonic pleasures. The obvious sex surrogate is the two scenes in which Henreid lights two cigarettes in his own mouth, hands one to Davis, and then the two of them puff away with deep pleasure. The love scenes are generally dull, but the confrontations between mother and daughter throw off lots of sparks. When Davis returns after her cruise to South America, she successfully resists her mother's efforts to resubmit her to her will; Cooper (apparently) throws herself down the stairs to activate Davis' guilt and pity; then she dies of a sudden heart attack when the two have a serious fight! The script is pretty laughable in places, but the movie is redeemed by the impeccable production values, all round excellent acting, exquisite close-ups of (the not very beautiful) Bette Davis, and the blockbuster performances of Davis and Cooper. Also an excellent ubiquitous symphonic score by Max Steiner. (2008)

**La nuit américaine** 1973 François Truffaut 4.0 Truffaut as director Ferrand trying to make what appears to be a bad melodrama (wife of son falls in love with his father and it ends with son killing his father in the street), Jacqueline Bisset beautiful as Hollywood actress with shaky emotional background come to play the female lead, Jean-Pierre Aumont as faded romantic star and ex-lover of Cortese – he throws the production into turmoil with his death at the end, Jean-Pierre Léaud as temperamental actor playing the son – his romantic crises ("Do you think women are divine?") almost destroys the film, Nathalie Baye as sexy assistant director always at Truffaut's side -- sex with the prop man on the stream next to the road is classic, Valentina Cortese as alcoholic Italian actress who sips champagne on the set. Marvelous light-hearted and touching comedy about the making of a film in the Victorine studios in Nice; eloquent expression of Truffaut about his passionate love of films, so passionate that the viewer is completely convinced. Truffaut is completely focused and cares only about the film; while most of the cast are embroiled in their personal dramas, he sleeps alone and dreams about the time as a boy he walked down the street to a movie theater to steal photo stills to 'Citizen Kane.' Truffaut's occasional narration: when I start of film I want it to be great, about halfway through I just want to finish; making a film is like a stagecoach journey – at first you hope for a pleasant trip, but soon you are thinking only of your destination; making a movie is something like a freight train that has its own momentum, personal affairs have to be completely subordinate, only your work counts. The whole crew is like a family that fights, falls in love, breaks up their romances, etc.; all is impermanent except for the movie. Film follows the romantic ups and downs of several characters – Leaud has great difficulties with his script girl girlfriend who finally runs off with the English stuntman; Bisset is emotionally fragile, and breaks down when she has a brief sexual fling with Leaud (to keep him from leaving the film) and he impulsively squeals to her husband about it; the production manager's wife sits on the set knitting and

making sure her husband isn't seduced by someone, and then angrily denounces actors to the camera, etc. Tells you a lot about the production of movies: the role of the producer who is always worrying about the business end, including the insurance people (English) when Aumont dies suddenly in the end; Bisset has to climb a ladder to get to a high set of a window; the stuntman does a few dry runs before diving out of his car just before it goes over the cliff to a fiery destruction; several takes to get a kitten to go over to a discarded continental breakfast and drink milk out of the saucer; Cortese can't remember her lines (she is drunk), partly because her make-up girl is also playing a maid, and the crew has to paste her lines on the wall so she won't forget them; the movie has to be reedited and a key scene reshot at the end of the movie when Aumont dies, etc. Music of Georges Delerue is marvelously inspirational – particularly the moving baroque theme that is played several times during shooting to convey the beauty and dignity of the proceedings. A film that reminds you how much you love movies and gives you reason for loving them more. (2007)

**Les nuits de la pleine lune** 1984 Eric Rohmer 3.5 Pascal Ogier (who dies of heart attack the following year at the age of 26!) as Louise, Tcheky Karyo as her live-in lover who wants to marry her, Fabrice Luchini as Louise's platonic lover who cannot understand why she won't have sex with him, Virginie Thevenet as charming friend of Louise. Typical Rohmer comedy about young woman who wants to have her own apartment in Paris while maintaining the relationship with her live-in lover; she doesn't want sexual liberation, but just a social liberation that allows her to experience the "pain of solitude." She works in Paris and spends one night a week in her pied-à-terre. Rémi comes around to the idea with some difficulty, as she convinces him that the freedom will enable her to stay with him. Her plan works for a while, as she goes to parties, develops her relationship and ideas with Octave, her male friend, whose sexual advances she has to repulse a couple of times (he is married), and spends time alone in her apartment. She eventually meets someone who attracts her (she tells Octave that he doesn't), and after sex (she is depicted as radiantly nude in her apartment), she decides to return to Rémi, only to discover – irony! – that he has fallen in love with someone else. She wanders off to an uncertain, although certainly not tragic, future. Film probes the modern condition of young men and women in our society: is it possible to have freedom while pursuing a monogamous relationship? Are most people really lonely and looking for companionship, but not willing to pay the price? Louise, who is quite thin, does not wear a bra, and has a rather annoying baby voice, thinks she is a free spirit, and that traditional monogamy is a prison; she tries to be honest, but she seems confused and uncertain about what she really wants; the ending leaves her future open. The Full Moon is the night where nobody sleeps well, according to a mysterious figure she meets in a café after she spends the night with her lover; it is the night where she decides to return to Remi but in which he falls in love with the other woman. Touch is mostly light, with some emotion welling up at the end. Characters engage in long, often self-deceptive conversation and analysis, but dialogue seems more colloquial than some of Rohmer's movies. No music aside from a couple of pop songs, mostly accompanying the dancing in the discos. (2007)

**O Brother Where Art Thou?** 2000 Coen Brothers 3.0 Picaresque adventure of three members of a 1930s Mississippi chain gang that escape so Clooney can reunite with his ex-wife. George Clooney as goofy guy that speaks with artificial learned vocabulary; John Turturro a disappointment in his broad, hyper-goofy Southern hick performance; Tim Blake Nelson plays similar, dim-witted role somewhat better; John Goodman makes good use of his massive presence to play Bible salesman that beats and robs the trio; Charles Durning as rotund Mississippi politician, who is about to lose his race for the state governorship; Holly Hunter thin and unyielding as Clooney's former wife – she has six daughters and is fixin' to marry some other no-count guy. The film has no credible integrated plot or theme and is usually off the wall, but it has entertaining individual sequences: the narrative reminds one of 'Burn After Reading' and particularly 'Hali Caesar', although the latter benefits from an objective cultural reference, Hollywood in 1950. Much of the film is a homage to other films or cultural artifacts. The title is a reference to the dramatic film that the protagonist in 'Sullivan's Travels' wants to make in his own picaresque voyage through the hobo world of the Great Depression. References to Homer's 'Odyssey' abound: the invocation of the Muse in the beginning; the predictions of the blind man (on the railroad car); the sirens that seduce the three men and somehow disappear one of them (famous scene that

somehow comes across as dull); in Goodman's one eye a reference to the Cyclops (in the Klan scene he wears a hood with only one eye hole); Durning's character's real name seems to be Menelaus; Clooney's eventual return to Penelope (Penny), although she is anything but the patient wife she is in Homer's epic – her daughters keep referring to the “suitors” that are contending to marry her. Yet the film never catches the spirit of the epic. Much satire and mocking of yokel culture in the South, which is full of stupid-acting, violent people (including Daniel Van Barger's sheriff that seems like the devil himself) that can't speak a straight sentence of English. The Coens don't hit their targets as squarely as in their other anti-regional film, 'Fargo'; their depiction of Southern culture recalls rather Tarantino's meretricious 'Django Unchained'. The best scene in the film is the Ku Klux Klan scene, where the Brothers use ideas from Busby Berkeley (picturesque choreographing of a large number of hooded racists) and Leni Riefenstahl (lockstep obedience to a white-hooded Führer) to invent a sequence both funny and disturbing. The bluegrass-style folk music of the 1920s and 1930s (“You are My Sunshine”) provides constant entertainment, sometimes on the soundtrack, sometimes when as the Soggy Bottom Boys the boys (somehow) record a hit song, “I Am a Man of Constant Sorrow” and get to perform it in front of an audience. With its reference to cigarettes growing on trees and effortless relief payments (Land of the Lotus Eaters?), the song the film begins with – “Big Rock Candy Mountain” – expresses the yearning of Depression outsiders for a life of calm and ease. The film is a kind of sprawling mess, but there is plenty of entertaining material, especially for Coen fans. (2016)

**Obsession (US: Hidden Room)** 1949 Edward Dmytryk (Britain); music Nino Rota 3.5  
 Neatly plotted little thriller about the extremes a jealous husband might go to. Robert Newton as Clive, witty, ineluctable, extremely jealous husband of...; Sally Gray attractive as his unfaithful wife, Storm; Phil Brown as American lover who approaches his impending death with American bravado reading Boswell's Life of Sam Johnson; Wayne Naunton as nosy, insinuating Scotland Yard police inspector; Storm's and Newton's dog, Monty. Jealous of his wife's serial affairs, Newton kidnaps her current lover, imprisons him in a dank cellar on a (unconvincing) leash, and plans to humiliate him before finally murdering him and disposing of his body in a tub of acid. Dialogue is urbane and very entertaining: the gabby good ol' boys at the Liberal Club complaining about the ascendancy of the American dollar; Clive's clever, menacing interchanges with his prisoner; particularly the cat-and-mouse Columboesque games that he plays with the police inspector. Newton is a kind of mad scientist with a laboratory behind his consulting office (he is a psychiatrist), although always maintaining an appearance of respectability. The first part of the film sets up the vitriolic relationship between Newton and Storm and Newton's ambiguous treatment of Bill – he brings him whole chickens and martinis and yet tortures him with references to how long before his murder and how he is going to get rid of the body, even discussing how he is going to avoid the trap of blood-stained clothes; every visit he brings a hot water bottle filled with acid that he decants into the tub. The second part of the film has Clive's environment close in on him: apparently beginning to suspect that the long absent Bill may still be alive, Storm calls in Naunton, who engages Clive in elusive conversations, in which it is unclear whether the inspector suspects Newton of murder. Naunton's break comes when he notices that the suspect uses American colloquialisms like “Thanks Pal”, deducing that he has been spending time with Bill. Meantime, Clive proceeds with the murder, but is frustrated by Monty the dog having emptied the tub of its corrosive material; Bill somehow survives the attempt on his life. Newton is apprehended in gentlemanly fashion in his club – as Naunton reminded him on two occasion, the criminal is at a disadvantage since he is always an amateur and the police are professionals. A clever little epilogue has Storm visit Bill in the hospital, and then acquiesce in Monty's preferring Bill to her. Pleasing thriller with a neat plot and amusing English-style dialogue. (June 2017)

**Obsession** 1976 Brian DePalma 3.0 Cliff Robertson, Genevieve Bujold, John Lithgow (his first big role). Obsessive, excessive psychological thriller about man who loses his wife and daughter to kidnapers, his guilt about having failed them (he had allowed himself to be talked into putting fake money in the ransom case), and then his rediscovery of his wife (also played by Bujold) 17 years later in Florentine church San Miniato al Monte; Robertson becomes obsessed with her and – inexplicably – decides to marry her! Obviously based in many ways on *Vertigo* with his obsessive tracking of the



mystery woman, but the homage is a teaser, since behind Robertson's attachment to the new woman is a con game/double cross, in which his New Orleans partner, Lithgow speaking Southern, is swindling him and has enlisted Robertson's daughter, who did not die in original event and who hates her father as her mother's killer, to participate in the game. Quite a few twists at the end, which were a surprise to me, although apparently not to every reviewer. Bujold quite beautiful and extremely effective as the mystery woman, perhaps rivaling even Kim Novak; Robertson and Lithgow perhaps less compelling. Since print was unfortunately washed out, photography seemed washed out and too "70s" – telephoto shots, informal framing, etc. Audience manipulation seemed a bit extreme (but was Hitchcock any more plausible?). Good atmosphere in the semi-decadent streets of Florence (wouldn't Venice have been better?) and New Orleans. Oppressive and effective score by Bernard Herrmann that is both romantic and melodramatic; action sequences recalls episodes from *Vertigo* and *North by Northwest*. Use of San Miniato al Monte wonderful: Robertson erects huge replica memorial to his wife and daughter in New Orleans (he had met her in the Florence church), and then wonderful colors and tracking deep-focus shots in the church when he meets Bujold II. Perhaps too complex and manipulative, but still an entertaining and stylish ride. (2005)

**The October Man** 1947 Roy Ward Baker (writer Eric Ambler) 3.0 John Mills in affecting performance as a man in a jam and not sure that he is sane; Joan Greenwood sincere as local girl that he falls in love with; Joyce Carey as catty, gossipy fellow tenant of slightly seedy boarding house where Mills stays. Interesting, although often statically written and directed thriller about a nearly suicidal man in postwar Britain who has a serious head injury from a bus accident in which a child he was entertaining was killed; he takes up residence in a darkly lit town where he can pursue his career as an industrial chemist; the police decide that Mills committed the murder of a woman also resident in the hotel; while the police painstakingly close in on him (although with very little evidence; the real guilty party is obvious, a lurking sex pervert), Mills dallies with the sincere Greenwood; the pace of the film picks up as Mills chases the true guilty party to Paddington Station to keep him from taking a plane to Portugal; the police are won over, and the film ends with Mills resisting definitively another impulse to fling himself in front of a train and dropping the handkerchief that signifies his guilt about the death of the child; he then embraces Greenwood for a happily-ever-after finale. The film has several strong points. The mise-en-scène is effectively shadowed and darkened (perhaps reflecting the film noir ethic then flourishing in the USA?) inside and outside the dreary rooming house, although the print is not clear enough for full appreciation. Characters are fairly well written, especially the gabby Joyce Carey and a couple of the more friendly characters. Mills' and Greenwood's performances are convincing. The chase sequences that occupy the last third of the film is exciting and well-edited, perhaps reflecting Hitchcock's legacy in Britain at the time: Mills manages to elude the police in a small train station, and when he is identified in Paddington Station by a formerly helpful policeman as the wanted man, he again escapes in the aisles of the baggage room. However the script and mise-en-scène in the middle part of the film during the police investigation is plodding, unimaginative, and boring – bring a witness into a room, questions posed, more or less unsatisfactory answers, witness dismissed, fade out, move to the next scene. The film probably had a greater resonance with 1947 British audiences, since they would read it as a commentary on the difficulties experienced by demobilized servicemen when they returned from World War II. Entertaining and pretty well made. (2009)

**The Odessa File** 1974 Ronald Neame (Britain) 2.5 Jon Voigt as laid back, mostly expressionless German reporter that conducts an obsessive search for war criminal Schell; Mary Tamm as Voigt's wife – marginal acting of damsel-in-distress character; Derek Jacobi refreshing as printer that words for the Odessa group and is neurotically attached to his mother; Maria Schell briefly memorable as the mother; Maximilian Schell breaks the china as ex-concentration camp commandant who delivers the standard anti-Semitic SS rant at the end of the film just before he is killed by Voigt; a slew of mostly good German actors speaking lightly accented English. Rather plodding spy thriller based on Frederick Forsythe thriller. Voigt tracks down Schell after he happens upon the suicide death of one of his victims. In the process, he teams up with Israeli agents, who are trying to short circuit the Odessa Group's nefarious plot to destroy Israel by supplying Nasser with a rocket guidance system. One of the strong

points in the film is the realistic and colorful locations – the busy streets of postwar Hamburg at Christmas, two picturesque Schlosses where Voigt encounters members of the Odessa group; an old-fashioned factory in Bayreuth, etc. The film, however, fails to engage the viewer: Voigt's performance is usually lazy and lackluster; the filming and editing are standard and impassive; dangerous moments range from the fairly gripping (Voigt's struggle with the assassin in Jacobi's workshop) to the limp (threats to Tamm when she is watched by the secretly Nazi police, Voigt being pushed in front of a subway train and escaping by rolling under the platform). The film shares with 'The Boys from Brazil' 1978 the focus on the survival of fanatical Nazis in the postwar Federal Republic; this time they are plotting to destroy Israel. Lacks the complications and moral quandaries of the Le Carré films. (2014)

**L'oeil de Vichy** 1993 Claude Chabrol 3.0 Unusual documentary in that it is essentially a long string of excerpts from official newsreel films produced in France during the years of the Vichy government (1940-44); the film has only minimum commentary either to fill in basic events or to produce a sense of irony by describing Vichy crimes set against some innocuous newsreel. The newsreels give a vivid picture of what life in France was like during World War II (shortage of food, cigarettes, nail polish, nylon stockings, etc.) and of the self-image of the Vichy regime. To wit, constant pictures of le Maréchal working at his desk, delivering a radio address, walking in the streets, or inspecting some government initiative; he comes across as a dignified old man, who moves and talks slowly and has limited energy: il a annoncé qu'il fait le don de sa personne à la France. Laval is usually presented as Pétain's loyal supporter. The government broadcasts that it is bringing a true revolution to France to replace the egotistical regime of bankers, industrialists, and Jews that prevailed under the Third Republic. There is some mention of a corporatist-like regime embodying the idea of cooperation and solidarity instead of the class clash of interests predominant under capitalism; more often the newsreels show French youth exercising and camping German style in the outdoors and an appreciation of the French countryside and of the strength and good sense of the peasants. The newsreels are very critical of the English (little mention of the Americans), hammering on their egotism under the thumb of the Jews, as they destroy part of the French fleet at Mers-el-Kebir and cause widespread destruction in their bombing of French cities. They speak always positively of the Germans. France is now integrating herself into a new Europe under German leadership that will pose a challenge to the Anglo-Saxons; Germany is praised for its good treatment of French prisoners of war and its willingness to return many of them to their homes; Frenchmen are encouraged to join the League of French Volunteers Against Bolshevism (fighting with the Wehrmacht in Russia) or the labor corps sent to Germany. Nary a word of course about the persecution of the Jews, but educational programs make clear the extreme anti-semitism of the Vichy regime (the narrator at times comments on the crimes against the Jews in France). As the Allies approach, the newsreels sing the praises of the German defenders, but of course all reporting ceases by the middle of August 1944. An enlightening historical document for the understanding of the Vichy phenomenon. (2012)

**Of Gods and Men** 2010 Xavier Beauvois 3.0 Lambert Wilson as the serious, intensely spiritual abbot of a Cistercian monastery in Algeria in the 1990s; Michael Lonsdale as the informal doctor monk; several other soulful-looking actors that look like real monks – Olivier Rabourdin, Philippe Laudenbach, Jacques Herlin, Loic Pichon, Xavier Maly. Sincerely spiritual French film about eight Cistercian monks living in the Algerian Atlas mountains in harmony with grateful local villagers; the time is the Algerian civil war of the 1990s, and all foreigners in Algeria are threatened by the terrorist Islamist guerillas (illustrated in a particularly grisly scene in which several Croatian workers have their throats slit by the goons); the monks, who ask only to live and pray in peace, are warned by the authorities to leave, but after much internal debate, they decide to stay; in the end they are kidnapped by the terrorists and then murdered when the French government refuses to release Islamist prisoners. The film is very slow-moving; little happens; it spends a lot of time observing the picturesque countryside (the film was made in Morocco), recording the everyday activities of the monks, their friendly interactions with the local population, and panning over their soulful faces. It has little soundtrack music aside from the monks' singing Gregorian chant and a touching scene near the end when Lonsdale plays a famous excerpt from Tchaikovsky's 'Swan Lake'. The filming style is objective and unobtrusive – the camera observes

dispassionately usually from a distance, even when the old men are marched through the snow to their death; a possible exception is the scene in which the camera pans over the faces of the men recording their silent thoughts while ‘Swan Lake’ plays on the soundtrack. There are no religious revelations, no messages from God, who remains apparently silent while the monks wrestle with whether to leave or stay. The message of the film is quietly spiritual: the monks are sincerely and completely committed to their task of praising God, supporting themselves with their own labor (they sell their honey in the local marketplace), and loving and succoring the local population – Lonsdale stands out as the medical man (doctor?) who treats dozens of poor people a day; martyrdom is not part of their philosophy. The message is also ecumenical: Christianity and Islam are brother religions whose relationship has been poisoned by radicals; the monks make no effort to convert local people; the abbot knows the Quran well and is even able in the middle of the film to persuade a guerilla leader to leave them in peace by quoting a pro-Christian passage from the holy book; several of the monks also attend a family ceremony in which they listen attentively to Muslim prayers that invoke strength against unbelievers. A sincere and noble Catholic film that would perhaps have more impact if treated more cinematically. (2011)

**Old Boy** 2003 Park Chanwook 2.5 Choi Min-sik in powerful, intense acting (although a lot of demonic staring and wincing) as revenge bent Dae-su, Kang Hye-jong as the pretty Mido, who becomes his lover and turns out to be his daughter (!), Yu Ji-tae as the perpetrator Wu-jin. Extremely kinetic and luridly violent movie about revenge: Dae-su is mysteriously imprisoned, and when he is released he pursues his revenge relentlessly, finding out after much melodrama and over-the-top violence that when in a Catholic high school (!) he had been responsible for the suicide (?) of the perpetrator's sister, about whom he had supposedly spread rumors about her incest with her brother. Most striking in the movie is the appeal to violence (several sequences of mass conflict in which Dae-su somehow emerges victorious against perhaps 20 enemies) and especially to lurid excess à la Quentin Tarantino (who was by the way the head of the judging at Cannes where the film received a top award) – Dae-su slowly and ickily consumes a live octopus whose tentacles continue to squirm outside his mouth, he uses his hammer to attack opponents and particularly to extract the teeth of one, when begging Wu-jin not to tell his daughter that he has had sex with her, he cuts his tongue out of his own mouth with a pair of scissors (that just happened to be lying within reach). Film tuned to excess in color, violence, emotional suffering of the protagonist. Some absurd moments – Dae-su tasting his way through the city's pot stickers to find out who catered the prison's food; why did the goalers cut his hair and give him a shave after gassing him to sleep when he could have done it himself? What's the point of the lengthy drunk scene in the police station at the beginning? Plot has possibilities and it is intriguing to wonder with Dae-su what is behind Wu-jin's single-minded sadism, but the pay-off is ambiguous and confusing: Wu-jin has transferred his guilt about sex with his sister to Dae-su; and his ultimate revenge is to arrange for him to fall in love with Mido, who turns out to be his daughter!, and to have sex with her, about which of course Dae-su is tortured with guilt and regret. The film's coda is quiet and packed with redemption – Dae-su's memory of his incest has been removed by hypnosis (!), and he and Mido are reunited in a pristine mountain winter wonderland in an embrace in which Dae-su says "I love you:" very ambiguous since presumably Dae-su means that he loves her as a daughter, while Mido must still consider him her lover since her memory has not been altered! There is perhaps some hint of Catholic penance and forgiveness with the hypnotist as the confessor with powers of absolution (was Park raised a Catholic?). Where is this going to go?! (2007)

**Old School** 2003 Todd Phillips 2.0 Luke Wilson rents a house next to his old college deciding to live the frat guy's life of sex, booze, and rock and roll; Will Ferrell the comic center of the film adding an unpredictable dose of off-the-wall goofiness that saves the movie from flat-line boredom; Vince Vaughan as father of two small children -- he uses his money and connections as a local stereo entrepreneur to throw smashingly wild fraternity parties; Ellen Pompeo providing the cute love interest for Wilson. Another film in the ‘Animal House’ line about immature 20-something males wanting to relive their glory days as college students. The film is basically an excuse for gags, some of which are funny. The narrative is hardly scandalous – Ferrell is married and confines his shenanigans to running nude through town; Vaughan is also married, carries around his younger child as he organizes wild parties

in their false frat house, and refuses to have sex with a winning and willing undergraduate; Wilson is not married (he breaks up with his live-in girlfriend [Juliette Lewis] at the beginning of the film when he catches her having group sex with a blindfolded couple), but having a strong conscience he feels bad about having sex with a high school student; his compensation however is finally to hook up with Pompeo, whose knowing smiles promise him much pleasure at the end of the film. Much of the plot deals with the scheme of the impossibly young-looking “Dean” to drive the guys and their ersatz frat off campus; he is finally discredited and fired for trying to bribe the Student Body President. The parties are pretty wild: wrestling matches with participants lubed with K-J jelly; two winsome girls strip topless and when they face down an “89-year-old” “member” of the fraternity (Patrick Cranshaw), he dies of a heart attack (hilarious, no?); much of the time is taken up with rapping by Snoop Dogg. Perhaps the most amusing scene is when the hapless Ferrell shoots himself in the neck with a tranquilizing dart at a party (Don’t ask what a tranquilizing gun is doing at a party); he then rolls into a swimming pool, where the soundtrack strikes up “The Sounds of Silence” (unexpected reference to ‘The Graduate’); when a bystander gives him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, Ferrell French kisses him, since he was having a dream about reuniting with his wife; disgust all around. One of the less inspired of the juvenile male movies of the 2000s; ‘Wedding Crashers’ was funnier. (2014)

**The Omen** 1976 Richard Donner 3.0 Gregory Peck thoughtful, distinguished, and dignified as US Ambassador to Britain; Lee Remick suitably nervous and scared as his (much younger) wife; Harvey Stephens as the semi-innocent-looking little Satan boy; David Warner sporting a page-boy haircut as a photographer that joins Peck in his investigation to find out what is going on; Billie Whitelaw truly scary as Mary-Poppins-like character that appears spontaneously to be the child’s governess (and protector, as she tells him). Well-made, sometimes scary blockbuster-style horror film of the 1970s, obviously sharing many characteristics with ‘The Exorcist’ and ‘Rosemary’s Baby’. Peck has a guilty secret – when his baby died in childbirth, unbeknownst to his wife he picked up a substitute baby from a Roman hospital so she wouldn’t be chagrined. But soon scary indications of his unusual nature occur on Peck’s luxurious estate: the nanny commits suicide by publicly hanging herself during a garden party; Whitelaw arrives (the viewer knows from the beginning that she is bad news); a black dog watches warily from the garden and later makes his way into the house. A turnaround in the plot occurs when Warner, who for some reason has been taking a lot of photos of Peck and his family, discovers startling photographic evidence that a priest trying to warn Peck was marked for death (he was impaled by a lightning rod falling from the roof of a country church), and he persuades Peck to take off for Italy and Palestine (where he gets a little help from Leo McKern) to find out what is going on. The result – abject failure: everyone dies. In the film’s showpiece Remick is pushed off the balcony by Damien riding a tricycle; she survives but is then pushed out of a window by Whitelaw in the hospital. Although surviving attacks by a pack of incompetent black dogs in an Italian cemetery, Warner is eventually beheaded in grisly fashion by a truck in an Italian city. In the film’s climax Peck drags his “son” to a local church to execute him with a ceremonial knife (sounds pretty pagan!), but in the key moment the police shoot him dead to prevent the murder; cut to Peck’s state funeral when the camera focuses on the back of a child’s head; he turns and we see Damien smiling in a knowing and faintly evil way. Truly devastating ending in which the forces of evil have made a clean slate. Set for the sequel! The film is well-made, but the viewer has to buy in to the reality of Satan fulfilling prophecies from ‘Revelations’ to bring about Armageddon, all of which in retrospect is a bit hard. The film tries its best to evoke the affecting tragedy of ‘The Exorcist’, but perhaps because of its derivative nature does not quite succeed. Entertaining, though, with lots of jolts. (2011)

**On Dangerous Ground** 1952 Nicholas Ray (RKO) 3.0 Robert Ryan as lanky, disillusioned inner city cop with a crazed violent streak – he beats up suspects to extract information; Ed Begley as his boss, police captain that warns him about his transgressions; Ida Lupino pretty glamorous as blind young, life-giving woman (she has a tree in her living room!) protecting her brother against the police; Ward Bond hard to recognize as older man who obsessively seeks vengeance for the murder of his daughter. Flawed, although interesting, film divided into two largely separate parts: noirily photographed inner city, where plain clothes detectives doggedly pursue low life types, whom the ill-tempered Ryan regularly

mistreats; and the bright, snow-filled mountain landscape, where Ryan shows a noble streak by defending the teenage brother of Lupino against the rage of Bond; upon his return to the city, Ryan seems to realize that Bond's rage is the image of his own, and he returns to the country for redemption in the arms of his beloved: big Hollywood kiss at fade-out. Film impresses with the depiction of the close-knit friendship of the detectives confronted every day with the misdeeds of the scum of the city; the quiet rage of Ryan seething behind his facial mask; the intensity of Ray's film style – oppressive close-ups, unexpected edits and mise-en-scène as in his introduction of Lupino (face hidden for the first few shots) and of her brother (the viewer sees only the top of his head). The film suffers perhaps from lack of integration. To a great extent it contains two separate films – the first about Ryan's existential anger and anxiety in the city; the other about his noble and sensitive actions in the country, where he arrives seemingly already transformed even before he falls in love with Lupino and realizes his parallels with Bond. Ryan's conversion/redemption experience needs to be developed more clearly. Bernard's Herrmann's percussive score intrudes on the drama in several scenes; some passages prefigure his work in 'North by Northwest'. Some of the scenes recall the emotional and poetic intensity of 'They Live by Night'. (2016)

**On His Majesty's Secret Service** 1969 Peter Hunt (Britain) 3.0 George Lazenby a deadpan Bond, but good-looking, cultivated (he knows a lot about perfume and butterflies), and a good acrobat; Diana Rigg as Tracy, sometimes sexy daughter of mob boss -- she is simultaneously strong-willed (defying her father) and sensitive (falling in love with 007); Telly Savalas suitably snarling and diabolical as Blofeld, the head of SPECTRE (international criminal organization). Despite Lazenby's impassive performance, one of the better Bonds because of Lazenby's and Rigg's true love and the long, exciting action sequence that occupies the last 40 minutes of the film. The film opens with Bond saving Rigg from committing suicide on a Côte d'Azur beach; the two then pursue their relationship as Rigg's father (Gabriele Ferzetti) encourages Bond to marry her; some of the lovers' initial scenes together are cornily romantic, as they walk through gardens to a saccharine Louis Armstrong ballad. Eventually the threat of SPECTRE takes precedence, and with dad's help Bond journeys to a snow-covered mountaintop in Switzerland (actually filmed on the Jungfrau?) to confront Blofeld about his plot to blackmail the world with his bevy of beauties carrying a species-threatening bacillus into society; amusingly, Blofeld seems most interested in having his claim to a baronetcy confirmed. Beginning with a dull scene, in which Bond is closed in the gondola machine room, the film has a 45-minute climax that never lets up: Bond and Tracy skiing down an endless mountainside pursued by numerous heavies, transferring to a bobsled careening down the track with the bad guys in hot pursuit, in the village jumping into a car and driving crazily through a snowstorm, somehow entering a stock car race and wrecking several of the cars; at one point the two hiding in a barn, where Bond tenderly proposes marriage to Tracy; Bond returning to destroy Blofeld's mountaintop headquarters with Ferzetti's armed helicopters. The film ends with the Bond-Tracy marriage ceremony, and then – heart-breakingly – the shooting death of Tracy on the Cote d-Azur corniche; Bond buries his face sobbing next to the bloody head of his beloved; credits roll. The film is long at 2:22, but generally entertaining. The scenery on the Riviera and in Switzerland is spectacular; through fabulous editing the last part of the film holds the attention even of viewers not particularly fond of action sequences. Nary a gadget used in the whole film. (2015)

**Once** 2006 John Carney 2.5 Glen Hansard as the Guy, Dublin street musician pining after his lost girlfriend who has taken off to London ; Marketa Irglova as the Girl, kind of a pianist and part of a Czech immigrant family living in working-class Dublin. Rather unremarkable, kitchen-sink musical that makes extra effort to integrate the music into the narrative and make it supportive of the drama. When singing disconsolately in the city, the Guy is approached by a curious, direct, wide-eyed Girl who strikes up an affectionate relationship with him, based partly on their mutual love for music and partly on their need for consolation since both have been wounded romantically – Girl has a small child and is separated from her husband and Guy stills pines after his departed lost love. The narrative consists of the two of them visiting different venues where they strike up their songs together, which are meant to be reflections of their love for music, but which also express their individual psychological and dramatic situations – their sense of loneliness and loss, their uncertainty about how to live their lives, their developing affections for one another. The central event is gathering a band to cut a CD of their music (shade of 'The

Commitments'), which they complete in a marathon weekend session from which all emerge exhausted but elated. The romantic tension about whether the two will go beyond friendship and attraction to consummate their relationship ends in an unexpected way: Hansard's invitation to Irglova that she spend the night with him is ultimately turned down, she reunites with her husband (final scenes of domestic bliss with him and her little daughter) while the Guy is last seen in the Dublin airport talking to his girlfriend on the telephone and preparing to board a plane to reunite with her in London. Film has a genuine feeling, much more down-to-earth than the Broadway musical that plays for big laughs (e.g., in the scene where the bank loan officer reveals to the kids that he too is a singer-songwriter and in all the scenes with the Czech immigrants that come to the Girl's apartment to watch television); the developing, ever so tentative romantic relationship has a wistful, sentimental tone that is sometimes moving. To this viewer the main problem with the film is the folksy-rocky music: intended to be simple and heartfelt, it comes across as often trite, repetitive, prosaic – the lyrics vary between the bombastic (Guy loudly lamenting his lost love while he strums his guitar violently) and unimaginative and unpoetic, something made up on the spot without any lyrical fireworks. The film has an obvious debt to 'The Commitments' but without the bawdy, outrageous humor and the hard beat of soul music. A quiet pleasure that lacks dramatic impact and musical interest. (2012)

**Once Were Warriors** 1994 Lee Tamahori (New Zealand) 3.0 Rena Owen as sympathetic, courageous, heroic Maori woman standing up for her family of 5 children; Temuera Morrison as her physically powerful, charismatic, but deadly violent drunk of a husband; Mamaengaroa Kerr-Bell as Owen's pretty, optimistic teenage daughter (who however does not look like she is 13). Vivid, intensely and violently dramatic, sometimes manipulative film about the fate of a Maori family living in a housing project in contemporary Auckland. The story is told from the point of view of Owen, who is abused emotionally and physically by her brutish husband (the scene in which she is battered black and blue by him toward the beginning of the film is surprising and shocking) and who struggles valiantly to provide a decent life for her children (they never seem to lack the necessities of life). She is challenged by the actions of her two sons, one of whom joins an intensely tattooed Maori gang and the other is sent to reform school by the local court; but even more disturbing is the fate of her sweet, beautiful, diary-writing daughter, who is raped by her "uncle" during a drunken orgy in her home and who then hangs herself from a tree in the backyard when she cannot find support in her community. The style of the film is percussive and melodramatic – a lot of lip-trembling anger (Owen) and shrieking, eyes-bulging rage (Morrison), violent and bloody fights in the barn-like tavern where the unemployed Morrison spends most of his waking hours, acting-out rage by the young males, extreme patterned tattoos on the faces of the angriest young Maoris (the men on their chests and faces, the women on their faces and their lips), etc. Although the film has very few Caucasian characters and makes no reference to racial injustice in New Zealand, the issue of oppression of Maoris and the need for Maori pride and reconnecting to native traditions lurks in the background of the film and then bursts into the foreground toward the end – the second son is taught Maori male dance and face grimaces in his reform school (but he refuses to have his face tattooed saying that he wears his inside) and Owen takes the body of her daughter back to her tribal homeland for burial at the end. The film suggests that the solution to the Maori predicament is pride in tribal traditions, wearing the tattoos, dancing the dances, speaking the Maori language, banding together for mutual support, and staying true to your family. At the end the two wayward boys return to attend their sister's funeral and bond affectionately with the rest of the family, minus of course the father who has returned to the tavern to get drunk yet again. Film suggests some parallels with American Indians and Australian aborigines. Compelling film that you don't want to stop watching. (2013)

**One, Two Three** 1961 Billy Wilder 3.0 Jimmy Cagney, Pamela Tiffin, Horst Buchholz, Arlene Francis. Wilder very different from previous two movies, especially sentimental 'Apartment.' Wild farce choreographed to the 'Sabre Dance' and to the non-stop wisecrack dialogue of Wilder and I.L. Diamond. Butt of humor is topical – almost everything. Capitalists, westerners are sex-obsessed, greedy, ambitious, etc.; Cagney will stoop to any manipulation to get promoted to London office. Russians, which I think were the funniest of the butts of humor (they interrogate Buchholz by playing a loud recording of "Itsy bitsy teeny weeny yellow polka dot bikini"), were bureaucratic, fearful, ideological

apparatchiki, who however sell out the Party in the end, mainly because of greed. Germans are depicted as highly efficient ex-Nazis, all hiding guilty secrets from the war; one newspaper reporter threatening to print the truth about Buchholz, shuts up when Cagney discovers that he is ex-S.S.. The best jokes are about the Germans and the Russians; the American-related humor is stale and dated. Buchholz is bad, as is Tiffin. Cagney, with his stiff rapid walk reminiscent of ‘Yankee Doodle Dandy,’ is a volcano of energy, who never stops rushing around, barking orders and delivering one-liners and other wisecracks. A few funny scenes, especially in middle sections (the chase with the Moskvich spewing fumes and smoke and the fenders coming off!), but lots of it misses the mark. Good final joke, when Cagney is trying to get cokes out of a machine, and he holds up a bottle of Pepsi and yells “Schlemmer!” References to Lubitsch (“Schulz!”), to ‘Public Enemy’ (the grapefruit in the face), etc. Sum: madcap, satirical farce. Pictures of East Berlin virtually unreconstructed in 1960. (2005)

**One False Move** 1992 Carl Franklin 3.0 Bill Paxton, Billy Bob Thornton, Cynda Williams, Michael Beach. Thriller/cop movie about a couple of vicious psychopaths, who murder six people over drugs in LA, then travel cross country to small town in Arkansas, where there is another blood fest (in the meantime the bad guys have killed a Texas state trooper on the highway, and three more drug dealers in Houston) and a big emotional payoff. All performances are good, particularly those of the bad guys. Plot interesting because we know from beginning that there is going to be a confrontation two thirds of the way across the country; two savvy LA cops travel there to help with the pinch. Narrative ends up focusing on Lyla, who wants to visit Star City because of her son there, and it turns out (after she returns) that the child is the result of a seduction by the respectable, although somewhat naïve town police chief. Contrast between the two cultures handled very well. Initial murders are grisly and darkly fascinating; all the heads of the victims were hooded, and Beach is sadistically handy with a knife. Final shootout expertly choreographed, and emotional message is quite satisfying. Some of exchanges are clichéd, which undermines at times the immediacy and conviction of the story (e.g., exchanges between Lyla, her brother and the police chief). (2005)

**One from the Heart** 1982 Francis Coppola 1.5 Teri Garr looking a little mature as Las Vegas window dresser living with long-time boyfriend; Frederic Forrest also looking a little mature as her boyfriend deeply in love with her; Harry Dean Stanton as Forrest’s womanizing friend; Raul Julia as the guy that Garr momentarily takes up with; Nastassia Kinski drop dead beautiful as the girl (circus performer) that Forrest has a one-night stand with in a parked convertible. Empty piece of eye candy posing as a romantic comedy. Couple that has been together for five years breaks up, they each have brief affairs the night of the break-up, and then they fall back into one another’s arms. Very little attempt to make the characters real or to exploit the geographical identity of Las Vegas (big contrast with ‘The Cooler’). The whole movie is shot on a sound stage (Zoetrope Studios) with an emphasis on magical realism, a dumbed-down version of Fellini, dance numbers in the street or on the outskirts of the city, outdoor scenes with mountains outlining a pretty blue or orangish sky, some singing, extensive use of greenish and reddish lighting flooding the mise-en-scene. Obviously intended to be a romantic fantasy, but since we don’t care much about the characters and we don’t know where we are, it is hard to get involved. Strong points are Julia and the stunning Kinski (legs! And face!) and – for his fans – the extensive songs of Tom Waits; Forrest in particular fails to be compelling or credible. Coppola should go back to mafia operas! (2007)

**One Hour With You** 1932 Ernst Lubitsch 3.0 Maurice Chevalier hair always perfectly brushed, married happily to MacDonald and trying to resist Tobin; Jeannette MacDonald expressive, giggly, affectionate comedienne; Charlie Ruggles as square, foolish guy pursuing MacDonald making ridiculous, humiliating love declarations; Genevieve Tobin very lively, mobile, good timing as lubriciously aggressive woman; Roland Young as very dull, deceived husband of Tobin, who wants a divorce with his wife. The last of Lubitsch’s sexy musical comedies. Entirely a remake of “The Marriage Circle” located among the rich in Paris but refashioned for music and for the MacDonald–Chevalier team; lacks the subtlety of its predecessor. The songs are rather sparse – only a few and very short, but some are charming and memorable, especially “Wedding Ring” and “What Would You Do?”.

1) ‘What a Little Thing Like a Wedding Ring Can Do’ duet Chevalier and MacDonald – how nice it is to be married and not have to worry about what others think: \*\*\* 2) MacDonald “Day After Day We will Always Be Sweethearts” – short waltz ditty \*\*; 3) Short duet Tobin and Chevalier “Three Times A Day” delightful sprightly, somewhat off-color flirtation duet \*\*\*; 4) Corny tenor bandleader then Tobin and Chevalier, then Ruggles and MacDonald sing film theme song “One Hour With You” – e.g., “When moonbeams fall on roses and dew”; ends up with MacDonald and Chevalier \*\* 1/2; 5) Chevalier “But Oh That Mitzi!” explains why he is thinking about meeting Tobin after that party; classic hammy, mugging Chevalier \*\*\*; 6) The two reprise “Day After Day” as they appear to reconcile; 7) Chevalier (1:08), “What Would You Do With a Girl Like That” – addressing the camera and justifying his infidelity with Mitzi as something any man would do; clever lyrics and quite short \*\*\* 1/2. Perhaps to compensate for paucity of songs, the characters sometimes talk in rhythmic rhyming couplets. Chevalier exploits his smarmy charm to address the camera two or three times. Usual retrograde gender relationships. Ruggles says it to MacDonald: “You have a right to be wrong. You’re a woman. Women are born to be wrong. I like my women wrong!” It ends with Chevalier confessing his infidelity with Mitzi to MacDonald, and when she tries to retaliate by lying to him about her evening with Ruggles, Chevalier just laughs. MacDonald ends up calling him a “naughty boy” and the two are reconciled with the understanding that casual infidelity should be forgiven if you are really in love with your spouse, especially if the husband is the guilty one. (2008)

**The One I Love** 2014 Charlie McDowell 3.0 Ted Danson as psychotherapist, who is up to no good, although it is hard to specify what; Mark Duplass as Ethan, modern LA husband that is sent off with his wife to a property in Ojai that is supposed to be good for their sinking relationship; Elisabeth Moss as Sophie, his wife; both Duplass and Moss play doubles of themselves once the plot thickens at the property. Intriguing, sometimes insightful, Indie film about contemporary U.S. romantic relationships; the film emphasizes science fiction toward the end. Ethan and Sophie are at first surprised that the property has no therapist or other guests, and then even more so when they realize that there are duplicates of themselves on the premises: Sophie encounters a clone of Ethan when she goes to the guest cottage (she even has sex with him [first time in months] thinking that he is her husband); Ethan encounters Sophie 2 in the main house while Sophie 1 is absent. The film is very entertaining as the two principals become aware of the strange situation, although the viewer cannot help but wonder how the clone couple came to resemble Ethan and Sophie so closely. Whereas cautious Ethan remains suspicious of his Sophie clone, Sophie finds Ethan 2 to her liking – he is “20%” cooler, more relaxed, more charming, and more adventurous than the real thing: the film seems to be saying that just a little stretching in one’s personality would do wonders for a foundering relationship; matters even reach the point where Sophie decides to leave her husband for the new man. Toward the end of the film science fiction seems to take over. A new twist has Ethan discover sound files that indicate that the clone couple was trained – apparently by Danson – to imitate the speech patterns of Ethan and Sophie. After, it becomes apparent that the clone couple is really a separate couple trapped in a space warp (which is emphasized by having Ethan 2 bounce off an invisible shield when he tries to run away!); their only means of escape from the property is to replace the new couple; then the new couple is confined to the premises and must conspire to replicate and replace the next couple that Danson sends their way. Ethan and the woman he assumes is his wife then succeed in making their escape back home in LA; but the last shot of the film indicates that the Sophie clone is the one that has returned with him (the shtick about eating bacon); the expression on Ethan’s face indicates that he is aware of the situation and doesn’t mind at all. Ending is entertainingly cynical. While the film is well-acted, well-directed, and well-photographed, the narrative is a constant source of surprise and confusion. Why in the world is Danson doing all of this? What happened to start the trapping syndrome? How is he able to create the physical resemblances (the speech similarities are explained – more or less)? Entertaining, intriguing, some insights about relationships, but its credibility-defying plot line can be distracting. (2015)

**One of our Aircraft is Missing** 1942 Michael Powell; Emeric Pressburger (Britain) 3.0 Persistently optimistic, almost sunny WWII propaganda film that purports to do for the Netherlands what ‘The 49th Parallel’ did for Canada. Eric Portman as second pilot on the two-engine Lancaster bomber



that is shot down returning from a bombing raid on Stuttgart; Bernard Miles as the slightly goofy front gunner; Godfrey Tearle as the rear gunner a bit old for the job – he is wounded while trying to escape, but survives; Hugh Williams and Emrys Jones as two rather undifferentiated crew members; Pamela Brown makes an impression as hard-nosed leader of the Dutch underground, who aggressively verifies that the British airmen are not German provocateurs; Google Withers as another efficient and dedicated female member of the Underground; Peter Ustinov very young as a priest with a pendulous lip. Effective depiction of the Stuttgart raid focusing on the camaraderie of the men inside the cramped aircraft. When the men bail out, they gather in the Dutch countryside and make their way toward the North Sea amidst a language polyglot of English, Dutch (the locals), and German (Germany army guards who are usually shouting). They are fortunate to meet up with members of the Dutch underground, who shepherd them to safety – bicycling across the flatlands, hiding out in a Haarlem house right above German headquarters, escaping in a rowboat under a guarded swing bridge, camping out in a German lifesaving buoy in the company of two German fliers, who seem like decent chaps. Entertaining, suspenseful concluding sequence, in which two speedboats approach the buoy; our men think they are “Jerries”, but are relieved when they hear a seaman speaking English. The men return to England, where a short time later they are ready for another mission – this time against Berlin in a four-engine Lancaster. The film does not individualize the crew members, but celebrates their solidarity (the men refuse to leave the wounded Tearle behind in the buoy, even though he would probably be taken care of by the Germans), their good humor as they tease one another and talk about the girlfriends they had when stationed in Germany prewar, their ability to get their job done without the lockstep discipline of the Germans. The Dutch are uniformly devoted to the anti-German war effort, watched loosely by the German occupiers. Even the Germans are treated rather kindly as adversaries; no mention of Nazis, only Jerries; both sides want to follow the laws of war. The film is intended to encourage the Dutch in their resistance with the assurance that Britain supports you and will eventually liberate you (no mention of the Americans). Film drags a bit in the middle section, but the raid on Stuttgart, and the escape at the end are interesting and suspenseful. (2016)

**Onibaba** 1964 Kaneto Shindo 3.5 Nabuko Otowa as youngish mother-in-law with a striking white streak in her hair; Jitsuko Yoshimura, pretty, delicate face, as young woman living with Otowa in a reed hut in the wilds of Japan; Kei Sato as Hachi, primitive-acting ex-soldier living close to the two women. Striking, sometimes scary Japanese art film from 1960s that paints poetic, convincing picture of the primitiveness of life in times of war. Film is set in a huge reed area somewhere in southern Japan (hot in summer) during the time of troubles in the 16th century. The characters are always buried beneath the level of the reeds, which are constantly swaying in the breeze. Otowa and her daughter-in-law make their living by preying on samurai that get lost in the reeds: they murder them, strip them of their armor, dump their bodies in a pit lined with skeletons (“The Hole”)and sell it to a merchant in exchange for grain. The film focuses on the bottom-level primitiveness of the life of the women: they murder for a living; they live in a reed hut with no comforts; they dip water out of the lake, they eat aggressively and noisily, especially on the infrequent occasions when they find meat – in one scene they catch a dog, and the scene cuts to them greedily ripping the meat from the bone with their teeth. Jitsuko lives like an instinctual animal – when she runs through the reeds, her eyes are wide open and her teeth bared. Drama and tragedy are awakened when Hachi returns from the war without Jitsuko’s husband with him. Hachi stalks Jitsuko sexually while she is fetching water in the reeds, and when she eagerly responds, they copulate joyfully in his hut. Jealousy and anger however take over Nabuko: she is angry with the man who returned from the war without bringing her son, and in any case she is jealous of her daughter-in-law’s sexual liaison with him; she tells her that demons will consign her to hell for her sin. She steals a hideous horned mask from another wayward samurai, and uses it to terrorize Jitsuko when she tries to seek comfort in the arms of Hachi; the shot of the masked Otowa rising in the midst of the reeds to block Jitsuko’s path is memorably terrifying. The film ends tragically with the death of Hachi and Otowa falling into the dreaded hole while she is chasing her daughter-in-law. Mise-en-scene is memorable – Shindo tells the story with visuals and little dialogue, constant reference to the sea of reeds surrounding the characters, the women are often nude down to the waist to emphasize their sexual nature. The focus of the story is pretty eloquent: war reduces everyone to a primeval state (Hobbes’ “war of all against all”)

where only survival matters – murder if necessary, scramble for food and eat greedily, seek sexual contact to perpetuate the species. Morality becomes irrelevant (although it seems Otowa is punished severely for her immorality). Enjoyable, even riveting, film. (2014)

**Only Angels Have Wings** 1939 Howard Hawks (Columbia) 3.5 Cary Grant cast against type as a daredevil pilot and manager of a mail airline in a fictitious South American republic (certainly west coast), pleasantly macho and handsome; Jean Arthur her appealing unpretentious self as showgirl who gets stuck on the way to her new gig in Panama; Thomas Mitchell as Kid, Grant's right-hand man, who befriends Arthur and dies a courageous death at the end; Richard Barthelmess ('Way Down East') as new pilot who has to reestablish his credibility and honor after previously bailing out on a favorite of the male club in Barranca; Rita Hayworth as his wife, who has not much more to do but act glamorous and overact; Sig Ruman as the owner of the airline, who serves mostly as a Dutchman's comic relief; Noah Berry Jr (Rocky!) as one of the devil-may-care pilots who is killed in the beginning of the movie. Excellent movie combining good characters, some romance (will Arthur get Grant?), and especially high adventure in and around the Andes. Perhaps with the exception of Hayworth, all the performances are credible and compelling. The men who work for the airline hang out at the bar until they get their orders from Grant, they wear gun belts (one wonders why), they are loyal to one another, and when somebody dies, they change the subject since it must have been that that pilot was not good enough for the job. An awful lot of pilots die, making one wonder how they could run an airline with such a casualty rate. The set including the port (with a moving boat!), the airstrip, and the interior of the buildings (looks like movie Hawaii) is terrifically detailed and textured. The sequences of the planes taking off, landing, and crashing at the airport are not always completely convincing (but not bad), but the aerial sequence of Barthelmess flying to pick up a sick person in the desert is beautiful and gripping – landing with difficulty at the short strip after banking around a sheer cliff to make the approach (were these sequences filmed in the Rockies?), and then taking off with insufficient speed but taking advantage of the drop after the end of the runway to pick up speed. No doubt that this is a man's universe – they all live by a code of guts and loyalty and stiff upper lip – but it is modified to allow Arthur eventually to make her way into the group. Nice ending, since Grant's invitation to Arthur to stay in Barranca (he is off flying again after being shot in the arm by a jealous Arthur!) doesn't have to be explicit (such would undermine the male code), but is implicit by means of the double-headed coin. Ending means Grant has the best of both worlds – he continues flying and he has the love of a good woman. (2010)

**Only Lovers Left Alive** 2013 Jim Jarmusch 2.0 Tilda Swinton as Eve, a fey, mild-mannered, vampire living in Tangier, Morocco; Tom Hiddleston as Adam, her husband and true love, a much more pessimistic – even suicidal – member of the species living in bombed out, ruined Detroit; John Hurt looking ancient and dying as Christopher Marlowe (!), vampire friend of Eve living also in Tangier; Mia Wasikowska the films breath of fresh air as Eve's irresponsible, fidgety younger sister that comes to visit the couple in latter part of film. Serious mish-mash of a film representing Jarmusch's – mostly unconnected and inchoate – impressions of the vampire phenomenon. Although mise-en-scène, imagery are interesting and sometimes arresting, it is as frustrating exercise to try to uncover what the director's point is or even what he thinks about vampires. It is pretty clear that the species is in serious decline – Wasikowska's flakiness, Hiddleston's depression, the dependence of all on buying blood from hospitals (Jeffrey Wright obliges Hiddleston in a compellingly mysterious long scene), the spectral, decayed appearance of Detroit, which the protagonists often cruise through in their nighttime Sunday drives, Hurt's decline and death at the end; in the final scene Adam and Eve (why names recalling the first rather than the last couple of the human race?) realize that their usual source is no longer available, and baring their fangs they prepare to puncture the necks of a sexually active couple on a Tangier terrace. On the one hand, the protagonists are presented as members of the artistic and intellectual elite (with references to quantum mechanics, spook action at a distance, past discussions with Mary Shelley, Percy Bysshe Shelly, and Byron, and Marlowe's continued insistence that he should have gotten credit for the plays of Shakespeare), on the other they fall into a drug-dependent ecstasy when they take a swig of deep red, viscous blood from a delicate sherry glass (their vampire fangs become momentarily apparent and they always leave a bloodstain on their lips). Art and drug dependency go together? Is there some

significance to Adam's interest in 1950s-era electric guitars or to his habitual use of old-fashioned 50s stereo technology when he plays music or to the choice of the couple to live on different continents or to the obnoxious behavior of the younger sister? If a film does not have a plot, it should have at least a point or a theme; this one seems just a conglomeration of the interests and obsessions of the director. (2014)

**Only You** 1994 Norman Jewison 2.5 Marisa Tomei very thin as young suburban woman whose search for her true love is fueled by a Ouija Board and a fortune teller; Robert Downey, Jr. not entirely convincing as romantic lead who bags his girl after a lot of plotting and effort; Bonnie Hunt as Tomei's companion who accompanies her to Italy, has a potentially adulterous flirtation with a romantic Italian, but who is saved at the bell by the sudden appearance of her husband (a roofing contractor, who although an unmitigated jerk, suddenly decides he loves his wife and wants to spend the rest of his life with her!). A by-the-numbers romantic comedy undermined by the unconvincing performances and lack of chemistry of the two leads. It is largely a woman's movie that plays on the myth of true love from the woman's point of view; it's just that it turns out that destiny (Tomei, who is an Italian teacher, actually teaches the word 'destino' to her high school class in the beginning of the movie!) is an empty term, the man Tomei is chasing is not who she thinks he is, and the will and dedication of Downey wins her in the end. There is a lot of traveling to cool destinations in Italy – Venice (gondolas and canals, naturally), Rome (charming squares and fountains), and Positano (a few plunging views into the sea); and of course a lot of cool venues – elegant hotels with marble tables, baroque mirrors and flower arrangements, romantic dinners with wine, white tablecloths, flower arrangements, and views of the sea. Film tries to exact comedy from contrasting the American coolness and matter-of-factness about love with the Italian enthusiasm – Italians are always breaking out into applause when lovers kiss with conviction. A typical middle-of-the-road Hollywood romantic comedy – entertaining, cute, with a few laughs, and bankable stars, but with little originality and piquancy. (2009)

**El Orfanato** 2007 Juan Antonio Bayona 3.5 Belen Rueda very eloquent as disturbed mother searching obsessively for her disappeared child; Fernando Cayo as her sensible husband Carlos, who doesn't quite believe all this ghost business; Geraldine Chaplin a little annoying as a medium called in to figure out what is going on. Effective ghost story set in Asturias (Spain; there is even snow on the ground) about ex-orphan who returns to the orphanage where she was raised; she and her husband have decided to live there turning it into a home for sick children. She is very attached to her adopted son (a cute and angelic Roger Princep), who appears to be contacted by (ghosts of) children, who constantly want to play. When he disappears at a creepy party inaugurating the school, Rueda embarks on an obsessive quest to find him. She finally does so after much effort and many scares and is reunited with him at the end of the film; but it appears that this has happened in death, since the other children who had apparently kidnapped little Simon now gather around Rueda, delighted that they now have a mother to tell them stories – they are particularly fond of 'Peter Pan' and they consider Rueda as Wendy: she has grown up. Film has its share of shocks – seeing the deformed face of the child Tomás who is to be the ringleader of the kidnapping plot, discovering the bones of the children in lime hidden in the garden shed, the child with the burlap sack over his head slamming a bathroom door on Rueda's fingers and propelling her into the bathtub, the gaping bloody mouth of the social worker after she has been killed in an auto accident, etc. But the film specializes in suspense and growing dread rather than shock and gore: the camera is constantly gliding – back, forward or to the side toward a corner in the house – threatening at any moment to reveal something unpleasant; in her search Rueda is constantly opening closed doors – ever so slowly – and we cringe at what she will find on the other side; windows slam shut shattering the glass; one constantly hears creaks and moans in the house, voice of children in the distance, etc. Art direction is masterful: the house is voluminous, old-fashioned Victorian (?) with dark paneled rooms, lots of dark crannies and unexplored passages and basements isolated next to a cold beach with a lighthouse oscillating in the background: we wonder whether the house is a real place or really the recesses of Rueda's tortured mind. The painted burlap sack over Tomás' head is effectively creepy and evocative. There are plenty of clues that the film depicts an imaginative internal journey in Rueda's mind, but it is more satisfying as a true ghost story combined with the drama of a mother seeking reunion with her beloved child. The score is lush symphonic recalling a traditional Hollywood score or Nino Rota. The

setting appears to be influenced by 'Diabolique' with its ramshackle schoolhouse and disquieting swimming pool. The film might have been more effective as a horror movie if its last part had not been so unrelentingly sentimental and upbeat. Nevertheless, stylish, scary and entertaining ghost movie. (2008)

**The Other Boleyn Girl** 2008 Justin Chadwick 3.0 Natalie Portman crimped and imprisoned in Tudor finery as Anne, the ambitious, hard-bitten of the two sisters; Scarlett Johansson playing effectively against type as the sweeter, more domestic, and more pliant of the two; Eric Bana looking always formidable as an untraditionally hunky Henry VIII looking for sex, a mate, and a male heir; Kristin Scott Thomas as Ma Boleyn, continuously chagrined by the runaway ambition of the men folk in her family but doing little to stop it; Ana Torrent as untraditionally weighty and well-spoken Queen Katherine of Aragon; David Morrissey perhaps growling and scowling a bit much as the family leader Duke of Norfolk. Entertaining, rather feminist version of the Anne Boleyn story, but this time widening the focus to include the whole family with emphasis on her younger sister Mary (in history the older sister). The narrative focuses on the ambition of the Boleyn men, who "whore out" their two daughters to the king in order to advance family fortunes; Mary, who seems really to be in love with the king, is the first, and although she gives birth to a healthy boy, he is illegitimate, and she is banished to the country; Anne is the second – she eventually manipulates the king into marrying her by withholding sex from him (his first sex with her is a rape from behind); but when she also fails to produce a live male heir (although she does give birth to Elizabeth) and gives the appearance of incest with her brother George (Jim Sturgess), she is condemned to death and beheaded with a big sword; the family's fortunes enter into decline. The film has excellent sets, over-the-top costumes (those diamond-shaped female headdresses!), and some good acting. Torrent as Katherine stands out and Portman shows that she can handle the heavy role, although her wide-eyed terror and near madness toward the end are a bit extreme; Morrissey, however, tires us with his one-note scowling, and Bana, whose lack of resemblance to Henry VIII is distracting; he seems always to be either shouting in anger or sulking on his throne. The film is feminist in a negative fashion: the men in the family call all the shots, and despite the impassioned objections of Mother Boleyn, they basically pimp out their daughters for fame and fortune; the king is a kind of romantic sex maniac, who sexually assaults his bride-to-be; the fate of the women depends entirely on their child-bearing prowess, specifically on whether they are able to give the king a son, and the film spends a lot of time with the two sisters lying in bed with child or giving birth; Anne is depicted as innocent of adultery and incest (although she was tempted), and yet the fanatic king sacrifices her so he can marry Jane Seymour. Film perhaps suffers from the presence of the two high-octane American stars, who can distract the viewer from focusing on their characters and the drama. (2010)

**The Other Woman** 2014 Nick Cassavetes (son of John Cassavetes) 2.0 Cameron Diaz perhaps a few years older, but still sexy and charming as young woman that finds her lover is married; Nikolaj Coster-Waldau as that men, oozing a bit too much charm as a serial seducer; Leslie Mann (Apatow specialist) as Nikolaj's disabused wife; Kate Upton as sexy, maximally endowed Marilyn Monroe-like second girlfriend – no gift as actor. Occasionally entertaining, heavily censored (all the scatological humor removed for the airplane version) female buddy movie about three women who team up to humiliate the lout that is sexually exploiting them. The film is obviously modeled on previous gross-out comedies such as 'Bridesmaids' and 'Hangout'. Some of the revenge tactics are funny: e.g., administering a violent laxative, estrogen (nipple growth) and hair removal products (panic in front of the mirror) to the offender; the use of the 'Mission Impossible' theme when they set off on their revenge quest is hackneyed and derivative. The film is sophomoric: it stretches the parameters of credibility by having a wife and two mistresses cooperate courteously and enthusiastically in getting the bastard; it tries to appeal to young American women by giving them permission to do terrible things to the men who have screwed them over; while Coster-Waldau is cool and collected through most of the film, when he is confronted by the three women at the end, he becomes completely unglued, shrieking and humiliating himself, much to the amusement of the young women in the audience itching for payback. In its invocation of a little community of young women navigating the shoals of sexual relationships, the movie

sometimes recalls the 'Sex and the City' franchise. A Hollywood exploitation flick with occasional glimmers of effective humor. (2015)

**The Others** 2001 Alejandro Amenábar 4.0 Nicole Kidman in deeply emotional performance as strongly Catholic, guilt-ridden woman living with her two children in a large manor house; Fionnula Flanagan in strong performance as a nanny come to the house to help out Kidman; Alakina Mann and James Bentley in expert child performances as Kidman's two children; Christopher Eccleston as gaunt, suffering husband who appears in house for a brief visit. Excellent gothic ghost thriller, expertly made, recalling Jack Clayton's 'The Innocents' and the American film 'The Sixth Sense' but that suffers some from a complex script. Kidman lives in spooky, though beautiful and capacious fog-shrouded manor house on the Isle of Jersey (actually shot somewhere in Spain) in 1945 with her two children; she insists that doors remain locked and that the windows be covered with heavy curtains since she says that the children have an allergy to light that would kill them; the house is beset by ghostly presences; Flanagan arrives with two other servants, and the viewer begins to question who is the mover in the goings-on – the servants are perhaps trying to take possession of the house, the precocious, defiant child Anne has something up her sleeve, Kidman is just bonkers? The view becomes more clouded when Kidman's husband, who she thought had been killed in World War II, appears looking gaunt and alienated; jolt follows jolt until the servants decide that they have to take the initiative, and they push Kidman to acknowledge reality in a 'Sixth Sense'-style reversal crisis: Kidman and the children are dead (as are the servants and the husband), Kidman in a moment of madness had killed her children, and the lot is living in a house with a family of alive people (hence the disturbances that Kidman and the children had perceived), who however have decided to leave because of the disturbances that they have been exposed to; Kidman and the children hug one another forever bonded in their love and determined to stay in their house to the exclusion of the living (somewhat resembling the situation in Tim Burton's 'Beetlejuice'). The film's message is strangely optimistic for a scary ghost movie – the dead go on living in the place where they have lived and they recognize that they have to live in harmony with the living (?); one has to forgive oneself for the evil that one has been responsible for. The film is beautifully directed and photographed: the spacious, gloomy atmosphere of the house, a lovely, romantic, lush symphonic score composed by the director that sometimes resembles Grieg and sometimes is exploited for shock effect; expert suspenseful camera work that takes advantage of opening doors (what will she see?), camera angles that leave Kidman's back exposed (watch out behind you!), shocks such as the photo album with group pictures of recently deceased persons from the 19th century or Kidman's terminal panic when she sees a cackling crone dressed in the costume that her beloved daughter had been wearing (the crone turns out to be a medium that is helping the alive family to figure out what is going on in their house). Kidman's performance is deeply affecting – her suffering and neediness that unbeknownst to the viewer comes from her guilt is matched by the overpowering love she expresses for her children when she finally confesses her secret to them. Her insistence on keeping light out and keeping the doors shut and locked are eloquent metaphors for her insistence that her children not be told the truth. Outstanding film whose only weakness is perhaps excessive narrative complication. (2010)

## **Our Gang**

**Shrimps for a Day** 1934 3.0 About 20 minutes about two do-good adults who are entertaining the orphanage children being turned into two children by a magic lamp. Amusing as the large crowd of kids plays cute, cuts up with children's antics, gets into mischief and then laughs at the discomfiture of adults. The two children playing the morphed adults are good performers with a cute, well performed ditty 'Ice Cream'. Pretty good special effects as adults and children morph back and forth. Good final joke when Spanky (the only member of the gang who is named in this episode) turns the asylum dictator into a child and then pummels him.

**Fly My Kite** 1935 3.0 Another entry that is perhaps funnier than 'Shrimps'. Focuses on Grandma, a plucky, kind, very active (she does somersaults and boxes with the kids) old lady (Margaret Mann) who befriends the children and goes to great lengths to protect them; her cad of a

stepson is trying to rob her of her nest egg, but she and the kids are way too resourceful for him. A lot of close-up cutaways to the angelic/mischievous/adorable faces of the children, as they play with her and humiliate the stepson in the final sequence in the field (he is dragged through broken glass, pelted with rocks and mud, cut down when he is perched atop a power pole, etc.). The black kids are treated in the same way as the others – no step-n-fetch-it stuff.

**Our Hospitality** 1924 Buster Keaton 4.0 Keaton, Natalie Talmadge (very cute and soon to be his wife), Baby Keaton, Joe Keaton (dad). Very inventive earliest feature of BK. Themes – railroads (rickety 1830s version) and blood feuds (Canfields and McKays) with complications coming from values of hospitality (cannot kill your enemy while he is in your house, or when he is married to your daughter, since then he becomes a member of the family!). Directed and edited with the usual care of Buster Keaton. Full of gags that are well highlighted. 1) Centered around the train, its movable tracks and its slow pace (with dog running beneath and behind); 2) Centered around BK's visit to his beloved in the enemy clan's house; 3) Centered around the rope tying him to an opponent and then rescue of NT from the Truckee (?) River; amazing stunt when BK swings on rope to catch NT as she is about to go over the waterfall. 'Romeo and Juliet' influence as boy falls in love with girl who belongs to enemy clan. BK does all his own stunts; many of them are very dangerous (the railroad) and a few of them amazing (the waterfall save)! Great care to be historically accurate – the primitive train, the costumes, the interior décor. Obviously a pretty big budget. End with charming scene when opening of the door shows that Buster is marrying the 'enemy' girl, thus preventing the hostile clan from shooting him! (2005)

**Our Man in Havana** 1959 Carol Reed 3.0 Alec Guinness as vacuum cleaner salesman in 50s Havana who is recruited to provide information to the British secret service; Jo Morrow as his vapid, American-speaking daughter who turns every scene she is in to a boring trial; Ernie Kovacs (to me) rather unconvincing as a supposedly brutal Havana police chief (Guinness refers to his cigarette case "covered with human skin"), who wants to marry Guinness' daughter (!); Burl Ives as a depressive German immigrant who sometimes wears a pickelhaube; Noel Coward archly amusing as the absent-minded seeming operative who recruits Guinness and swallows all his lies without objection; Ralph Richardson as Coward's superior back in London; Maureen O'Hara also rather out of place as Guinness' love interest speaking with a British accent. Puzzling film that is primarily a satire on the incompetence of the British secret service: Guinness gets paid for false agents who do not exist, the London chiefs accept his vacuum-cleaner-inspired sketch of a secret weapon in the mountains without demur; and when they finally realize the full extent of their foolishness at the end of the film, they order Guinness and O'Hara to remain silent and award him the OBE. In impeccable black and white, the film has fascinating footage of 1959 Havana – American cars in the streets, the beautiful arcades not yet decayed, lively nightclub scenes with dancing girls going at it – all often shot with Reed's 'Third Man' style tilted camera. Guinness plays everything straight and emotionless. The film is sometimes serious, as when Guinness shoots (we think) his spy nemesis at the end, but the best parts are comic: Guinness trying to recruit operatives in the men's room of the country club, where his interlocutor misunderstands his intentions; the contrast between Guinness' vacuum cleaner salesman's job and his spy activities, the checkers game that Guinness plays with Kovacs – they play with small whisky bottles, and since the winner of a piece has to drink the contents of the bottle, they are both soon roaring drunk; the final scene where Richardson rewards Guinness for his deception and failures instead of punishing him. It is difficult to stay interested in the film. Most of the enjoyment comes from watching the all-star British cast and appreciating the rich street scenes. (2007)

**Out of the Blue** 2006 Robert Sarkies (New Zealand) 3.5 Karl Urban as Nick, a local (volunteer?) policeman that witnesses the shootings but is unable to take action against the perp when the occasion arises; Mathew Sunderland as David Gray, the shooter whose vicious murders go psychologically unexplained; Lois Lawn plays an elderly woman who shows confusion but courage after the first murders crawling through ditches to find help for one of the men shot; several other more or less unknown Kiwi actors playing various victims or spectators of the horrors. Affecting docudrama about the series of 11 murders committed by a deranged local gun collector in a small town located at the mouth of

Dunedin harbor in 1990. The film begins with a series of vignettes that acquaint the viewer affectionately with several local families and also the future “offender” who plays with his guns, buys another in a local gun shop (probably in Dunedin), and blows his top at a bank teller who tries to collect a bank fee from him; otherwise we know nothing about him that might explain his actions. The murders begin when David has a petty dispute with one of his neighbors over his daughter trespassing on his property; he brutally shoots the dad and two of the three girls, then sets their house on fire – the first burns through much of the film. He goes on to shoot at random whomever he happens to run across, some of them inhabitants of the village, some of them vacationing from out of town. Unlike American action directors, the film does not dwell on the physical effects of the violence, but on the tragic drama of the shootings: the efforts of Lawn to help an older man lying wounded by a telephone booth, later her cowering inside her kitchen to keep from being spotted by David, her relief at recovering her dog but her anxiety when her son, Jimmy, does not show up after the shootings begin. The police appear gradually and once on the scene, they show themselves woefully unprepared for the challenge; the police sergeant is overwhelmed and killed by the perpetrator, a couple of them hesitate to shoot Davis even when they have him in their gun sights – responding to such gun violence seems completely unknown to this peaceable people. Only when the anti-terrorist police show up the next day is David finally tracked down. The scene in which he stumbles out of his house and is then cut down by automatic rifle fire is the most explicitly violent of the film; after the police tie his hands behind his back, he continues to writhe and struggle on the ground until he is motionless – all the while the police are relaxing, chatting, and smoking cigarettes. The tense and dramatic action is punctuated several times by distant shots of the surf moving gently into the mouth of the bay. Compelling and honest film chronicling a happily rare case of extreme violence in New Zealand. (2013)

**Out of the Past** 1947 Maurice Tourneur (RKO) 3.5 Robert Mitchum, weary, droopy-eyed, apparently indifferent, cynical, worldly wise, and wise-cracking as gangster/private investigator obsessed with a woman; Jane Greer in the role of her life as beautiful red-headed (?) woman without a straight or honest bone in her body; Kirk Douglas as nasal talking, greedy, twisted, and often foolish and inconsistent gangster with a lovely house on the west shore of Lake Tahoe; Rhonda Fleming glamorous (and sometimes confusingly similar to Greer) San Francisco woman with a short appearance; Virginia Huston as clean-cut good girl in Bridgeport; Dickie Moore as the deaf-mute boy who works for Mitchum at his service station in Bridgeport, California and who has the last “line” of the film. Very famous film noir that may be overrated. Focuses on Mitchum’s obsession with Greer – begun in her famous entry out of the sunlight into the cantina in Acapulco – and his inability to shake her off despite his perfect understanding of her vicious faithlessness. Begins in wonderful shots of brightly lit, sparsely populated streets of Bridgeport, California and the Sierra pines and lakes around it, where Mitchum is trying to build a new life after bad experiences with Douglas and Greer; while driving to Tahoe, he tells the story in flashback to good girlfriend Virginia Huston ; he then accepts a job from Douglas which takes him through some very confusing complications in a studio set San Francisco reminiscent of ‘The Big Sleep’; then back to Bridgeport and the hope of salvation, only to be dragged to destruction by the inexorable Greer. Greer is indecipherable and constantly deceptive – double-crossing both of her boyfriends, Mitchum and Douglas – and yet Mitchum with all his insults cannot break with her, until she leads him to his death in the car at the police roadblock. After the dark shadows of the intrigue in San Francisco and of the death drive down the nighttime Sierra road, the film ends in light-filled Bridgeport, where Huston has to decide to cast her lot in with her upstanding forest ranger friend; when she hesitates, the deaf-mute boy lies to her telling her that Mitchum had meant to run off with Greer (most probably not true), and she walks smiling into the Sierra light to her nuptials. Terrific cynical one-liners that are great for memorable dialogue, although not very realistic speech – “when I saw her, I quit caring about the 40 grand”; “Sure I’m going to die, but I want to be the one who dies last”; “You’re like a leaf being blown from gutter to gutter”, etc. Script suffers from unrealistic characters, whose schemes and mind changes make for interesting intrigue, but which can get on the nerves of a viewer expecting real character motivation – Douglas takes Greer back after she has double-crossed him and run off with the \$40,000; Douglas hires Mitchum back after he had run off with his girl after finding her in Mexico; Mitchum’s repetitive inability to get Greer out of his heart. But the dialogue, the dangerous beauty of Greer, Mitchum’s obsession and

his inexorable progress toward destruction *à la film noir* drive the film forward. Elegant film, surprisingly moving at the end when good survives in the light of Bridgeport after the persistent corruption of the long night. (2007)

**Out of Sight** 1998 Steven Soderbergh 3.5 George Clooney his relaxed, ironic, humorous, intelligent self as not-so successful bank robber (he has bent to prison three times) caught in the trunk of a car with...; Jennifer Lopez sexy yet tough as federal marshal who falls in love (lust?) with escaped con; Dennis Farina in non-comic role as Lopez's avuncular dad; Luis Guzmán as not-so-smart con; Catherine Keener pretty as Clooney's alienated ex-wife; Ving Rhames charismatic as Clooney's best buddy and protective guardian angel with a tender conscience; Steve Zahn hilarious as clueless pothead associate of Clooney and other criminals – he specializes in carjacking; Don Cheadle playing a black criminal boss a bit lightly; Albert Brooks funny on reflection as wealthy mark for robbery with a fetish for bad wigs; Samuel L. Jackson, Michael Keaton, and Nancy Allen in uncredited small roles. Surprisingly funny, snappily directed crime flick based on yet another Elmore Leonard novel. Film is primarily an improbable romance between a bank robber – however charming and handsome – and a tough-as-nails federal marshal with a memorable figure. They first make their connection in the trunk of a getaway car (Lopez has been kidnapped when she happens upon a prison escape), where Clooney has little choice but to “put his hand on her thigh!” He continues to pursue her, and they finally have a memorable sex scene toward the end of the film (enhanced by Soderbergh's sophisticated editing); in the end however, there is no way that they can escape society's rules, and Lopez shoots him in the leg on the staircase of the Ripley mansion, incapacitating him rather than killing him. The final scene leaves the viewer in uncertainty: a still limping Clooney is transferred in the same van as Jackson from Detroit back to Florida with Lopez in the front seat as guard – perhaps they will work out something after all. Despite all expectations, the back-and-forth between Clooney and Lopez works without seeming improbable: perhaps their sexiness and charm and their obvious attraction to one another helps us suspend disbelief. A strong point of the film is the characters: some serious and solid like Rhames and Farina (and Keaton in a mock-serious role that we surely are not expected to take seriously), but most of them comic, off-the-wall, and very entertaining like Guzmán, Brooks, and Zahn; comic characters placed in their violent criminal environment and the mixing of gruesome violence and humor are reminiscent of Scorsese or Tarantino. Soderbergh's editing is part of the film's success. The “present” of the film begins just before Clooney is sent to the Florida prison and then continues through to Detroit; flashbacks however take us back to the federal prison in Lompoc where Clooney meets Brooks and Cheadle, thus enabling the director to introduce Lopez in the beginning of the film rather than one-third of the way through. Clooney's and Lopez's love scene is greatly enhanced and poeticized by fluid editing with visual flash forwards that don't match the dialogue. Entertaining, extremely well-made film. (2010)

**The Outlaw Josey Wales** 1976 Clint Eastwood 3.5 Clint Eastwood in a more relaxed version of his persona – he smiles and expresses affection more often, although the body count he leaves behind is surprising; Chief Dan George as charming, philosophic and well-spoken older Indian who teams up with Clint and his crowd; Sondra Locke a bit callow as Eastwood's love interest; Bill McKinney red-headed and red-legged as the villain searching for Josey; John Vernon as slightly more *politique* Union officer also in pursuit; Paula Trueman in sometimes overacted role as feisty Grandma who becomes part of the band; Sam Bottoms as pretty little guy befriended by Eastwood who dies early in the film. Very entertaining and thoughtful semi-western about the pursuit of Eastwood by victorious Union forces after the war and his revenge against Red-leg McKinney who had raped and murdered his wife and burned his homestead. Starts in Missouri where the protagonists are Missouri irregulars and ends in Texas and New Mexico (?) where Josey flees to avoid the vicious pursuit of the Red-legs. Eastwood is compelling in his gentler self – he smiles, remains loyal to his little family despite his vicious vengefulness, and he falls in love. The villains in the piece are associated with the Union Army, the good guys with the Confederates; the film starts off in the hills and scrublands of Missouri (at this point the film doesn't seem much like a western) and end up in the desert mesas and arroyos of west Texas. The film is an episodic string of adventures in the course of which Eastwood meets various colorful characters, gathers them around himself, and moves on toward his destiny: there are many entertainingly greedy, filthy, low-life characters



(two very skinny guys next to the river and two or three others who are interrupted raping an Indian woman) trying to collect the bounty on Josey's head, all of whom meet their deserved death through Josey's very fast gun (he carries four guns on him most of the time). A veritable plethora of killing – body count would be difficult to determine – and Eastwood does not hesitate to pump an extra bullet into a supine opponent to make sure he is dead. Focus is on Eastwood's bitter vengefulness, and his need is requited by the pointblank shooting of perpetrator McKinney. The film however ends in reconciliation: in a moment of philosophic negotiation he makes peace with the neighboring Comanches; Eastwood moves toward marriage with Locke; the townspeople accept him as one of theirs and falsely declare him dead when more Union and Texas officials arrive; and Vernon, who knows full well that the con is on, accepts it in a spirit of justice and forgiveness, seemingly recognizing that Josey was terribly wronged in the Civil War. Some draggy moments, for example when the Josey 'family' celebrates their new home with a dance that evokes Ford's 'My Darling Clementine'. Entertaining, charming and satisfying western of the 70s. (2010)

**Padre Padrone** 1977 Fratelli Taviani 3.0 Omero Antonutti monumental, implacable, and sadistic as the Sardinian shepherd father determined to break his son and make him follow in his footsteps; Saverio Marconi as his adult son (Fabrizio Forte plays him as a boy) who first endures the beatings and then rebels and bulls his way through to become a Ph.D. Sardinian linguist. Memorable film about patriarchy based on the famous autobiographical book by Gavino Ledda. Convincingly set in northern Sardinia (near Sassari) in the shepherds' pastures and small towns. Memorable first scene when the father bursts into six-year-old Gavino's classroom and asserting loudly his ownership of his son, drags him off to watch the sheep and milk them in the fields, promising that he will be able to complete his elementary education when he is an adult. First part of film is best: the appreciation of the famous Sardinian oaks and the stream that flows past the pasture, the terrible beatings, the terror of the boy of his father, the boy's awful loneliness, his sexual urgings (masturbation is not mentioned, but the shepherds screw chickens and donkeys). All is expressed through imaginative techniques – particularly sound: when father and son listen to the sounds of nature, the sound of the wind blowing through the trees and the torrent flowing by are magnified; often individuals give voice on the soundtrack to thoughts that would never be allowed in this society – e.g., the self-serving reactions of the men standing around the bed of the murdered shepherd, the laments of the older generation as the young men leave for Germany to find work. Notable is the scene when an accordionist appears in the countryside, and its sound is magnified into a large orchestra's rendition of the 'Fledermaus' overture: the music is obviously seen as a symbol of civilization (learning and music) and Gavino's fascination with it. The large middle section dealing with Gavino's stint in the Italian army and his stepwise decision to graduate from college and become a scholar is less gripping – a lot of recitation of Italian vocabulary, which he has to learn for his job (he spoke only Sardinian dialect when he signed up) and for his career as a scholar; the title is in part a reference to his study of vocabulary and linguistics. Powerful ending when Gavino returns to his father's house in Sardinia to study, and a contest of wills between them (both are implacable) ends in a physical altercation in the kitchen. The film ends with Gavino leaving for good, but only after having to witness his father's humiliation. The film vividly dramatizes the conflict between father and son, but to most viewers the father's unbending harshness is incomprehensible; it's just tradition and always seems bizarre – Doesn't he love him? Can't he just get a grip on himself? Is he insane? Brothers, sisters, mother, friends at home and in the army just never come alive. One suspects that the Tavianis are Marxists and they see Gavino's father as a type for the old world – the world of master and servant – that will soon be replaced by a new (classless?) society of equals. Not as gripping as Ledda's book. The color print is quite poor. (2007)

**The Painted Veil** 2006 John Curran 3.0 Based on the 1925 Maugham novel. Naomi Watts convincingly holding center stage as the shallow upper class English woman who marries to get away from her mother; Edward Norton (the father of the film) reserved British bacteriologist working in Shanghai who marries a woman he doesn't know and pays the consequences; Leev Schreiber as rough-hewn lover of Watts in the first year of her marriage in Shanghai; Toby Jones looking a bit corrupt as the only British official remaining in the distant province where Norton takes his wife to fight a cholera

epidemic. Set in the midst of a China in unrest – war lords dominate the countryside, the British are “pointing guns” at China, the Nationalists are in charge but barely; and cholera breaks out in a distant province. Norton is a medical scientist who, when he discovers that his wife has been unfaithful with a friend, drags her with him to fight the cholera epidemic. Watts is stunned and lonely in the country moving into a filthy abandoned house, surrounded only by Chinese peasants, a Chinese soldier who guards her, and a group of European Catholic nuns (Mother Superior is Diana Rigg!) who are laboring to save Chinese children (and convert them to Catholicism). Norton is bitter and quietly sadistic in his treatment of his wife – ignoring her, never looking at her, giving her the silent treatment, and generally punishing her for her betrayal. The landscape set in a spectacular valley of the Yangtze is poetic but seems unrelated to the terrible things happening in the story. Norton is very scientific, using test tubes to test the water, discovering alternate ways to bring water to the village, etc. The two principals gradually thaw to one another, Watts because she admires his humanitarian dedication and energy/passion, Norton because now that he has the time to get to know his wife, finds her courageous and interesting. The two reconcile, and when Watts finds herself pregnant with (whose?) child, Norton seems willing to accept it as his. Story ends tragically and movingly with the death of Norton in the epidemic. Watts returns to London. The final scene has her meeting Schreiber in the street but then refusing his quiet invitation to get together; she walks off with her five-year-old son. The film is mostly a married romance, but has elements of a woman coming of age – a Bildungsroman. The film seems much influenced by the famous Merchant-Ivory treatment of turn-of-the-century English novels. (2008)

**Pale Rider** Clint Eastwood 3.5 Clint Eastwood as the mysterious stranger arriving as an answer to a prayer for help; Michael Moriarty as the decent, somewhat stolid but courageous small-time miner; Carrie Snodgrass rather forbidding as his prospective wife; Richard Dysart as the bad guy big-time miner who has a good time chewing the scenery with pungent dialogue; Chris Penn a bit callow as his son; Sydney Penny as sexually precocious daughter of Snodgrass. A remake of 'Shane', the movie is set in the mining camps of California. Just as in 'Shane', the mysterious stranger (this time the 'Preacher') arrives in the valley, he goes to work for Moriarty's family (this time helping Moriarty split a large rock in the stream instead of attacking a stump), defends the sorely beset good guys against the big bully; at first he fights with non-lethal weapons; then resorts to his guns (which he takes out of a safe deposit box!) when Dysart brings in professional killers (John Russell and his sic "deputies"); and after killing everyone (about 12 men in a disturbing bloodbath), he takes off for the hills again, this time chased by Penny, who yells 'Preacher' instead of 'Shane'. Beautiful cinematography taking in the magnificent landscape soaked in western light much as in 'Shane'. Rather smarmy romantic subplot is that both Snodgrass and Penny fall in love with the Preacher, and they both have to renounce. Film has environmental theme, since the big-time miners are washing away the mountains with their placer technology, word comes from Sacramento that the state might outlaw such, and Eastwood and Moriarty blow up much of the machinery with dynamite. Eastwood is the rider of "Death" on the pale horse of the Apocalypse: when Penny prays to God ("if you exist") for help against the bullies, the film fades to the lone rider on the pale horse riding through the snow. When Russell arrives in town, he thinks he has seen Eastwood before; in fact, he thinks Eastwood is dead (implying that he killed him), and his behavior during the climactic gunfight is hesitant and confused; Eastwood ends up shooting him six times through the body, and when Russell still tries to point his gun, Eastwood pulls his second gun and gives him the coup de grace through the head. We are left unsure whether Eastwood is the ghost of the dead man, or more probably an angel of vengeance sent to avenge the death of the man killed by Russell. Eastwood is taciturn and minimalist as always; he has irresistible skills, defeating and killing all comers with aplomb. A classical western with a suggested supernatural subtext added. (2010)

**Palm Beach Story** 1942 Preston Sturges 4.0 Claudette Colbert, Joel McCrae, Rudy Vallee, Mary Astor, Sig Arno, etc. Hilarious farce/satire on the power of sex and money in relationships and marriage. Colbert and McCrae break up primarily because he isn't making any money (theme: women are practical and expect their men to bring in the money), but despite Colbert's looking for a millionaire husband, they still love one another and get back together in the end. Colbert is great with fast delivery of witty lines; McCrae more inclined to look on with wonder and reply laconically. Colbert: "I said

adventuress, not adventurer, my dear; an adventurer would go on an 80 foot yacht, but not with a crew of less than 80;" "the only thing permanent in life, Dear, is Mr. Roosevelt." Middle section of film is classic slapstick with 7-8 men of Ale and Quail club traveling on railroad Pullman to somewhere in South for hunting expedition; they get very drunk, shoot up the club car thinking they are shooting skeet, and then hunt through the train for Colbert with their dogs; very unpolitically correct as Black bartender cowardly ducks behind bar with ice bucket on his head, shouting "I don't think I would do that if I was you, gentlemen!" Rudy Vallee plays Rockefeller character, Hackensacker, who falls in love with Colbert and courts her persistently; he is very dapper, focused, precisely spoken, and sings creditably a couple of times. Wonderful scene where his serenade version of "Good Night, Sweetheart" unwittingly causes Colbert and "brother" McRae to fall in love again and spend the night together. Some funny repeated ongoing jokes, e.g., in an emergency Gerry identifies her husband as 'McGloo,' which McRae objects strenuously to ("Of all the idiotic..."). Arno is hilarious as Toto, the hanger-on of promiscuous party girl Mary Astor (been married five times already and she is after McRae now): he speaks an unidentifiable language, and Astor treats him with dismissive contempt ('Nitzt,' 'Jetzt' are some of their unintelligible expressions). Colbert also very effective in conveying her devotion to her husband, and audience is very happy at the end with their getting back together. The zaniness of comedy outweighs the satire with witty dialogue and Screwball Comedy-type unpredictable behavior. Perhaps the funniest of the Sturges comedies. (2005)

**Palo Alto** 2013 Gia Coppola 3.0 Jack Kilmer as child-like, immature middle class teenager looking for the right road in life; Nat Wolf pulling out his Thespian stops as Kilmer's crazy friend, who always makes the wrong decision; Emma Roberts as pretty (sophomore?) soccer player that finds her temporary direction in an affair with her coach; James Franco (also produced and wrote the collection of short stories that the screenplay is built upon) as good-looking soccer coach with an obvious interest in teenage girls (and he didn't get in trouble!); Zoe Levin convincing as pretty but clueless girl whose purpose in life is giving oral sex to virtually any guy who wants it. Engaging, almost plotless film about teenagers (seem around 16) growing up in a privileged middle class community (never identified as Palo Alto) without parental direction or discipline. The screenplay focuses on the four kids, weaving their story together in an impression of the difficulties and anxieties of growing up in that environment. Like in a Peanuts cartoon, the parents are virtually absent: Roberts' mother seems botoxed and distracted, constantly pawing her daughter to tell her what a wonderful girl she is; Jack's dad (his real life dad Val Kilmer) has an amusing cameo as a pot-smoking, video-game-playing layabout. The kid's smoke a lot of cigarettes and a lot of weed; their parties – held in their homes when their parents are absent – include heavy drinking, lying around, the girls talking about boys and sex, horsing around, some sex in the bedrooms, and driving under the influence, which twice leads to auto accidents. Relationships seem rather casual and aimless: Levin gives everyone blowjobs; although obviously interested in one another, both Roberts and Kilmer drift in their relationships, culminating in Kilmer's declaration toward the end of the film that he loves her, which however is not followed up. Roberts' confusion and boredom also lead her to fall for Franco's, squirm-inducing seductions, but her hopes that they have a meaningful relationship is torpedoed when she finds out that he is doing the same thing with another girl (!). The film focuses on the friendship between Kilmer and the over-the-top, unpredictable, violent Wolf (who seems on the verge of psychosis). The film begins with their profanity-laced conversation in the latter's car; their relationship is tracked through Wolf's vandalism of the local library where Kilmer is doing community service; and the movie ends on a suspended note, when Kilmer gets out of the car Wolf is driving and starts to walk up the road, while Wolf intentionally enters the freeway the wrong way and careens wildly past oncoming cars, while the film fades out. Wolf is destined for destruction, while Kilmer seems to have made a healthy choice, although we don't know the future of his relationship with Roberts. An unusual American film that does not rely on a narrative focus. (2014)

**Pan's Labyrinth** 2006 Guillermo Del Toro 4.0 Ivana Baquero, a beautiful and gifted actress at 11, plays the daughter who must withstand the cruelty of the real world and make her way back to her (?) fairy kingdom, from which she had run away in the beginning of the film; Sergi Lopez (the Captain) very effective as sadistic fascist martinet, who treats his wife in chilly fashion as a

baby factory. Gripping story set in Franco's Spain in 1944 that doubles as a political denunciation of the inflexible dictatorship and a fairy tale that provides Ivana an escape from that harsh reality. Set in the mountains of Spain; in an old mill used by the army to hunt down Spanish Republican resisters; mostly in dark light both outside and underground. The army officers are cruel and slaves to discipline and routine; they hunt the Resistance, and the Captain takes personal relish in tormenting prisoners with instruments of torture; they fail however in hunting down their opponents, and the film ends in defeat for the Franquist forces. With its rosy view of the Republicans, the film is clearly a denunciation of the Franquist regime. Drama centers on Ivana, whose mother has married the Captain in wartime circumstances; Ivana despises her stepfather (she refuses to call him 'Father'), and although she loves her mother, she rebels against her passive subjection to her macho husband. Film presents Ivana as the lost princess of an underground kingdom – she is being sought by her father. She is contacted by dragonfly creatures, which turn into little fairies. In traditional fairy tale fashion: she is befriended by a friendly but gruff faun (played by Doug Jones) and then subjected to several trials – the scariest being a carnivorous human-like creature who carries his eyes in the palms of his hands and pursues her back to her bedroom; the underground kingdom is dark, slimy, filled with bugs and quite dangerous. Ivana, although not always obedient, shows pluck and innocent virtue: she confronts her trials bravely and snatches up her baby brother (her mother has died in childbirth) to go to the Underworld. The film ends ambiguously: on the one hand, the spirit (?) of Ivana returns underground and walks toward her kindly bearded father in the dimly lit throne room, where she is welcomed warmly by a woman (kind stepmother?). On the other hand, in the real world she is pursued by the Captain, who shoots and kills her. She falls next to the underground portal, where her blood drips down enabling her to return to her kingdom. At the end, her surrogate mother, Mercedes, grieves deeply over her. One is left with a deep feeling for the ineffable sadness of human existence, where suffering, cruelty and death mark our lives; the souls of the Underground kingdom are immortal, but even there there is darkness and sadness. (Why did the girl escape from that place in the first place?) Film is moving and resonates with fairy tale references. (2007)

**Pandora's Box (Die Büchse der Pandora)** 1929 Georg Wilhelm Pabst (Germany) 4.0  
 Scandalous-moralistic Pabst masterpiece about the destructive impact of a beautiful woman; lovingly restored by Criterion with expressive symphonic score. Louise Brooks as extremely cute, childlike flirt with no consideration of the consequences of her actions; Fritz Kortner as uptight bourgeois lawyer who is first Lulu's lover and then decides to marry her; Francis Lederer as clueless son of Kortner – he also falls in love – tragically – with Lulu; Carl Goetz as deformed, dwarf-like companion of Lulu – he is loyal to her and she once announces that he is her father; Krafft-Raschig as lecherous, bizarre-happy impresario; Alice Robert as Countess who makes a lesbian play for Lulu. Film focuses on Lulu's sexy persona : pretty, slim, short dark hair with bangs, low-cut gowns showing the tops of small breasts, impulsive, suddenly breaking into smile and twirling in dance step for no apparent reason. She attracts the obsessive attention of every man who sees her: her lover Kortner suffers since he is supposed to get married to a society girl; Lulu kills him with his pistol in ambiguous struggle; she is tried and found guilty for the murder but then escapes; she gathers with friends (Lederer, Goetz, Krafft-Raschig) in a gambling den (in England?) where they all lose their money and she is in danger of returning to prison; she and Lederer retire to a depressing garret, where she is affectionately (!) murdered by Jack the Ripper (Gustav Diessl); the ending features the Salvation Army and the celebration of Christmas, suggesting perhaps salvation through community and religion (?). The film is beautifully made and expertly restored: expressive, yet precise imagery; slow paced editing to nail down the psychological progress of the narrative (and to include as many images of Brooks as possible); a symphonic score that dramatically interprets the film's major moments. The film is moralistic while giving the viewer plenty of opportunity to enjoy the corrupt proceedings. The innocent Lulu paradoxically sows destruction and confusion among the men around her; they seem slaves to her (sexual) charms: Kortner dies; Goetz remains a faithful supporter; Krafft-Raschig lusts after her continuously; the charming Lederer throws away his life to be with her, losing all his money at the gambling table and sauntering alone behind the Salvation Army band in the last scene. Robert even adds a lesbian episode in her pursuit of Lulu. Film suggests that Weimar artists were fascinated by moral corruption. The Nazis must have despised the film. (August 2017)

**Panic in the Streets** 1950 Elia Kazan (MGM) 3.5 Richard Widmark competent, dedicated, virtuous, sharp-tongued, and ill-tempered as US Navy doctor in charge of the US public health office in New Orleans; Jack Palance (film debut) as charismatic, charming, neat, but tough-as-nails, cruel gambling crook with angular chiseled face; Paul Douglas as the stubborn, doubting police captain who finally comes round to being Widmark's staunch ally; Barbara Bel Geddes perhaps a bit too sweet as Widmark's wife; young Zero Mostel as hysterical hand-wringing small-time hood subservient to Palance; Emile Meyer as ill-tempered ship's captain who loudly refuses to cooperate; a posse of non-professional actors lending an aura of realism. An unusual semi-*noir* dealing with the possible outbreak of the plague in New Orleans instead of lust and greed. Setting is around the waterfront in police morgues, dive bars, steamship employment offices filled with guys looking for work, seedy café with sad losers sitting at the counter, freighters just off the coast, ships coming in and leaving. A dead man is found carrying the pneumonic plague; the problem is to find within 48 hours the one man (unidentified) who was exposed to him. Essentially a whodunit thriller as Widmark and Douglas search for the infected men before the plague breaks out; the authorities have an anti-plague serum. A counter subplot is Palance trying to find the infected man first since he is convinced that he has something valuable; he is a picture of blind greed with no regard for human life or the health of the community. Another subplot is Widmark's humanizing home life: he and wife Bel Geddes are harassed by creditors and they want a second baby. The film ends with exciting chase on the New Orleans docks; surrounded by police, Palance and Mostel try to escape on a freighter, but Palance can't crawl past the rat disk on the mooring cable. Film ends with un-*noir* reuniting of Widmark and Bel Geddes, and Widmark's resolution to be a more attentive father and husband. Evocative black-and-white photography; shadows, off-screen light sources bring out contours and three-dimensionality of faces (Palance's jutting cheekbones!) and bodies deep focus helps make all scenes richer and more interesting, e.g., closeup on Widmark's face while the indecisive city officials listen in the background. A lot of dark evening shots. Acting style is intense and realistic, perhaps influenced by Kazan's experience in the theater. The film deals with the confrontation between civil liberties and public necessity, e.g., Widmark is totally opposed to publicizing the danger since he fears the infected man will flee, and Douglas puts his career on the line by having a loose-lipped reporter arrested. (2006)

**The Paper Chase** 1973 James Bridges 3.0 John Houseman as the demanding, haughty, acerbic classroom tyrant Professor Kingsfield at Harvard Law School who believes in the efficacy of the Socratic method of teaching; Timothy Bottoms rather flat as intelligent, good-natured, callow first year law student with bushy 70s hair, a drooping mustache; Lindsay Wagner as somewhat feminist ("I don't want to take care of babies in the marriage students' dorm") daughter of Kingsfield with an aversion to commitment. Engaging film about the struggles of first-year law students at Harvard. The imperious personality of Houseman dominates the film: when students are not suffering from his prodding and sarcasm in the classroom, they are studying furiously and reacting to his challenging personality. Although he lectures most of the time, Kingsfield insists that the Socratic method trains one's mind; the student teaches himself the law; a photographic memory is of absolutely no use without the ability to analyze the facts; you have to learn to reason and connect the dots. The students are a bunch of ambitious young men in the age of Vietnam and Watergate who care everything about passing the exams at the end of the year; Bottoms is so ambitious that he breaks into the law library to get a look at Kingsfield's original notes when he took the contracts course in 1927. Very entertaining sessions in the classroom where the deliberate, precise, occasionally witty Kingsfield picks on students pushing them toward clarification. There are also some good comic scenes: Bottoms' escape from the Kingsfield house to the accompaniment of merry harpsichord music when the professor returns home early; he falls through the ice into a three-foot lake when he is showing off in front of Wagner. The romantic subplot between Bottoms and Wagner, who turns out to be Kingsfield's daughter, is awkward and poorly developed – shoehorned in to ensure the film has a romantic angle. Drama comes partly from the tension among the students who worry about passing their exams at the end of the first year (only three of the original six members of the study group survive until exams), and partly from the impossibility of Bottoms forming a personal relationship with the sovereign, arrogant Kingsfield, who is entirely unavailable emotionally and

incapable of showing affection or caring (so says his daughter). Film ends ambiguously when Bottoms makes a paper airplane of his grade report and throws it into the sea. Does the gesture mean that he is not going to pursue a legal career? Or is it just a declaration of independence from Kingsfield and thus a sign of maturity? (2011)

**Paper Moon** 1973 Peter Bogdanovich 3.5 Ryan O’Neal thanks to his daughter turning out ok as Moses, small-time grafter (selling Bibles to widows) in mid-30s Kansas; Tatum O’Neal (AA!) as Addie, intense, non-smiling, survivor kid whom Moses agrees to drive to her aunt’s house in Missouri; Madeline Kahn in hilarious role as Trixie Delight, a touching carnival stripper and opportunistic prostitute whose bouncing breasts O’Neal becomes obsessed with; P.J. Johnson amusing as pickaninny -style Black girl serving unwillingly as Trixie’s maidservant; John Hillerman in amusing double role as bootlegger and his sheriff cousin. Easy-going, humorous, nostalgic comic yarn about a small-time grifter and the nine-year-old (who may or may not be his daughter) he takes with him in his little odyssey across Kansas. O’Neal is not much of a comic actor, but he does pretty well playing straight man to his daughter, who has a perfect sense of timing and a pouty, pugnacious personality (she repeats with emphasis several times “You owe me \$200.”) and is a quick study for the life of a con girl (she soon learns both the \$20 and the \$5 switcheroo trick). The narrative is the simplest: O’Neal takes Addie in tow, the two fight and bicker, get used to one another, Addie suddenly becomes Moses’ assistant using her acting skills to help bamboozle their victims, their luck runs out when Moses sells some of his own whiskey to a relative of the sheriff, and when Moses tries to deliver Addie to her aunt, Addie thinks it over for a moment, she runs down the road to Moses, and in heart-warming fashion the two take off toward the horizon in the latter’s jalopy truck. Bogdanovich indulges his love for the cinematic past by photographing the small Kansas towns and the landscape in a way reminiscent of John Ford, of ‘Bonnie and Clyde’, and of his own work in ‘The Last Picture Show’ – dusty towns with broken down wooden buildings and populated by gaunt people in perfectly rendered 30s clothes, isolated houses protected by trees or next to a large river (the Missouri?) in the middle of a deserted landscape, Moses driving a convincingly 30s car down dusty roads (only once did the viewer notice a paved highway), etc. Many amusing scenes: almost any time Addie opens her mouth to make a cynical, petulant comment to a usually clueless, blustering Moses; the grifting scenes with the widows who are being fooled into buying expensive Bibles (Addie changes the procedure by charging in proportion to the perceived wealth of the recipient). The funniest scenes are the ones in which the inimitable Madeline Kahn tries her best to act like a respectable woman but always fails miserably (while trying to convince Addie to quit opposing her, she accidentally falls down and blurts out “Son of a bitch!” and a little while later, “You’re gonna pick up your ass, drop it in the back seat, and cut out the crap. You understand?”); the sequence in which Addie and the servant outwit Trixie to convince Moses to abandon her as unredeemably unfaithful is very entertaining. Nothing profound, but entertaining in its light-hearted, nostalgic way. (2010)

**The Paradine Case** 1947 Alfred Hitchcock (Britain; Selznick) 3.0 Gregory Peck handsome and charming as defense lawyer that inappropriately falls in love with his client...; Alida Valli beautiful, glamorous and convincing as woman accused of having poisoned her illustrious, blind husband; Ann Todd slender and drab as stand-by-your man wife of Peck; Charles Coburn in small role as Valli’s solicitor; Louis Jourdan thin and intense in early role as murdered man’s valet; Charles Laughton as law-and-order judge that has no compunction sending a condemned man to the hangman’s rope; Ethel Barrymore in very small role as elegant wife that challenges Laughton’s assumptions; Leo G. Carroll as courtroom prosecutor. Rather UnHitchcockian over-inflated Hitchcock courtroom drama that focuses on romantic-sexual attraction, in particular Peck’s infatuation with Valli, which interferes with his defense of her. The movie suffers from a script that is overlong with drawn out repetitive scenes that do not precisely define plot points and stages of character development. The first half of the film is taken up by preliminaries, Peck’s relationship with his wife and Valli, and Peck’s visit to the Paradine manse in Cumberland, the second half by the long-winded courtroom drama in London’s Old Bailey. On the one hand, Coburn prevails on Peck to take up Valli’s case, but because of his confusion and infatuation with her, he makes some serious mistakes, including his indecision about presenting an alternative scenario to the prosecution’s murder theory (he at first presents Mr. Paradine’s death as a suicide, and then in the

course of a long interrogation paints Jourdan as the murderer). At the end of the trial he has Valli take the witness stand, where – to Peck’s horror – she incriminates herself in order not to inculcate her lover Jourdan; the viewer surmises that the lovesick Peck’s motive was to have her tell the truth about her amorous relationships and her part in the murder, if true a massively self-defeating tactic. Although usually interesting, the film lacks the usual Hitchcockian characteristics – the McGuffin, the finely articulated plot, the carefully calibrated, rising suspense, the believable deeply romantic connections between the leading actors, the piquant characters in amusing side plots, the only exception perhaps being the prickly relationship between Barrymore and Judge Laughton, who in one scene comes on strong to an embarrassed Todd, grasping her hand strongly in his. With its strong sexual undercurrent, the film could have been fascinating. (2016)

**Les parapluies de Cherbourg** France, Jacques Demy 1964 4.0 Stunningly beautiful, sweet romantic film. All dialogue is sung in operatic style; not a word of spoken dialogue. Beautiful musical texture by Michel Legrand, sometimes romantic and moving, sometimes jazzy and “populaire.” All leads are wonderful. Catherine Deneuve as 20 year old is unbelievably beautiful and sweet. Castelnovo (who is he?) is handsome and convincing. Anne Vernon is strong, caring and old-fashioned (to a point), with great expressions and a strong voice. Suppose that all is lip-synced. Theme is love does not conquer all; necessity requires Catherine to marry the more wealthy man and absence induces forgetfulness (but why didn’t he write more often, and why didn’t he come home?). In restored version intense candy colors reminiscent of MGM musicals. Clothes very stylish. All an incredible pleasure to watch. But profound in its way as the beautiful actors, the expressive music and the skillful scenario inculcate romantic longing in us, and then show its strains and its deep sadness. Last scene chance meeting of both lovers (now married) extremely poignant – they meet by chance in a gas station, they both look and speak longingly, but there is nothing they can do but part. So sad – romantic love is real, but it doesn’t last (for long). (2005)

**The Parallax View** 1974 Alan Pakula 2.5 Warren Beatty with pretentious long styled hair as idealistic (?) reporter dedicated to uncovering the truth behind the assassination of a U.S. senator in the Space Needle in Seattle; Hume Cronyn not doing much as his indulgent, avuncular newspaper editor who encourages him to do whatever he wants; Paula Prentiss in cameo role as Beatty’s paranoid ex-wife convinced that somebody is trying to kill her. Slackly directed and edited early-70s paranoid thriller about Beatty’s incompetent campaign to unmask an assassination organization. There is nothing “safe” about this thriller. The film buys into the conspiracy theories abounding in the country at that time about the assassinations of the 1960s; a portentously photographed judicial commission declares in the beginning that the initial assassination was committed by a single demented person and that there was no evidence of a conspiracy; the same commission appears in the final scene to say the same thing about Beatty’s solitary guilt in the (framed) assassination of another senator in the last part of the film. Beatty tries earlier to penetrate the Parallax organization by posing as an assassin recruit, but he is no match for the powerful, nefarious evildoers. The organization seems vaguely right-wing, but it is not clearly identified as such. At the end of the film Beatty rushes to a meeting hall to try to foil the planned assassination of a charismatic senator (memories of “The Manchurian Candidate?”); the assassination is shot effectively in the nearly empty hall during a rehearsal for a political rally and to the accompaniment of patriotic music (“Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean” in a rousing arrangement), but Beatty is so careless that he allows himself to be shot by the organization and then framed posthumously for the assassination. The film has problems as a thriller. The motivation of Beatty’s character is sketchy at best: we know almost nothing about his background; early on when speaking with Prentiss he is very skeptical about the conspiracy idea, but with little transition he is traveling alone to a logging and fishing community in the Cascades to try to solve the mystery; some scenes might be missing from the film. The film also lacks the suspense and contour one expects in a thriller: there are a lot of dark, drawn out scenes with the principals shot from a distance (individuals dwarfed by their surroundings?). The film has its good moments, primarily in the scenes shot in the mountains. Very typical of the cynical, “paranoid” films of the early 70s bringing out the nether side of American culture and politics. (2011)

**Paris** 2009 Cedric Klapisch 2.5 Romain Duris as Parisian dancer who may have a fatal heart condition and is awaiting a heart transplant; Juliette Binoche as his somewhat disheveled older sister, who moves in with him bringing her three children; Fabrice Luchini, a neurotic professor of the history of Paris who is besotted with a supposedly beautiful student, who seems to spend all of her time hanging out with various boyfriends in cafes rather than studying; Francois Cluzet as the professor's more normal and settled brother, who is going to have a child. Rather long and aimless, Altman-like film depicting a cross-section of Parisian characters who weave in and out of one another's lives. The film focuses mostly on middle-class characters – the university professor, the architect (Cluzet), the social worker (Binoche), and the professional dancer, although there are a couple of marginal black African characters (including some mysterious scenes that take place in the Cameroons), and especially toward the end several boisterous, fun-loving, girl-chasing working-class characters who tend vegetable stands outside of Duris's apartment window and party in the post-Les Halles wholesale vegetable market in Rungis. The focus is on the rather blank Duris, who is very attached to his sister and afraid that he is going to die – he ruminates some on the joy of being alive and watches the characters in the street outside his apartment window live their lives without a consciousness of their preciousness. Binoche is devoted to her brother, and a bit world-weary for a beautiful woman of 40 despairing about ever having a sexual relationship; she seems to consider her three children to be a bother; but she supposedly reconnects with life at the end by having fumbling sex with a sensitive working-class guy. The second, unconnected focus is on Luchini, who follows his muse around like a puppy dog sending her infantile text messages and performing a rock dance for her, but after denouncing him as an over-the-top pervert, she makes his day by going to bed with him. The theme appears to be the importance of connecting with the life of the great city by being faithful to your family, having friends, and having sex as often as you can. The real star of the show is Paris, whose broad, sun-drenched expanse is depicted lovingly in several scenes; Duris' apartment is drab, but the view out the window is spectacularly well-suited for people-watching and falling under the spell of the City. Some amusing moments, especially from Karin Viard (César), a well-dressed, old-fashioned, gossipy, and racially prejudiced owner of a boulangerie. Often amusing and picturesque, but the long film drags for lack of narrative cogency and a clear point of view. (2010)

**Paris qui dort** 1924 René Clair 3.0 Henri Rollan as gardien de la Tour Eiffel; Albert Préjean as the airplane pilot, who appears with his passengers toward the beginning of the film. Short (about 30 minutes), semi-experimental science fiction film about what happens in Paris one morning when a (mad?) scientist turns on his "rayon lourd" that freezes all motion in its tracks. The film follows Rollan from his perch atop the Eiffel Tower into the motionless, empty streets of Paris, to the airport to pick up a few other people that can still move (the early airplane transports about eight passengers), and then through a few adventures in the city, including some hair-raising stunts on the girders of the Eiffel Tower, to a final resolution between Rollan and his girlfriend. The film has the actors perform some comic, anti-social tricks now that they are freed from the constraints of civilization – crashing a party, getting drunk, insouciantly breaking into locked buildings and stealing necklaces and money from dowagers and waiters they run into (but then Clair is careful to emphasize that wealth and money are not important). The well-edited film seems to owe a lot to American silent comedy, e.g., the sequence in which two men with large advertising signs on their backs cancel one another out when they try to bend down to pick up a 1000 franc note and thus allow a third party to get it. The author seems also to enjoy manipulating time and the film medium – the moving characters interacting with the motionless ones, motion in the city being turned on and turned off by throwing the lever of the scientist's machine, some aggressive editing, etc. Fairly interesting little film that provides an introduction to Clair and to the European style of editing. (2016)

**Parlez-moi de la pluie** 2008 Agnes Jaoui (co-written with husband Bacri) 3.5 Agnès Jaoui as hard-driving yet often genial feminist writer from Paris in the provinces to help her sister settle her mother's affairs after her death and to start a career in politics; Pascale Arbillot as her pretty sister who still suffers from not being loved enough by her mother; Jean-Pierre Bacri hilariously fumbling documentary filmmaker who is also carrying on an affair with Arbillot; Jamel Debbouze as short-statured Algerian son of the family housekeeper who suffers personally from anti-Maghrebin discrimination and



who works with Bacri on making a film about Jaoui. Drole, engaging, insightful film about the tangled relationships and unrealistic ambitions of the principal characters. The main narrative focus is the attempts to shoot interview sessions with Jaoui. The two filmmakers are incompetent (they once performed an entire interview session without turning on the camera), spend much of the time bickering (e.g., about appropriate questions while their interview subject waits), allow their personal issues to take over the interviews (the divorced Bacri begins one asking her why women almost always get the custody of the children in a divorce), and generally try the patience of Jaoui. The pièce de résistance is an interview session that for some reason is shot on a ridge in the Alpilles; the session is interrupted by the bleating of a flock of sheep nearby and their car getting stuck in a ditch; deciding to hitchhike, they are caught in a downpour and end spending most of the night in a peasant household where one man stares hungrily at Jaoui and the other complains bitterly and aggressively about how politicians treat farmers. The duo of Bacri, who hilariously considers himself a competent filmmaker, and Debbouze, who although gifted is full of anger and frustrated with his life going nowhere, is priceless. The film glides insouciantly through funny scenes and lines without noticing them, providing much occasion for laughter for the fan of subtle humor. Two romantic subplots – Bacri with Arbillot and Debbouze, who is married, with a fellow worker in a hotel – do not advance the plot or deepen the treatment of the issues. Jaoui is the main character: she is sharp, impatient, bossy, and prickly, and is advised by Debbouze’s mother to marry her boyfriend; she ignores her, but as the film progresses she begins to think that her independent life is not rewarding, since her political campaign does not get off the ground and she cannot even finish the interview; the last scene of the film has her embracing her boyfriend when she gets off the train in Paris. At the same time, the other characters move on through their lives: Bacri deciding to spend time with his son and Arbillot deciding to stay with her controlling husband despite her lack of affection. No great drama or resolution of issues raised, but insightful and amusing throughout. (2012)

**Partir** 2009 Catherine Corsini 2.5 Kristin Scott Thomas in excellent performance as unfulfilled upper middle class housewife who abandons all for her one true love; Sergi Lopez affectionate, sincere, teddy-bearish as her working-class lover; Yvan Atal (‘Anthony Zimmer’) as the husband left behind angry and determined to force her to return. High quality women’s picture/soap opera about giving up everything in your life – husband, status, wealth, security, two teenage children – for a man that you fall passionately in love/lust with. Thomas shows her dissatisfaction by relaunching her career as a physical therapist, and then falls desperately for Spanish handyman Lopez. She defies her husband and children openly, even to the point of violent physical confrontations with Atal, and she sets up shop with Lopez in the most unpromising of circumstances – isolation, dingy apartments (compared to the stylish home she shared with her family), poverty and desperation from lack of money. She agrees to return only when Atal threatens to have Lopez arrested, but apparently unhinged mentally, she gets up from her bed at night and shoots Atal dead with a hunting rifle. The film ends with Lopez and Thomas embracing one another hopelessly while framed by one of the many picturesque mountain and sea views that the director uses to enhance their romantic attachment. The film is very well made and well acted: Thomas stands out in making us believe in her heedless devotion to the French ideal of ‘amour fou’, all the way from her laughing joy when she is with her lover, to her catatonic grief when she is forced to leave Lopez and return to her husband, and to her narrow-eyed, unhinged determination when she decides to kill him. Atal is also strong as the grim husband who will resort to any stratagem to force his wife to return. The film’s characters are hard to sympathize with: What is it about Lopez that causes such extreme behavior in Thomas? What happened to the old French tradition of having an impossible extramarital affair and then moving on however painful? And given his wife’s relentless rejection of him and the children, why would a husband – especially one as sympathetic as Atal – so ruthlessly manipulate her return to the conjugal bed? The answer seems to be ideology. The director presents Thomas as a woman oppressed by masculine domination and class power. Her prestigious doctor-husband uses his influence in the community to take away Thomas’ clients and to have the lower-class Lopez arrested. He is determined to reassert his domination over his wife, his “ownership” of her: he makes it clear that she belongs at home because he “owns” her, and when after her return, he has sex with her, it is a brutal, dominating act. From the director’s point of view, her murder of him is probably justified. The film’s tragedy is brought about by social and gender repression. (2012)

**Le passé** 2013 Asghar Farhadi 3.0 Berenice Bejo as Marie (French character), hysterically angry mother of Lucie and lover of Samir – but she still has feelings for her husband; Ali Mosaffa (Iranian) as sensible, conciliatory Ahmad, Marie’s Iranian separated husband, who has returned to France to formalize the divorce; Tahar Rahim as Samir (Arab), mild-mannered lover of Marie – he is caught in the middle between Marie and his wife, who is in the hospital for a suicide attempt; Pauline Burlet as Lucie, tortured by a secret; Fouad is Samir’s alienated little boy. Over-long (2:10) domestic drama chronicling a family crisis – ultimately focusing on revelation of the past and the influence of the past on the present. Set in a busy, run-down Paris suburb, the narrative unpacks the situation step by step, often surprising the viewer with revelations delivered through dialogue. When Ahmad returns, he (and the viewer) discovers that Marie has a live-in lover and that Marie’s relationship with her daughter is fractured; it also becomes apparent that Samir’s son, Fouad, is suffering from some sort of family loss, and that Samir’s wife, Celine, had discovered that Samir and Marie were having an affair and had then tried to commit suicide – she is now in a coma in a hospital. We eventually discover that the source of Lucie’s pain is that she had forwarded her mother’s amorous emails to Samir to Celine, which one presumes had caused her to try suicide. The focus of the film is development of past events and their influence on the behavior and dilemmas of the present. The narrative moves slowly toward the necessity of packing away the past and moving on (Marie reconciles with Lucie and refuses to hear a confession by Ahmad); but it then ends on a note of tender sadness, when Samir visits his unconscious wife in the hospital – when he attempts to revive her with the fragrance of her favorite perfume, she does not move her hand as he requested, but a solitary tear rolls down her cheek; credits roll. It appears that part of moving on is facing squarely and honestly the experience of loss – Samir still loves (or is loyal to) his wife, but she is lost forever; since Ahmad has returned to Iran, Samir will now marry Marie. All the acting is first-rate; the director’s mise-en-scene is sensitive and appropriate; the twists of the narrative are interesting; the last scene is very moving. The film often moves slowly; if the viewer is not interested in cross-cultural domestic crises, his attention will wane. For this viewer the film lacks the inherent appeal of ‘A Separation’. (2014)

**Passion** 2012 Brian De Palma (adapted too; produced mainly by Germans and French) 3.5 Rachel McAdams as intense, glamorous, sexy, and kinky CEO of a Paris office of a New York advertising firm; Noomi Rapace as more serious, “nerdy”, but equally intense assistant; Keroline Herfurth beautiful redhead as Rapace’s assistant, who turns out to be a lesbian in love with her boss; Paul Anderson not very memorable as McAdams’ squeeze who also has sex with Rapace. Typically DePalmesque lurid remake of the ‘Crime d’Amour’ of Alain Corneau. McAdams as bitch dominating boss who toys with Rapace, eye-flirting with her, kissing her on the mouth, and telling her that she loves her; she maneuvers to take credit for her good ideas so that she can be promoted and move to New York. As in the original (see the review), Rapace eventually has enough and takes her revenge by murdering her boss. This version differs from the original in that the viewer is uncertain as to what Rapace is up to and as to who murders McAdams, whereas the original focuses on the assistant’s careful preparation and there is no doubt about the guilt. The remake differs from the original also in that Rapace’s assistant is another beautiful young woman instead of a loyal male and that Herfurth falls in love with Rapace and is jealous of Rapace’s relationship with McAdams. Herfurth helps her boss cover up her responsibility for the murder and attempts to blackmail her into accepting a sexual relationship with her. The ending of the film – typical lurid De Palma over-the-top – has McAdams’ twin show up at her sister’s funeral (haven’t we been told she is dead?) and then materialize outside Rapace’s apartment to strangle her with the bloody scarf used in the murder investigation...; or maybe she didn’t kill her and the murder was one of Rapace’s nightmares? Even though the narrative doesn’t make as much sense as the French original, the film is eye-poppingly memorable from beginning to end. The women are coiffed, made up, and dressed to be remembered: usually bright red lipstick, extremely cool clothes, shoes that come straight out of a haute couture fashion show, all accompanied by lush symphonic music; they interact with intense feelings of superiority, competition, and feminine one-ups-manship. The film is suffused with sexuality: McAdams, who plays kinky sex games with Anderson using masks and dildos, uses sexual come-ons to establish her superiority over Rapace; McAdams does not suspect foul play from her aggressor in her

murder scene since she has an affection for rough sex; the coda with Herfurth is immersed in her lust for Rapace, leading to another violent murder (we think). De Palma reverts to his crisis style at the end – slow-moving shots, aggressive editing to key objects (e.g., the phone that contains the incriminating information), shocking revelations (the appearance of the “sister” with the scarf when Rapace unexpectedly bends down in front of the camera), all accompanied by intense music. The remake is similar to the original in substance; the style is unmistakably De Palma. (2013)

**Pat and Mike** 1952 George Cukor 3.0 Spencer Tracy, Katherine Hepburn, Aldo Ray. Wr. Kanin and Gordon. Ok Hepburn/Tracy vehicle that suffers from improvised acting and improbable script. Milieu is double: the upper crust unmarried PE teacher who is a gifted athlete; and slightly hoodish atmosphere of sports promoters who act and talk like small-time hoods. Gangsters are amusing, especially when they try to act straight, and they are generally harmless. Aldo Ray fairly amusing as thick-headed boxer who talks like a hood and has the intelligence of a pinto bean. Both Tracy and Hepburn show that they are tired of the drill – practically no chemistry, and the dialogue often seems improvised and partly muffed. Cukor runs long takes that give room for dialogue miscues. The pairing is very unlikely: how could gifted athlete and college-educated Hepburn fall for small-time sports promoter who talks like Joe Palooka? Are we supposed to believe that he is really a sentimental slob underneath, who will leave behind his underworld connections and hitch all his horses to Hepburn? He does have a good line or two, “not much meat on her, but what’s there is cherce!” Usual much ado about Hepburn’s two sides: she is independent minded, a professional level athlete (she just loses to Babe Zaharias) and could easily be self-supporting, but she needs a man to support her (her first boyfriend Collier has a paralyzing effect on her when he watches her perform), and finally finds him in Tracy; but in end a little verbal sparring to indicate that she won’t be a pushover. (2005)

**Paterson** 2016 Jim Jarmusch 4.0 Beautiful meditative, realist drama about interface between everyday life and poetic feeling. Adam Driver pensive, soft-spoken bus driver in Paterson – he is also a sensitive poet, who writes more expressively than he speaks; Golshifteh Farahani also tranquil, rather empty, but devoted wife of Driver devoted to her hobbies – interior design in black and white and cupcake making (decorated of course in black and white); Marvin the deadpan although expressive English bulldog, who provides much of the humor; Barry Shabaka Henley as bartender owner of the local bar that Driver visits every evening; Rizman Manji as Donny, Driver’s boss, who is full of domestic woe (“My mother-in-law is moving in.”); William Jackson Harper as despondent bar denizen abandoned by his girlfriend; Masatoshi Nagase as Japanese poet who sits down next to Driver in front of the waterfall at the end of the film. Film is a deadpan, if not uneventful, chronicle of Driver’s ordinary daily activities as husband of Farahani and a bus driver in Paterson, New Jersey. Each weekday begins with its title, and the film then chronicles essentially the same activities – he wakes up next to his pretty sleeping wife, checks his watch, fixes his coffee, walks through the old section of town, drives his bus, returns home and greets Farahani after straightening the crooked mailbox (Marvin returns it to crooked every day), takes his dog for a walk stumbling to keep up with him, stops at Henley’s bar for a beer, and returns home. Each day his experiences are a little different: he hears different megaphoned conversations on the bus (including two college students yearning for the good ol’ days when anarchists lived in Paterson); he encounters intimidating kids in the street; he overhears the romantic frustrations of Harper in the bar and disarms him of the pistol he was threatening to use on his girlfriend or himself (it turns out to be a toy pistol). All the time he is transmuting his observations and experiences into poetic reflections in his notebook: e.g., he starts one with the description of a matchbox of Ohio Blue Tip matches and then transforms the eager flame of the match into a love poem to his wife. It turns out Paterson is the home of famous people including Lou Costello, whose statue is in the city, and William Carlos Williams, whose poetry seems to be the inspiration of Driver’s verses. The quiet film seems to be a meditation on the genesis of poetic images and sentiments out of the observations and experiences of everyday life, a theme emphasized by a spare conversation that Driver has with a visiting Japanese poet while looking at the local waterfall (or “water fall”, as a little girl spells it in her own poetry). The film ends quietly with the couple sleeping. No mention of family, children, sex, physical affection other than a peck; just the couple. The emergence

of sensitive poetic sentiments out of everyday objects and experiences breeds a quiet appreciation of the humanity of ordinary people. (2017)

**Paths of Glory** 1957 Stanley Kubrick (UA) 4.0 Kirk Douglas as Colonel Dax; George Macready as General Mireau; Adolphe Menjou as General Broulard. Superior antiwar movie that treats the military politics surrounding an attack of a French regiment against a German position (the Anthill) in World War I. Focuses on the careerist manipulations of upper level officers. Midlevel officers remain generally honorable and concerned about the fate of their men. Macready is excellent as pugnacious and compulsively active General Mireau, a "fighting general" burning with ambition for his third star but possessed of an ungovernable temper and little judgment (when his attack against the Anthill fails, he orders his artillery to fire on his own men). Menjou is just as good as the suave, elegant, and politic Broulard, Mireau's superior; he is just as ambitious as Mireau and knows that he needs to "cover his ass" against the civilian establishment on the Home Front. Against the backdrop of command politics, the loyal men in the trenches are the victims -- dirty, oppressed, and many of them are killed in the hopeless attack; the pleasant manners, elegant surroundings in a chateau (Wurzberg? with pictures of Watteau fêtes galantes in the background), pleasant meals, and graceful dancing at a ball contrast with the miserable living conditions of the men in the trenches. To cover his own failure, Mireau orders that three men be court martialed and executed for cowardice: the court martial scene establishes that the military judges have been ordered to find the defendants guilty; the execution scene is intense and realistic. In a nice twist, however, Dax reveals Macready's faux pas to Broulard, and after some hesitation, the latter turns against Mireau telling him that there will have to be an inquiry into his actions about the artillery; Broulard realizes that the potential scandal might blight his career. He offers the job to Dax, but Douglas turns it down in a famous meltdown style speech. Famous ending has French men humming a German song in the presence of a German performer, Susan Christian (who married Kubrick shortly thereafter); the final scene restores the common humanity of brutalized soldiers everywhere. Excellent direction from the still young Kubrick: very crisp editing (e.g., eliminating the choosing of the three men for court martial and skipping the delivery of the verdict of the court) that keeps the story moving; elegant and functional moving camera, most famously in the scenes where Mireau, and then Dax, stride through the trenches (made six feet wide to accommodate the camera), but also in the initial Mireau/Broulard scene, where the sinuous movement of the camera seems to express the political maneuverings of the principals. The antiwar film focuses on the egotism, arrogance, and hypocrisy of the professional officer class. (2005)

**The Patsy** 1928 King Vidor 3.0 Marion Davies in principal role as younger sister with unattractive page boy haircut and overshadowed by her flirtatious older sister; Jane Winton as the older sister who dresses elegantly (sometimes with Davies' clothes) and has stylish short hair; Marie Dressler mugging and funny as the social-climbing mother who favors Winton; Dell Henderson as the amiable, hen-pecked father who favors Davies. Amusing romantic comedy, well-directed, featuring the effective comic talents of Marion Davies. Davies, who is in love with one of Winton's boyfriends, is pushed around by her sister and mother until she is advised to get some "personality" to attract men (reflection of 'it' in 1920s 'It?'). This she does effectively by spouting nonsensical phrases from self-help books, acting like a glamorous leading lady, and imitating three leading actresses of the 1920s, including Lillian Gish (dead-on perfect from 'The Scarlet Letter') and Pola Negri, who approaches a man in the room with a dagger. Davies of course triumphs in the end: she gets her man, all are reconciled, and she will apparently live happily ever after. The comedy is partly physical (the gestures and facial expressions of Davies and Dressler), but there is a surprising amount of comic dialogue portrayed through fairly long title cards, which is particularly effective when Marion is spouting her platitudes. Davies is cute, although not particularly pretty (her teeth are so big!); she is very nimble and active in her comic style; her movements are quick and slapstickish. Vidor includes a light bit of social criticism -- the snotty behavior of the patrons at the country club ("It is polite to be courteous with the waiters"); the mindless behavior of the rich kid (Lawrence Gray) racing through the bay with his girlfriend in his speedboat; the more modest and constructive lifestyle of Davies' boyfriend (Orville Caldwell), who expects his girlfriend to be faithful and who is proud of the real estate development he is working on. Another good

example of the Hollywood romantic comedy at the end of the silent era to be considered next to 'My Best Girl' of Mary Pickford. Davies shows herself to be an effective comedienne. (2009)

**Patton** 1970 Franklin Schaffner (writer Francis Ford Coppola) 4.0 George C. Scott in the role of his life as charismatic, irascible, fanatic, profane, marginally crazy but intensely human and sensitive (he mourns genuinely the loss of his soldiers) American general in World War II; Karl Malden solid and believable as more down-to-earth "G.I.s' general" Omar Bradley, who according to Germans "looks like a common soldier" – he remains Patton's friend through thick and thin. Surely one of the best war films ever made. Starting with Scott's famous hard-hitting speech to GIs (us) in front of the huge American flag (we'll run through the Germans faster than "shit through a goose"), the film focuses on the personality of Patton, the politics behind the scenes, the jockeying between the Americans and the British, and the fabulous, epic scenery filmed in Spain (perfectly reproducing the deserts of Tunisia, the dry hills of Sicily, and the fertile landscapes of northern Europe). Follows Patton from his whipping of the American army in Tunisia into shape; to the invasion of Sicily where what matters to Patton most is getting to Messina before Montgomery (he does so in a memorably humorous sequence in which a triumphant Scottish marching band stops cold in the town's central square since Patton was already there and waiting for Montgomery); after a long hiatus, Patton receives the command of the armored units racing across northern France with a memorable scene of Patton "hands on" directing tank traffic at a messy crossroads; Patton steals everyone's thunder by turning his units around and pressing northwards to relieve the beleaguered 101<sup>st</sup> at Bastogne at the Battle of the Bulge; he mouths off about the Russians during the initial stages of the occupation, and he is again relieved of his command. Throughout the emphasis is on a fascinating and controversial personality, who is effective on the battlefield (although he is often criticized for being a "son of a bitch", for incurring excessive casualties, and for focusing on glory and stealing the thunder from the British), but who cannot control his public statements and behaviors. He constantly says things that get him into trouble, especially when he is talking about the hated Russians (in the English town hall dedication scene and in the "son of a bitch" toast that he shares with a Russian commander in Berlin); when he talks about his successes, he uses phrases like "killing Nazis". He writes poetry and often shows the mystical side of his personality: he constantly discusses ancient military history; he stands next to a Roman arch on what appears to be the battlefield of Zama and declares that he was with the Roman Army when they confronted the Carthaginians (at other times with the Athenians or Napoleon); he states repeatedly that he loves war ("God, I love it!"), and there is nothing like the glory, the messiness, the fulfillment of it. The film frequently emphasizes German admiration for him and fear of him: an attractive, scholarly young officer in Jodl's headquarters regularly gives his superiors reports on Patton's characteristics (he lives in the past) and German officers show their respect for him. The screenplay seems to say that war is hell, but thank God we have leaders like Patton who know how to get the job done when we need them. Outstanding film combining an in-depth character study of a memorable historical character, an epic sweep through North Africa and Europe; it makes the viewer reflect on the meaning of war. One goes away from the film admiring the military profession. (2008)

**Pauline à la plage** 1983 Eric Rohmer 3.5 Amanda Langlet, Arielle Dombasle (also in 'Un beau mariage'). Slice of life Rohmer look at a few days at the beach in Brittany; Pauline (Langlet) arrives with her cousin, and there follows a kind of Feydeau farce about who is sleeping with whom. The leisurely atmosphere of vacation, where no one has to deal with reality of work, is excellent for a leisurely exploration of personal issues in modern France. Wonderfully framed: in beginning Arielle's car arrives in front of the wooden gate and Pauline gets out to open it, and at the end with lessons learned and stated, Pauline closes the gate, steps back into the car, and it pulls away with us staring a few seconds at the gate. Very dialogue rich with nothing extraordinary happening. As usual, characters talk about relationships, their values and even their philosophies of relationship; conversation often deviates into fairly theoretical territory. Pauline is very young in the beginning and has the purity of heart and idealism of adolescence; she demands honesty and integrity. Meanwhile, the adults play games and make fools of themselves. Pierre pleads endlessly and boringly with Arielle to love him. Arielle says she is looking to fall for an overpowering love (her previous husband had turned her off because of "too much fidelity"), and then has a fling with the superficial, though straightforward hedonist Henri; it appears that she is fooling herself.

Pauline carries on a tentative dalliance with a teenage boy, but becomes disillusioned when it appears he might have had sex with the promiscuous flower girl. But it turns out that impression was caused by a lie concocted by Henri to get himself out of trouble with Arielle. Pauline generally stays in background and observes with some disapproval and bewilderment. As she leaves with Arielle, it seems that she may understand better what adults are all about, but we hope that she has preserved some of the purity of her heart. Apparent that since 1960s Rohmer has lost his theological focus; no more mention of eternal destiny, Pascal, etc.; all seem focused on their secular, sexual destiny, hopefully in the arms of a true love. Truly delightful movie with perhaps a little more action than the normal Rohmer product. (2006)

**Pawn Sacrifice** 2014 Edward Zwick 3.0 Biopic of Bobby Fischer from childhood to the immediate aftermath of his victory over Boris Spassky in the World championship at Reykjavik in 1972. Tobey Maguire as an over-the-top volatile, angry, and paranoid Bobby Fischer; Liev Schreiber in excellent performance as soft-spoken, gentlemanly, highly competitive Soviet champion Spassky (he applauds Fischer after the famous sixth game); Peter Sarsgaard cool and good-looking priest as Fischer's backup during the championship match; Michael Stuhlbarg as Fischer's rather sleazy lawyer manager, who sees Fischer's victory as a chapter in the Cold War competition with the Soviet Union. Maguire's performance as Fischer is compelling if obviously exaggerated: the kid is amazingly competitive, always opposed to the draws that the Soviet players are inclined to take, determined from the beginning to vanquish and humiliate his opponents; very volatile, given to unreasonable demands backed up by threats, and quickly launching into noisy tirades when he doesn't get his way; gets along poorly with his mother and sister, whom he excludes from his matches as distractions. Colorful rendering of Fischer's family background – his mother is promiscuous (teenager Fischer complains about sex noises heard from his bedroom) and an enthusiastic Communist, hosting party get-togethers in her apartment. Much of the film chronicles his rants and the patient, if exasperated, efforts of Sarsgaard and Stuhlbarg to pacify him and lead him back to competition. The film concedes that some of his demands were perhaps justified, e.g., the apparent policy of the heavily coached and financed soviet team to agree to draws among themselves in international competition in order to maximize their chances of winning. Film gets the chess right – Fischer is a brilliant, aggressive attacker, although his performance is often marred by emotional factors – his paranoia (the Russians are plotting against him), his susceptibility to environmental noises (camera running, people in the audience coughing). According to the film, Fischer gets encouraging phone calls from Henry Kissinger during the match. The film is engrossing as the viewer follows his upward career and worries about him and cheers for him in his competitions, particularly of course in the 1972 World Championship; it ends with a celebration of his victory, but then has to gloss over the rest of his career without mentioning that he gave up the championship when he refused to play Antonin Karpov a few years later. Entertaining, instructive film. (2016)

**La peau douce** 1964 François Truffaut (France) 3.0 Slowly paced romantic drama about a French intellectual that sacrifices his marriage for a cute stewardess, only to be severely punished in the end sequence. Pudgy Jean Desailly as clueless literary celebrity stumbling blindly forward in his affair seemingly heedless of the consequences; Françoise Dorléac very pretty young stewardess, who seems flattered that an bourgeois intellectual would pay attention to her; Nelly Benedetti as formidable dark-haired beauty married to Desailly – she explodes in the last part of the film. The film – less dynamic and joyous than Truffaut's first three films – is divided into three parts: the beginning of the affair between Desailly and Dorleac in a Lisbon hotel; the progress of the affair in Paris and in Reims while Dorleac remains enthusiastic and committed; the explosion, when Benedetti discovers the other woman and eventually gets hold of Desailly's shotgun and then shockingly murders him while he eats alone in a restaurant (Dorleac backs out of the relationship just before the ironic murder of her lover – Desailly was convinced to patch things up with his wife just as she was stalking him in the restaurant). Film's action is methodical and relatively inexpressive: slow movement, a lot of everyday gestures such as walking down sidewalks, inserting keys in locks, following one's wife up two short flights of stairs before the two have a showdown in the bedroom. The editing and mise-en-scene are neutral and low-key; the emotion behind the scenes and in the hearts of the characters is expressed by the often lyrical sound track of George de la Rue. Truffaut uses non-traditional editing to make important points: when a nervous Desailly (you would

never know from his facial expressions) is riding the elevator with Dorleac, it takes perhaps a time-dilated two minutes to go from the ground floor to the eighth floor; when after their nuit d'amour Desailly passes in front of flight attendant Dorleac as he leaves the airplane in Paris, there is a freeze frame as they look at one another ('400 coups'); when Benedetti murders Desailly at the end, he falls twice to the table (Eisenstein). Desailly is an unusually inexpressive, clueless lover; he goes to great lengths to pursue Dorleac, but he shows little to no emotion in his face, he rarely says anything romantic, and Truffaut does not show romantic kissing or love-making. One can't help but wonder why such a man would sacrifice his marriage and access to his daughter for a superficial, though pretty young woman. Benedetti adds an explosive dynamism to the last part of the film: over-the-top emotional, oscillating wildly between anger and pleading with her husband to get back together, finally embittered revenge once she sees the photographs of the happiness of Desailly with his girlfriend. An apparent critique of the bourgeois intellectual – outwardly conformist, dinner parties with friends in which little is said (Chabrol), pompous academic statements when Desailly gives a lecture, an apartment whose bookshelves are filled with soft-covered books. Is this Truffaut criticizing his father? At times compelling, often a bit off-putting. (2016)

**Peeping Tom** 1960 Michael Powell (Britain) 3.0 Carl Boehm, Anna Massey as girlfriend Helen, Moir Shearer of *Red Shoes* fame as actress victim. Cult film that is supposed to have started the slasher genre and to be more influential than *Psycho*. Carl Boehm is a cameraman who murders women, films them while he murders them noting the look of terror on their faces, and looks at the snuff films later; we find at the end that he has a sort of mirror on the front of his camera, thus adding to the terror of his victims, who see themselves being skewered by his tripod spike. Colors very lurid. Boehm is apparently being directed to act like Peter Lorre; in any case, he simpers, looks awry, and mispronounces many of his lines (does he speak native English?); his attempts to come across as sympathetic misfire. Lots of dime store psychology: Carl's father was also a psycho, who terrorized young women and children (while he murdered them?); he repeated similar experiments on his son, e.g., throwing a large lizard on his bed and then photographing look of fear/terror on the little boy's face. It appears that son is traumatized by the way he was treated, and he continues his father's work (obvious connection with DePalma's *Raising Cain*). Boehm tries to play his character sympathetically – he knows what he is doing and he wants to stop; he develops a sort of romantic relationship with Massey, who wanders into his inner sanctum (film and darkroom = also his subconscious!) and almost dies for her temerity; in end, Boehm commits suicide with his spike (cameras and flash bulbs going off all around him) rather than be taken by the police. Film doesn't play well now – mixture of tedium and unintentional humor. (2008)

**Pelle the Conqueror** 1987 Bille August (based on Martin Anderson Nexø novel); Denmark 3.0 Pelle Hvenegaard as Swedish Pelle, boy of about 10 arriving as immigrant on a farm in Denmark; Max von Sydow moving and memorable as his grizzled father, Lasse, bowed down by age and poverty; Björn Granath as farmhand Erik who becomes a simpleton after an accident; Astrid Villaume as Mrs. Kongstrup, who cries and wails her nights away because of the womanizing of her husband; Axel Strobye as the lecher Kongstrup, do-nothing owner of the farm that seduces his own niece (she goes back to Copenhagen to have her baby) and is castrated by his wife as a result. Epic-like film based on the first part of Nexø's four-part novel, that chronicles the experience and observations of a father and son working in a menial job on a large Danish farm. The film is episodic evoking several key experiences: Pelle's befriending of a retarded child, who has something of a happy ending when he secures a job as a kind of freak in a local fair; the rebelliousness of Erik, who plans to run away with Pelle to America when his time on the farm is up, but whose plans are canceled by the accident; the possibility of father and son acquiring a wife and mother in the person of the widow Olsen, but their dreams are dashed when the husband, supposedly lost at sea, returns home; the persecution of Pelle by his classmates because of his Swedishness (prejudice against Swedes!) and his father living out of wedlock with the widow; Kongstrup's setting his lecher's eye on his niece (Sofie Grabol) and deflowering her (with blood) next to a river; Kongstrup's wife castrating her husband with greater amounts of blood, which turn him into a sort of idiot lying on a couch eating petits fours, etc. Cinematography shows the farmstead in realistic detail and the Danish countryside picturesquely with an emphasis on the change of seasons – the winters come across as particularly bitter, snow and ice dominate everywhere. The film's theme focuses on the

hardships suffered by poor people on the farm – immigrant or native – and their dreams of escaping to a land of opportunity: that was the reason that Lasse had brought his son to Denmark; Pelle dreams throughout the film of emigrating to America and making something of himself. The ending, which has Pelle leaving his father and the farm and walking aimlessly through the wintry snow and ice, makes no sense on a realistic level (where can a ten-year-old go at that time of year?), but perhaps works as a pessimistic metaphor concluding an essentially pessimistic film: in fact, there is no future for the poor in western society. The highlight of the film is the powerful performance of van Sydow: a loving and attentive father, but a weak man to begin with who has no stomach for protest or independent action, and who is constantly bowed and humiliated by his station in life; and yet throughout he maintains his dignity. (2013)

**The Penguin Pool Murder** 1932 George Archainbaud (RKO) 3.0 Early sound whodunit that benefits from amusing performances. Edna Mae Oliver prissy, eccentric, speaking Midatlantic as Hildegard Withers; Robert Armstrong as lawyer who helps Withers investigate the mystery; James Gleason as wry, tough cop talking out of the side of his mouth like a gangster; Mae Clarke pretty in secondary role as young woman early jailed for the murder; Donald Cook as Clarke's young boyfriend; Clarence Wilson as disquieting aquarium director. Film takes place in an aquarium that featuring cute penguins that often walk through the scene. Begins with the murder of Clarke's husband, a much reviled stock broker. Clarke, who is having an affair with Cook, is inculpated and locked up; the rest of the film deals with the efforts by the police detective, Gleason, and his buddy Withers to find the real culprit. Gleason seems delighted to have the assistance of Withers, who is smart, observant, very persistent; she takes notes in a small notebook and has a smart mouth, criticizing a secretary for her heavy makeup and constantly exchanging banter with Gleason. Colorful surroundings including shot of a crab fed by aquarium staff to an octopus and of the body of the victim falling into the aquarium pool from an overhead catwalk. Withers follows clues relentlessly, focusing on her missing hairpin, the hatband found in the gullet of a sick penguin, etc. The whodunit plot finally comes together in the courtroom where Clarke is being prosecuted by Armstrong, who appears to be the district attorney (?). After Armstrong browbeats Withers in his interrogation, the latter turns the table on him, incriminating him from the witness chair (recalls Perry Mason!) by pointing out that Armstrong is the only person outside of the police and medical examiner who knows which ear the victim was stabbed in with the hairpin! The film ends humorously with Gleason making a rather unromantic marriage proposal to Withers, who accepts in her usual ironic fashion. Better than average whodunit with colorful plot details and lively characters; the genre is a bit overused. (January 2018)

**Penny Serenade** 1941 George Stevens (20c Fox) 2.5 Impossibly drippy and sentimental women's movie (soap opera) partly salvaged by a clever plot structure and first-rate star power. Cary Grant as charming (naturally) ne'er-do-well journalist, who falls suddenly in love with...; Irene Dunne in third film with Grant as his affectionate, old-fashioned wife working in a traditional record shop; sweet Edgar Buchanan as sexless, bachelor-type friend, who helps Grant and Dunn with their child; Beulah Bondi as rather starchy, but essentially sensitive and heartfelt adoption administrator, who bails out our couple at the last minute. The devoted couple is exposed to numerous, alternating hardships and kindnesses not due to their own initiative: they move to Japan, where at first Grant has a good job; Grant quits his job to take over a small newspaper in Rosalia just north of San Francisco (Santa Rosa?), which however is never a success; when Dunne becomes pregnant, she loses the baby due to an earthquake; the two however decide to adopt a baby – a two-year old boy with curly hair – but Bondi gives them a baby girl; after initial comic confusion and cluelessness (Buchanan is a good informal godfather with his bathing of the baby and meal preparation), the two become fond parents, witnessing with tears of affection as Trina sings in the Christmas play; because of Grant's impecuniousness, our couple almost loses their child, but Grant is able to save her with his AA-nominated speech in front of the judge (seems improvised and overrated); the viewers and Bondi are informed through a letter that little Trina has died from a disease (actually watching her expire would be too much for the 40s ladies); Grant enters catatonia and he and Dunne almost separate, but they are saved by another external initiative – Bondi telephones that she now has the perfect two-year-old male that they had requested in the beginning. The film ends



with Grant and Dunne – arms around each other’s waist – fussing about preparing for the arrival of the child. The movie is over-the-top sentimental: bravely bearing up under adversity, hearts bursting with joy at the sight of the baby, Grant awkward yet devoted with his daughter, the kids singing in four-part heavenly choir during the Christmas program (parents beaming with joy), etc. The film has a pleasing narrative gimmick: it begins with Dunne preparing for divorce; she recalls for us her story by playing a song that she associates with each segment, the most prevalent being an Irish lullaby (yes, maudlin), and “You Were Meant for me”. The narrative is thus essentially a flashback. The film wouldn’t be watchable without the star power of Grant and Dunne. (2016)

**People Will Talk** Written and directed by Joseph Mankiewicz 3.0 Cary Grant impossibly handsome, charming, sensitive, impeccably dressed, and wise as medical doctor Pretorius; Margaret Hamilton as crusty older woman; Hume Cronyn as curmudgeonly, weasely academic rival of Pretorius, a “little man” that eats carrots and drinks milk for lunch and is trying to discredit Pretorius; Walter Slezak as bass playing colleague and always sparring confidant of Pretorius; Jeanne Crain as student in Pretorius’ anatomy class – pretty, earnest, finely chiseled features, always perfect hair, pregnant without a husband, but with a romantic fire burning in her breast; Finlay Currie as Pretorius’ mysterious sidekick Shunderson, who has an effective monologue at the end of the film; Sidney Blackmer as Crain’s sensitive, sad failure of a father; Will Wright as crusty old codger. Entertaining, dialogue-rich early 1950s, sometimes puzzling Hollywood star vehicle. The impossibly charming Grant is presented as the kindest, nicest man ever to wield a medical scalpel, except that he believes that attention to the spirit and the feelings of the patient is equally as important as physical caring, which in fact is treated as clearly inferior when linked with the villain of the piece played by Hume Cronyn. “My purpose is to make sick people well. There is a vast difference between curing them and making a sick person well.” The plot runs on two clocks: the romantic angle that joins Grant with one of his patients, Crain – they are married toward the end of the film; and the suspenseful track that has Cronyn trying to discredit Grant out of spite and jealousy – a faculty hearing about Grant’s past sins (not imaginable that he might have acted unprofessionally while at the clinic) clears him in the end, and the Renaissance Man Grant returns hastily to his college orchestra, which is waiting impatiently for him to begin a performance of Brahms’ ‘Academic Festival Overture’ (which recurs throughout the film). The film lacks dramatic intensity, partly because parts of it are comic (Slezak, Blackmer, and Grant bickering over who was responsible for the crash in their huge model train[?]), and partly because there is little suspense – we know from the start that Grant and Crain are destined for one another, and that Grant is incapable of wrongdoing and Cronyn is a petty little weasel. The film is dialogue oriented, generally overwritten, and gracefully artificial: talky, chatty, very literate, eloquent and witty, full of quips; not natural colloquial conversation – “my functions have achieved a unanimous failure”, but theatrical, formal and studied. Beautifully photographed and edited, it has an impeccable early 50s look, including a Lincoln convertible, all the main characters dressed to the tee even when sitting on the newlyweds’ double bed, and Crain looking slim and proper even when she is close to giving birth. Mankiewicz throws in several liberal points of view, including a denunciation of American commercialism – butter smells like paper, an explicit defense of teachers and musicians, who have little money but live on talent, and of course negative references to unjust persecution, which might have been intended as a parody of contemporary HUAC persecution. Although in many ways an intelligent film, its main theme – the triumph of all things good over the mean and petty – is overstated and obvious. One of Grant’s best performances. (2013)

**A Perfect Murder** 1998 Andrew Davis 3.5 Michael Douglas, Gwyneth Paltrow, Viggo Mortensen. Good remake of ‘Dial M for Murder’ with many differences. Follows original plot line more or less until the murder, and then departs, becoming much more complicated with additional plot twists – perhaps too many since it is very easy to become confused. Focused on incredible wonderful apartment in New York, with sumptuous woods and stones, beautiful furniture and a view on Central Park. About the rich and the powerful; all about money and how it corrupts and tempts. Douglas excellent as icy, unpleasant man, who does not like his wife, although he never lets her know it explicitly (their conversations have chilly tone where it is obvious they don’t care for one another); he is losing his shirt in international trading, and needs her dead to cover his losses. Paltrow very beautiful and having an affair

with Mortensen, perhaps out of resentment against her husband's cold, calculating controlling personality; character a bit divided – supposed to be a damsel in distress, but she seems to know what is going on despite her dilatory reactions; does she really love the artist like she says? Mortensen good as lover gigolo con man, who is very greedy too, but seems to have some residual affection for Paltrow and cannot bring himself to murder her (despite the additional \$400,000). An awful lot of violence at the end, with Douglas stabbing Mortensen to death and Paltrow shooting Douglas. What language does she speak with the police detective? Nice use of the key McGuffin. (2005)

**The Perks of Being a Wallflower** 2012 Stephen Chbosky (adapted from his 1999 young adult novel) 2.5 + Logan Lerman as Charlie, the freshman “wallflower” looking for a place in high school and thus in life; Ezra Miller as his friend Patrick, gay, outrageous cutup who is delighted when he gets a C- in clock making class; Emma Watson radiant and charming as Sam, the stepsister of Patrick – she wants to get into the main campus of Penn State; Paul Rudd as Charlie's attentive English teacher Mr. Anderson that gives him extra books to read (‘Walden’, his favorite ‘Catcher in the Rye’); Mae Whitman as the slightly punk Mary Elizabeth headed for Harvard with killer SAT scores. Sweet tempered high school film that charts a year in the life of a shy, disturbed freshman in his quest to regain his confidence after severe mental disturbances as a child. Taken under the wing of seniors Patrick and Sam, Charlie struggles to level out his road to the future: he has sex with Mary Elizabeth, but soon tires of her obsessive attentions (one of the most successful humorous moments in the film), since he is secretly in love with his good buddy Sam; somewhat awkward and confusing flashbacks make the viewer eventually realize that his personal difficulties stem from sexual abuse by his aunt, who was then killed in an automobile accident. The film ends with Charlie benefiting from treatment in a residential mental facility and the bittersweet closure of the seniors heading off to college; in a postscript Sam returns for a tender visit with Charlie, and with Patrick driving the two of them drive through the brightly lit tunnel toward downtown Pittsburgh with rock music blaring on the soundtrack, an apparent metaphor for their having found a direction for their lives (although the future of Sam and Charlie together is left in doubt). The film takes place in an upper middle class environment, where the kids (with the exception of Patrick) and the teachers wear coats and neckties (!) and constantly talk about college. Very little attention is devoted to what one learns in high school; the focus is on the social and personal lives of the kids and particularly on the importance of friendship for adolescents – Sam and Charlie, Charlie's support for rebel Patrick, etc. The tone is a sensitive appreciation of the emotional difficulties teenagers encounter while growing up; not much humor, especially not of the loud, bawdy kind common in the Apatow high school movies. A little dull at times, the movie evokes tearful sympathy for the plight of contemporary teenagers. (2012)

**Persepolis** 2007 Marjane Satrapi 3.5 Voices of Catherine Deneuve (mother), Daniele Darrieux (grandmother), Chiara Mastroianni as Marjane. Simple and moving animated feature about Iranian girl: daughter of a middle class family, hot-headed, devoted to Bruce Lee, she refuses to be tamed by the authorities; her family sends her to Vienna to save her from the Iranian regime's repression; homesick and lost, she returns to Iran, only to be disappointed again; film ends with her arriving in Orly Airport (from which story is narrated in flashback) and her riding off in a taxi to an unknown future in France. Film paints a grim picture of the fate of western-oriented people in Iran of the mullahs; left-wing oriented folk were glad to see the Shah fall, but did not expect things to be worse during the interminable and bloody war and the unrelenting repression – some of it political (lots of people in prison and being executed) and much of it cultural (black-bearded Revolutionary guards harassing women in the street for wearing lipstick or not having headdress properly affixed, breaking up parties where boys and girls together play rock and roll music, etc.). Picture of permissive youth culture in Austria not much better – no values, self-indulgence, drugs, sex, aimlessness, etc. The film is executed in minimalist black and white style with areas of grey (the only color being while Marjane is present in the airport and then driving off in the taxi), two dimensional, expressionist (lovely depiction of the baroque facades and the streets of Vienna), expressive – e.g., the threat of the Revolutionary guards all with the same face, dark beards, carrying rifles (to break up parties!), Marjane floating through the air carrying on her off again-on again relationship with Allah (looks like God the Father). Parents are a bit bland, but Marjane's grandmother (voiced by Daniele Darrieux) is memorable – liberated, outspoken (puts scented flowers in her brassiere!),

sometimes profane, always irreverent and affectionate; her death at the end fills the viewer with sadness. A very poignant coming of age drama; the film expresses a negative view of Islam prevalent in France. (2008)

**Personal Shopper** 2016 Olivier Assayas (France) 3.0 Ambiguous hybrid of a horror film and a thriller about a young woman in Paris grieving about the death of her twin brother. Kristen Stewart moving but perhaps a bit over-exposed and opaque as the girl working as a personal shopper for...: Nora von Waldstätten as flamboyant, egotistical celebrity model who gets free use of designer jewelry and fashions; Lars Eldinger as Ingo, Nora's boyfriend who vows to Stewart ominously that he will not allow Nora to break up with him; Sigrid Bouaziz as Lara's good and supportive friend. The film, which takes the existence of ambient spirits very seriously, is intriguing and attention-riveting, until it indulges in ambiguity just past the halfway point. Initially it focuses on the presence of spirits and the possibility of horror: an anxious, usually dead-pan Stewart, who is convinced that her deceased brother will "appear" and give her a message, spends a great deal of time trying to get in touch with him. The horror aspect appears when a female apparition in her brother's old house (recently sold to a couple) is repulsive and evidently disturbed by something, since she vomits copiously over the spot where Kristen is watching. The film then takes a turn toward a thriller when an unknown person pursues her with text messages to London and back, and then Stewart, bringing some jewelry to Kyra's apartment, finds the latter murdered in her bathroom! The suspicious Ingo then enters and exits the apartment building, in front of which he is arrested by the police (we think); mystery solved – Ingo is the mysterious texter and the murderer. But not so fast; at roughly the same time as Ingo's arrival and exit, the exterior and elevator doors in the building open and close without any living body present; the spirit is real! The progression of the plot in the last part of the film is shrouded in ambiguity. When Stewart arrives in her (sort of) boyfriend's apartment in Oman, she has several minutes of "signs" from some spirit, mostly noises, knocking, crashes, usw. She asks the (one thinks) spirit if he is her brother, but when she receives no verbal answer, the screen goes to white – end of film. The viewer is challenged to provide an interpretation: All Kristen's fantasy (not likely given all the objective views of spirits and their impact)? Kristen is haunted by her brother, who is distraught about something (his death? Kristen's association with the materialistic real world)? It seems as if there might be two parallel stories: a dissertation on the spirit world, and a thriller plot (the texts and the murder) to throw the viewer off the track.... The director exploits expertly the menacing potential of texting in one scene when a rapid succession of increasingly menacing texts to Stewart makes the viewer's hair stand on end. One wonders whether the director chose wisely in featuring a low-energy actor like Stewart in every scene except for one (the elevator scene). Narrative ambiguity will only get you so far. (December 2017)

**Peter Ibbetson** 1935 Henry Hathaway; Paramount; from story by George du Maurier 3.0 Gary Cooper only slightly less deadpan than usual as true love to Ann Harding, the queen of soaps who has to play true to form in second half of film, John Halliday as injured husband of Harding, who is quite good at jealousy, D. Dumbrille in small role as English gentleman who is a family member, Dickie Moore as young Gary Cooper – incisive but annoying boy actor, Donald Meek as kind-hearted, blind architect and employer of Cooper. Fairly hokey true roman à la Borzage, set in England in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Cooper and Harding (as children) have an uncanny relationship but are separated. When they run back into each other as young adults in their 20s (it would appear to be chance, but of course we know it is fate), they finally recognize one another, since they share dreams, and they fall in love, although Harding is married to a Duke (how did that happen?). When the Duke objects with a gun, Cooper kills him and spends the rest of his earthly life in a Yorkshire prison. But love, being a spiritual forces, overcomes the couple's separation: through their dreams they are able to leave their physical selves and meet in idyllic spiritual realms (one appeared to be in the Sierra Nevada); they appear to do this for many years, until the last time, when Harding is near death, and comes to their last meeting to say goodbye. Cooper of course is devastated, but another Harding presence (she is invisible) tells him that she is waiting for him in a better place where there is no more fear and no more pain. He then dies in prison, and the credits roll. First part of movie is fairly dull – little action; last part of movie borders on being moving, but hokeyness is too strong, what with Cooper trying to be solemn and sincere, and Harding taking over with her

sententious pronouncements about faith and heaven (without mentioning the two words). Cooper seems miscast, Harding in her element. Despite the spiritual adultery, this movie I am sure had no problem with the censors. (2007)

**Le petit lieutenant** 2006 Xavier Beauvois 3.0 Nathalie Baye as chagrined police commander (like an American lieutenant) who knows what she is doing but is just returning from a severe bout with alcoholism; Jalil Lespert as young police plainclothes detective who is living in Paris without his adorable wife and who forms a developing friendship with Baye. A realistic minimalist detective movie set in contemporary Paris that deals more with the routine and often boring minutiae of police life and investigations than with twisty plots and exciting chases. Lespert spends roughly the first hour of the movie learning the ropes of his trade, walking inside from office to office, getting to know his police buddies, dragging a drunk into a cell, etc.; when the team finally embarks on a case, they perform repetitive and tiring work – staking out a door for hours on end, checking every flop hotel in Paris for the suspect, etc. Things pick up when a Russian street person is found murdered in the Canal de Saint Martin; then Baye’s team continue looking for the two murderers until they finally shoot to death the more dangerous one with the help of a SWAT team in Nice. Film takes on a tragic cast when Lespert is stabbed several times in the abdomen by the baddie, and then dies several days later in the hospital. Baye goes through a period of psychological crisis, in which she gets drunk (her ex-boyfriend tells her that it was not really a ‘rechute’) and then grieves deeply with the death of her new ‘son’ (her real son had died of disease much earlier). The film is realist in style – minimalist acting from the players (to show her sorrow at the end, Baye walks down a Nice beach for a couple of minutes with little expression on her face aside from gazing at the camera), letting the camera run without much cutting, filming at length routine actions, filming in stark, bare offices. With its focus on the police work world and the individual characteristics and problems of the police officers, the film seems more like a good American cop series on television. Solid film that does not excite or charm. (2007)

**The Petrified Forest** 1936 Archie Mayo (Warners) 2.5 Leslie Howard as romantic intellectual drifter, a failed writer and disillusioned with life and civilization speaking with a distinguished British accent in the middle of the American desert (he says to Bogart: “Let there be killing. All day I have felt destiny closing in... Carnage is imminent and I am destined to be one of the fallen.”) and not averse to being killed, Bette Davis as extremely fresh and innocent blonde working in a café in the middle of the desert – she is taken with Howard because of their shared existential feelings (her mother was French) and her taste for the poetry of François Villon, Humphrey Bogart talks tough as “desperado” Duke Mantee, head of a gang on the run that takes hostage the denizens of the café, Charlie Grapewin as Gramps, miser, loquacious, talking at length about the wild good old days. Obviously an adapted play, in which Bogart and Howard starred in New York. Film is very stagy: the great majority takes place inside the café as the characters rattle on interminably; outside shots are obviously soundstage with faded looking papier maché backdrops and a little desert dust blowing by; the conversation is artificially confrontational and philosophical, as the rich couple tell Bogart that he is a contemptible thief, and the characters talking semi-existential philosophy, failed hopes, Dickens novels, women heroes of France (George Sand), the attractiveness of death, the beauty of women and how they make life worth living, the penetrating morbid poetry of Villon, the attractiveness of death, the importance of following your life destiny, etc. Some suspense as we wonder what Mantee will do with the hostages and whether he will actually kill Howard, as he requested. Howard and Bogart develop a kind of bond based on their common alienation (in different ways) from mainstream society. A subplot emerges as to whether Davis will break out of her desert prison and “go to France and find herself” (as said by the restive wife of the rich man) and refuse to be sacrificed for the sake of others. Shootout between Mantee and his men and lawmen surrounding the café: Davis and Howard talk about Paris and kiss while bullets fly around them. Mantee does shoot Howard, who has left his \$5000 life insurance (!) policy to Davis so she can go to Paris. Davis speaks some (Villon?) poetry as she hold Howard’s dead head to her bosom. Good cast and some good lines, but too pretentious to qualify as a gangster movie! (2008)

**Peyton Place** 1957 Mark Robson 3.0 Lana Turner, Diane Varisi, Hope Lange, Arthur Kennedy, Lloyd Nolan, Lee Philips, etc. Very good late 50s super soap based on Metalious' blockbuster novel. Very professionally and ably done. Quite long with lots of characters and plot twists, ending with interesting courtroom trial in which Lange is tried for murder of her incestuous rapist stepfather; acquitted because of devotion to conscience of good Doc Swain (Lloyd Nolan). Supposed to be extremely scandalous, but of course much less so than the novel (where there was a great deal of explicit sexuality) and today's sex soaked movies. Billed as showing the hypocrisy of small town America, but actually shows the decency of most everyone, who even if initially misguided, end up acting decently; even the whole town accepts Lange after they learn that she was impregnated by her stepfather (Doc didn't give her an abortion, but simply assisted at her miscarriage); Lange's boyfriend accepts her too, Lana Turner and Varisi are reconciled, etc. Focus on sexual repression of the parents, especially the mothers, who don't want their daughters – and sons – to learn about sex and to have any sex before marriage; so widespread that becomes a bit comical. Cf. 'A Summer Place,' 'Splendor in the Grass,' even 'Psycho.' Photography is exquisite of small town New England and beautiful fall colors next to the ocean. (2005)

**Phantom of the Opera** 1925 Rupert Julian 3.0 Lon Chaney, Mary Philbin, Norman Kerry. Great smash of silent 1920s horror flick. Set almost entirely in the Paris Opera and underneath it in the Phantom's elaborately equipped crypt. Phantom is mad escaped con living in the crypt; fallen in love with opera diva Christine, who however is attached to Raoul. Intimations of 'Faust,' as Phantom promotes career of Christine in return for her devotion; but when she changes her mind, Phantom quits sweet-talking her and resorts to violence. Sets of Opera and crypt, etc. are wonderful – obviously very high budget. Phantom is furious when he is unmasked by curious Christine; she is horrified by his ugliness (superficial bitch?): receding hairline, dark circled eyes, ugly, distorted teeth, hand as claws. He does truly love her – a dedicated romantic--, but violence of romantic love drives him to violence and crime when she rejects him. At end she is picked up in the arms of her true love, the somewhat wimpy Raoul. He is a sort of artist, which he expresses through his (apparently) wild playing of the organ installed in his chambers. Good scene at masked ball toward end, when Phantom appears as the Red Mask of Death. Pace of movie is very slow, making it hard to watch; it would need good music to keep the audience in the mood. Lots of suspense at the end – will Phantom force himself on Christine? Will the two pursuers drown like Raoul's brother? Will the rioting pursuing crowd get there in time? In the end, we feel a little sorry for the Phantom, who is thrown like a dog's corpse into the Seine. He was at least a true lover. (2006)

**Phantom of the Paradise** 1974 Brian DePalma 2.5 Paul Williams, William Finley (a poor actor!), Jessica Harper very pretty as Finley's love interest. Apparent parody of rock music scene, rock opera, *Faust* legend, horror movies, etc. that has its good moments--but is so much over the top that it is almost impossible to relate to. Movie is filled with pop culture music – the Beach Boys style of The Juicy Fruits, the expressive, chromatic ballads of Paul Williams, the shrieking excesses of Beef singing Kiss-like songs (even with black and white makeup); a lot of the music is entertaining or at least eye-catching. Finley is hokey composer of pop cantata that is stolen by evil impresario Swan (gnome-like Williams); Finley is arrested, disfigured (his face is horribly scarred by an lp pressing machine!); he puts on ridiculous-looking bird/owl mask, and since he is double-crossed by impossibly evil Williams two more times, he takes gruesome retribution on the performers in the rock palace, the best of which was the electrocution of Beef on stage with a flying electric neon thunderbolt – he is reduced to a smoldering formless mass. Finley is hopelessly in love with Harper and insists that she be given the starring role, but even she double-crosses him by selling herself to Swan. Debt to 'Phantom of the Opera' is most obvious – the Phantom insisting that the woman he loves be given the starring role, Finley at his keyboard composing like the original (1925) Phantom at the keyboard of his organ, etc.; here the script gives the reason for the original rage of the Phantom – his creative work is stolen. A 'Psycho' like shower scene, and sets for the 'Beef' show seem taken from 'Caligari' or 'Frankenstein.' Film seems to be major influence for 'Rocky Horror Picture Show' released in the following year. (2005)

**Philomena** 2013 Stephen Frears (Britain) 3.0 Judy Dench as kindly, blue collar, Catholic British lady engaged in search for her son, who was sold by Irish nuns 50 years ago to a wealthy American couple without her consent; Steve Coogan as down-on-his luck, atheist London journalist that agrees to help Dench so he can produce a human interest story for a British publication; Sophie Kennedy Clark in sensitive portrayal as the young Philomena, seduced at an Irish county fair and then living in the Irish convent with other unwed mothers as a virtual slave. Often light-hearted, entertaining treatment of the campaign by the unlikely duo to trace the whereabouts of Dench's son, who was about 50 years old at the time of the search. Spending a lot of time in the car together, the two trace him to the USA, find that he was gay, legal counsel to the Reagan administration, and dead from AIDS, and then to the consternation of Coogan and the viewer that he is actually buried in the convent graveyard. The film is sensitively and credibly treated throughout. Dench and Coogan are a Mutt and Jeff partnership, he rationalist, skeptical, a graduate of Oxford quoting TS Eliot (Dench finds the excerpt very nice), she a sincere, uneducated, simple woman giving her friend blow-by-blow accounts of the romance stories she reads (he listens politely). When they discover the dishonesty of the nuns, who consistently deny any knowledge of the son's whereabouts and don't even reveal that he is buried in their graveyard, Coogan is seething with rage against the arrogance and obscurantism of the Catholic Church, while Dench refuses to be angry, and in a drama-filled scene at the end tells Sister Hildegard (Barbara Jefford), one of the offending nuns, that she forgives her. Just when the viewer expects a little forgiveness from the nuns, Jefford surprises us with a bitter denunciation of the girls, who she says deserve every ounce of their suffering because of their indulging their "carnal appetites". While Coogan gets in his licks against the Church, the film is essentially feel good, since Dench refuses to carry a grudge, and the two end up good friends; Coogan even gives her a statuette of the Sacred Heart to put on her son's grave. Watching the film is pleasurable, since it is directed with good taste by Frears and expertly acted by the expressive Dench and the skeptical, ironic Coogan. The film sometimes resembles a soap opera, especially when it indulges in maudlin home movies of Dench's little boy, but for the most part it remains restrained and in good taste. (2014)

**Phoenix** 2014 Christian Petzold (Germany) 2.5 Nina Hoss very intense as concentration camp survivor determined to find out if her husband betrayed her to the Nazis; Ronald Zehrfeld good-looking guy as her rather thick-headed husband; Nina Kunzendorf as severe friend of Hoss' trying to persuade her to move with her to safety in Palestine. Elliptical, self-consciously art film about (apparently) guilt and identity. Arresting opening scene with Hoss, whose face is wrapped in bloody bandages, traveling in car through US Army checkpoint right after the war. After she is given a "new" face that apparently resembles her original one, all she can think about is finding her husband, perhaps because she still loves him, allegedly because she wants to find out if he betrayed her to the Nazis. When he sees her (she has taken the new name of Esther), he takes her to his grungy basement apartment to prepare her (clothes, hair, walk, etc.) to impersonate his wife (Nelly) in his con to collect the inheritance that Nelly has come into; he is of course convinced she is dead. There ensue long, repetitive scenes of their interaction, in which Esther gradually recovers from her surgery. It is uncertain whether Zehrfeld begins to think, even subconsciously, that Esther is actually his wife. With wan, scared face, constant mournfulness and depression (she sleeps very well), Esther plays along with her husband's game. These sequences are supposed to be heart-rending, as Hoss must realize that Zehrfeld, who is trying to steal his (he thinks) deceased wife's inheritance, is an unsavory character more than capable of selling her out to the SS. For some reason, when she finds out from her friend that her husband divorced her shortly before she was arrested, she is seemingly more demoralized by that than by the putative betrayal. The ending sequences of the film contain many ambiguities. Johnny decides that Esther's fictitious first return to Germany must have her dressed in the latest Paris fashions -- something that would greatly reduce the credibility of her story that she is returning from a concentration camp; she is met affectionately at the station by a half dozen unidentified people, who must be friends and relatives; they have a welcome outdoor dinner, and then go inside to the piano to have supposedly disguised Nelly (appropriate now that she has arrived) sing a Kurt Weill song ("Speak Slow"), whose message seems to be we should seize the moment to love since life is short; as the viewer awaits the couple either to renew their old relationship (with Nelly) or to acquiesce in creating a new one (with Esther), Johnny quits playing the piano when he

sees that Nelly/Esther has a concentration camp tattoo on her arm; it seems that he also recognizes Nelly's singing style. Nelly then walks out of the room as the camera goes out of focus; end of film. Would seem to indicate that Johnny realizes that Nelly isn't disguised Esther, but the real thing; (but, since Esther was obviously in a concentration camp herself, she would have a number for her own stay.) Although the author is trying to raise important questions about guilt, obsession, and identity, the film is presented with so much subtlety and ambiguity that the result is often confusion. (2016)

**Pickpocket** 1959 Robert Bresson 3.0 Martin Lassalle as young man living in a bare, slummy garret room – he wants to be a thief; Marika Green as Jeanne, his potential redeeming angel. Puzzling Bresson *oeuvre* about a man who wants to be a thief, actually glories in it as perhaps a sign of his superiority over ordinary people and the laws that represents them, and who also – in his relations with the police inspector – appears to want to be caught. Very difficult to know what he (and the other characters) is thinking or feeling, since Bresson drains them of all emotion and expression (he calls his actors 'models'), hardly ever uses interpretative editing, and begins virtually every scene with the protagonist entering (sounds of footsteps) and ends it with the same character walking away (again sound of footsteps). Environments are the streets and cafes of Paris, and the hovel of Lassalle. One bravura sequence where with intensive editing the director shows us how a team of pickpockets plies their trade – projecting it as a finely honed craft. Perhaps the film can be interpreted as a religious/Christian allegory: Lassalle, whose sin is pride (his sense of superiority over others and society), is looking for grace and the voice of God; he tries to get it through his discussion with the police inspector (his confessor?), playing cat and mouse because the time is not yet ripe (only God knows when); he defies the law (of God?) by stealing thus challenging God to respond; grace then appears in the person of his friend's girlfriend (Green), who has previously reproached him for his uncharitable behavior toward his mother (he refused to visit her when she was sick and dying); he then more or less on purpose has himself caught stealing at the racetrack (the snapping of the handcuffs on his wrist is shocking); and as he is clapped behind bars, he says "Oh, Jeanne, what a strange way I had to take to meet you!" The ways of God are mysterious, as is obviously the theme in Bresson's other Christian films ('Curé de campagne', "Balthazar", 'Mouchette', etc.), but He has finally caught up with him. It is difficult to understand, though, why being caught and in prison would be salvation. In fact, the whole film is something of a mystery – nothing is given obviously or easily to the viewer; you have to dig for it. (2007)

**Pickup on South Street** 1953 Samuel Fuller (Fox, Zanuck) 4.0 Richard Widmark as more or less nice guy pickpocket who gets in potential trouble when he accidentally lifts strips of microfilm from Jean Peters purse on the subway, Jean Peters as gangster moll messenger breathing brassy, independent sexuality (lots of makeup, sensual mouth, glamour-style makeup), Thelma Ritter terrific as existentially lonely woman who lives in a small room waiting for her death (she wants to be buried in a real coffin in a decent cemetery) and who makes her living as a stool pigeon to the police, Richard Kiley as pretty guy selling secrets to the Communists; he is the only really vicious person in the movie since he murders both Ritter and Peters. Terrific streets-of-the-city gangster film from Fuller – very convincing locations (although the film was shot mostly in the studio and in West LA), good story that keeps the viewer on edge, piquant characters most of whom have a bit of the heart of gold, with hard-hitting dialogue: "What's the matter with you, Skip, playin' footsies with the Commies?" "You can do it Candy, you know the score. You've knocked around." "Aw, everybody loves everybody when they're kissin'..." The bad guys in the film are the Commies trying to get government secrets, but they seem a bit irrelevant – what matters is the fate of the main characters above and whether Kiley will get them. Cinematography is intense and expressive – dark streets of New York, excellent locations in the subway and in the quaint riverside shack where Widmark lives, extreme close-ups that cut out part of the faces, toward the end expertly choreographed scenes of violence: Kiley double being dragged face down the subway steps with head banging, Peter being tossed around a room by Kiley like a rag doll. Kiley is a real villain – sweaty face, indecision, ruthless murder despite his smooth good looks; the other characters mostly have good hearts under their Runyonesque exteriors. The main characters may be criminals (Widmark has been in prison three times), but their crimes are small ones and they value their friends – there is a basic decency about them. You root for the three of them and are upset when they are killed;

you are happy for them when Widmark and Peters walk through the final door together, although the idea of them spending the rest of their lives together is a little hard to believe. (2008)

**Picnic at Hanging Rock** 1975 Peter Weir 3.5 Bevy of Australian beauties. Eerie, unresolved film about three Australian (English) girls and schoolmistress from proper Victorian girls' boarding school, who disappear mysteriously while visiting strange rock formation one sunny day for school picnic. Author sets up disappearance as somehow a sexual event – girls are teeming with sexual tension, including inchoate lesbian attachments and girls taking off their stockings and shoes and mademoiselle running toward rock with her skirt off. Boys watch it happen, but no one can do anything to stop or later to solve the mystery. Movie about the frontier of mystery that separates sedate, proper Victorian civilization from the savage forces of the outback. Film focuses on atmosphere, “Pan”-like music and suggestion rather than plot; never gives us real explanation for what happened. School and headmistress ruined in end. A bit frustrating at times, but succeeds in creating an eerie and mysterious atmosphere. (2005)

**The Picture of Dorian Gray** Albert Lewin (MGM) 3.0 Hurd Hatfield rather effete and beautiful with prominent jaw line as the sybarite who changes roles with his portrait; George Sanders outstandingly cynical and epigrammatic as Oscar Wilde's mouthpiece, Lord Henry; Angela Lansbury pretty and distinctive as the innocent singer who is jilted by Gray and then commits suicide (AA nominated); Donna Reed pretty and decorative as Gray's last chance at morality and respectability; Peter Lawford in small role as man in love with Reed. Top of the line MGM treatment of the classic Wilde novel. The film stands out for its art direction (fabulously detailed interiors of Edwardian London town houses) and in its cinematography (AA for Harry Stradling); Hatfield is a visually convincing Dorian Gray and Sanders is entertainingly low-key reciting Wilde's cynical epigrams (“The only way to deal with temptation is to give in to it”, etc.). Gray, who is addicted to the pursuit of pleasure, remarks in the presence of the statuette of the mysterious Egyptian cat that it would be wonderful if instead of his painted portrait forever remaining the same, he, Gray, would remain the same in the bloom of his youth and the portrait would age in his stead. His wish is granted and while he pursues his undocumented off-screen pleasures, the portrait becomes increasingly more monstrous and corrupt looking, especially since it is periodically presented to the viewer in garish color contrasting with the crisp, high-key black and white in which the movie is filmed. The film ends dramatically with a guilt-ridden Gray stabbing his degenerate portrait, whereupon Gray ages suddenly and dies, and the painting morphs back to its pristine original state (special effects not particularly convincing) with a knife in its subject's heart. As if imitating the little horror films of Val Lewton, the film is soaked in the atmosphere of art – the interesting bric-a-brac in the apartments of Gray and his painter, the ever-changing portrait of Gray, and impenetrable quotations from the poetry of Omar Khayyam. While interesting and quite beautiful, the film rather falls flat as horrifying drama: the interior decoration, the costumes, the almost prissy behavior of many of the characters drains it of dramatic energy. Gray's supposedly demonic pursuit of pleasure seems rather dated: the viewer doesn't really know what sort of corruption he is involved in since the Hollywood Code forbids any but the most oblique references to his pastimes (drunkenness, drugs, wild sex, homosexuality, etc.) with the exception of a couple of murders at the end (for some reason acceptable to be shown under the Code); and in any case whatever the viewer imagines he is doing would not shock or titillate the contemporary audience. Nevertheless, this painstakingly produced classic is worth seeing. (2011)

**Pillow Talk** 1959 Michael Gordon 2.5 Doris Day with a minimum of singing as virginal 35-year-old, who has “bedroom problems”, i.e., needs a man in her life; Rock Hudson, womanizer on a party line with her (party lines in cool apartments in 1959 New York?), who is obviously that guy; Tony Randall amusing and clever as Hudson's sexless friend, who is in love with Day but gets little romantic attention from her; Thelma Ritter in truly objectionable role as Day's boozy (ha-ha-ha) housekeeper, arriving every day so hung over that she can't look out the window without wincing, at one time proudly drinking Rock Hudson under the table. Embarrassing, sexist, although well-made and often amusing romantic sex comedy that starts the collaboration between Hudson and Day. Film begins with celebrated party line tension between Hudson and Day that is presented in split screen (the device enables the two to



lounge in their bath tubs “together” and even play footsie without running afoul of the Hayes Code censors). Despite initial hostility, Hudson decides to court her with a faked Texas identity, almost nauseating in its artificiality. Despite her virginal objections, Day allows herself to be drawn to Hudson’s Connecticut country retreat (a nod to screwball comedy!), where she discovers that he is the same person as her detested party line partner. Day decides to get even with him by decorating his apartment in the most atrocious taste (mostly Middle Eastern and Indian), but Hudson realizes she is more willing than she wants to admit; he charges to her apartment, kidnaps her in her pajamas, carries her through the street and back to his apartment (why?), and then of course the Hollywood Kiss and the promise of happily ever after: a man has to take charge of his woman and force himself on her to make sure she gets what she wants. The film has a lot of non-nudity sexual content: Hudson as womanizer with a remote control system in his apartment that locks the door, rolls out the bed, and starts the seduction music on his record player; several smutty references to the word “bedroom”; on the way to the Connecticut cabin, Day sings a romantic song “Possess Me”—the viewer always gets the message that despite her apparent resistance, Day wants to be possessed sexually. If she could find the right man, she would melt in his arms and do his every wish; the only thing worse than a woman living alone is a woman doing that and liking it. The film is superficially entertaining – Randall’s role, passing sight gags, Day’s song “Pillow Talk” that she sings during the beginning and ending credits. It is a compendium of female sexual behaviors that would be out of fashion in about five years. (2016)

**The Pit and the Pendulum** 1961 Roger Corman 3.0 Vincent Price with scenery-chewing acting ranging from deep sadness to insane homicidal rage as husband of woman who died under mysterious circumstances; John Kerr featureless as the brother of Elizabeth come to the castle to find out what happened to her; Anthony Carbone equally featureless as doctor friend of Price; Luana Anders fetching as Price’s sister doing her best for her brother; Barbara Steele pretty scary as the wife Elizabeth when she “comes back to life”. Scary, colorful, highly expanded version of Poe’s story set in a spooky castle somewhere on the Spanish seashore; many low angle shots of the castle with surf crashing against the rocks; stony interiors with suits of armor, blazing fireplaces, and twisty candles; shots through grates or from behind the fire in the fireplace of characters moving around the castle; secret passages with spider webs clinging to the characters’ faces; spooky haunting sounds and creaking doors as Elizabeth makes her presence felt to the sensitive Price; in the depths of the basement spooky instruments of torture covered with dust and spider webs, and behind it in another room the pit with the pendulum machine. The focus is at first find out how Elizabeth really died; it is asserted she died of natural causes, but a visit to her sarcophagus indicates through the horrified expression on the cadaver’s face that she was buried alive. The last 20 minutes of the film bring pleasing surprises: when Price is lured into the basement, it turns out that Elizabeth’s ghost is really still alive and that she and her lover have been plotting to drive Price crazy through fright (shades of ‘Les diaboliques’? It is at any rate in his blood since his father was a weirdo torturer); just when Price seems plunged into the depths of blitheringness, he recovers, seizes Kerr (mistaken identity since the doctor was the adulterer), shackles him to the pendulum table and turns on the infernal machine; Price however is killed and Kerr is rescued at the last minute just as the razor-sharp blade begin to tear through the skin of his chest; when the surviving characters express relief that Price is dead never to return, the camera flits over to the Iron Maiden that holds the forgotten Elizabeth; the mise-en-scène narrows to a small rectangular centered on her eyes, whose active movements suggest the story is not over. Credits roll. Melodramatic film with often over-the-top acting by Price and a plethora of horror-film clichés; but a script well-timed to produce chills and shocks after a long suspenseful build-up, solid direction and cinematography to produce an entertaining and effective spooker. (2009)

**Pitfall** 1948 Andre De Toth 3.0 Noirish suspense drama detailing the consequence of straying from righteousness and respectability. Dick Powell as happily married insurance executive, who is looking for adventure and non-conformity in his life; Jane Wyatt lovely and sensible as prim-and-proper well-situated postwar housewife; Lizabeth Scott in unusual non-femme-fatale role as a model looking for a good man; Raymond Burr hulking and broad-shouldered as aggressive private detective obsessed with Scott; Byron Barr as excitable ex-boyfriend of Scott. The film is situated in postwar Los Angeles in a family living the American Dream. Powell tells his wife that he is tired of his daily routine

in an insurance office and suggests facetiously he would like to run away down the Pan-American Highway to Brazil. He falls for Scott and starts an affair without telling her that he is married (but any red-blooded American girl would have found out!). Since Scott is connected to two temperamental men – her excitable ex-boyfriend/fiancé Barr and her disquietingly persistent admirer Burr – matters get complicated: Scott shoots Burr when he gets too pushy and Powell shoots and kills Barr in suspicious circumstances as the latter tries to break into his house. Powell is eventually forced to confess his wrongdoings to his rather clueless wife, who decides to stick with him provided they move away from LA to a place where they are not known. The film is moderately compelling despite lazy editing and the soothing musical score. It is a kind of penumbral film noir. The element of relentless fate seems to be absent, and instead of her usual femme fatale role, Scott is a decent girl in search of a good man; instead there are two *hommes fatales*, the thuggish Burr and the excitable Barr, both of whom are punished for their faults with death. Powell plays well the morally ambiguous leading man, who although well-intentioned, causes great suffering in others and comes perilously close to losing his wife and son. The novelty of the narrative has Wyatt and Powell decide to soldier on in their marriage, although prospects for recovering their former happiness are dim; a satisfying noir conclusion would have him lose his family and face bleak aloneness at the final fade-out, perhaps after losing his job because of the scandal. The author depicts marriage as a practical partnership rather than a romantic bond. Interesting film. (2017)

**The Place Beyond the Pines** 2012 Derek Cianfrance 2.5 Ryan Gosling intense tattooed macho daredevil motorcycle rider who discovers that he is the parent of a baby boy; Eva Mendes as stressed working class mom who has married another man since the affair with Gosling; Bradley Cooper foregoing comic roles to play an intensely ambitious young police officer that kills Gosling in a shootout; Ben Mendelsohn as the trailer-dwelling mechanic that teaches Gosling how to rob banks and then bows out setting the stage for Gosling's demise. Sometimes interesting and intense, quite long, thematically ambiguous and self-indulgent film about violence and retribution in a working class environment. The film is dual generational and divided into three parts: the first has sociopath Gosling attached to his baby son, intimidating the mother Mendes, and then committing small-time bank robberies with his buddy Mendelsohn to support the baby and his mother; the second begins with a police chase in which – surprise – Gosling is shot and killed by rookie police officer Cooper, who is treated as a town hero, although the viewer is more impressed by his ambition and his career manipulations that secure him a job as assistant district attorney (he had been to law school and apparently passed the bar); the third section – the least relevant, the least cogent, and least memorable – focuses on Gosling's and Cooper's two troubled teenage sons 15 years later. Much of this last part is taken up with the violent and impulsive, actions of Gosling's son taking revenge on Cooper, who is now running for New York Attorney General. The kid relents and runs away when he has taken Cooper to a forest instead of shooting him. The end of the film has the two boys moving "beyond the pines", where they seem to have let the past go and to move on with their lives – Gosling's son follows in his dad's footsteps and heads off to parts unknown on a motorcycle. The film reeks of self-importance, taking oneself too seriously. The adult characters are interesting and sometimes gripping, but the adolescent ones are unfathomable. The film would have benefited from more narrative coherence, perhaps leaving off the last third entirely. The filming style is often off-putting – unpredictable camera angles and editing, soft-spoken, even mumbling actors apparently ad-libbing their lines. Action sequences – Gosling's robbing of banks, his chase by Cooper and his death in the window of an apartment building – are compelling, but one wonders about relevance of the part 2 excursion into police corruption, and then that last part of the film... The performance of Cooper is particularly convincing. The movie would have probably benefited from more studio discipline. (2013)

**A Place in the Sun** 1951 George Stevens 3.0 Romance drama about a young man's search for the American Dream that ends in disaster. Montgomery Clift as handsome, moody guy exuding sexual need on the way up from a poverty background; Elizabeth Taylor a vision of beauty as flirtatious, spirited socialite Angela Vickers, who falls passionately in love with Clift; Shelley Winters as working class girl pitiful in her simplicity and victimhood; Ann Revere as severely religious mother of Clift; Fred Clark as Clift's defense attorney; Raymond Burr efficient and accusatory as district attorney prosecuting

the murder – he uses a cane. The first half of the film follows the initial rise of Clift as an employee in the California Eastman Mill and his love affair with the needy Winters, whom he impregnates; he loses his way however when he meets the stunning Taylor, with whom he falls in love; she returns his feeling with passion. The second half focuses on his romantic dilemma and his temptation to murder Winters by drowning, since she doesn't know how to swim; when he gets her on a Sierra Lake in a boat (actually Cascade Lake near Lake Tahoe), he can't go through with it, but she then falls into the lake by accident (more or less) and drowns; Clift is then pursued by prosecutor Burr and is found guilty in a dramatic trial sequence. Before he walks to his death in the electric chair, he appears to take some responsibility for Winters' death since he didn't try to save her once the two of them were in the water. In any case, the rather murky conclusion is required by the Hays Code. Film is very star oriented: the charm of the moody, slouchy, anxious Montgomery Clift eludes this viewer, but Elizabeth Taylor is not only a vision of loveliness (she was 17), but her portrayal of the passionate lover is convincing, giving credible weight to Clift's felonious fantasies. The pace of the film is deliberate, sometimes pokey, but Stevens' no-nonsense, neutral style tells the story effectively. Several scenes are memorably shot and edited: the early scene of Clift and Winters in the movie theater; the intense two-shot depicting Clift's and Taylor's attraction when they meet over the pool table; particularly the shot on the dock on Lake Tahoe that focuses on a portable radio giving information about the murder while noisy speed boats race by periodically interrupting the broadcast and causing the dock to bob slightly up and down (an obvious parallel to events in Clift's life). Much of the second part of the film is photographed picturesquely on Lake Tahoe and environs. The courtroom sequence is gripping and dramatic, excessively so when prosecutor Burr theatrically smashes an oar in his successful bid to have the jury view Clift as a liar and a murderer. The movie is ideologically conformist – the socialites are treated without satire as are Bible missionaries, Burr's courtroom pyrotechnics pass with little comment, the tragedy of a (mostly) innocent man going to his execution is not emphasized. The validity of the American Dream is not questioned; Clift's quest is interrupted by a romantic imbroglio and perhaps a psychological weakness. The film is perhaps best enjoyed as a tragic romance – thanks to the vivacious, beautiful Taylor. One doubts in retrospect that it deserved six Academy Awards. (2017)

**Le Plaisir** 1952 Max Ophüls (France) 3.0 Danielle Darrieux as romantic prostitute in late 19th century France; Jean Gabin mumbling and eliding his usual French speech as farmer that welcomes the prostitutes for the first communion of his daughter and develops a yen for Darrieux; Daniel Gélin as impulsive painter in magnificent studio – he falls rapidly in and out of love; Simone Simon cute, pert, and equally impulsive as Gélin's girlfriend that tries to commit suicide by throwing herself out of a window. Ophüls' detailed and evocative treatment of three of Guy de Maupassant's stories from about the 1880s; the film is a prime example of the poetically inspired "film bien fait" that the Nouvelle vague reacted against. The first recounts the famous story of the old man that tries to extend the pleasures of youth by donning a mask to dance – very awkwardly – in a Parisian dance hall, after which he returns to his long-suffering wife. The second – by far the longest segment at 70 minutes – recounts the visit of (Rouen?) prostitutes to a lovingly recreated Norman village to attend the first communion of the madame's niece. The third is absurdly abbreviated: Gélin and Simon fall violently in and out of love, Simon cripples herself by attempting suicide when her alienated boyfriend threatens to marry, and out of guilt (?) he marries her and is last seen pushing her wheelchair on a beach (Trouville?), as his ex-friend comments: Why isn't he happy? He has money, status, stability. "Le bonheur n'est pas toujours gai." No doubt that the art direction and mise-en-scène are lush and complex, especially in the Maison Tellier sequence, where the gliding camera introduces the characters from outside the windows of the establishment, and the picture of the village and the lush Norman countryside is especially rich with the orchards, the rolling hills, the crypt-like church where the kids receive their first communion, the prosperous farmhouses (Gabin obviously is well-off), the visiting women's finery forming a striking contrast with local costumes, and the picturesque small train waiting in the station and then puffing through the orchards and fields. It is a bit difficult to find the common themes among the poorly balanced segments, aside from three looks at the price one pays for pleasure in love: wasting one's life by trying to preserve the illusion of youth; even prostitutes can flirt, but then they need to return to their métier where love is a paid commerce; youthful passionate love does not last, but ends in either tragedy or married stodginess. The

film lacks the dramatic focus of “Letter from an Unknown Woman” or “The Earrings of Madame de....” The picture of the pretty prostitute with a heart of gold (right in the middle of the French provinces) is a bit hackneyed. Ophüls seems delighted to be back in France after his Hollywood stint. (2014)

**Platoon** 1986 Oliver Stone 4.0 Charlie Sheen as new middle class recruit who arrives in Vietnam in 1968 with a certain idealism about the war; Tom Berenger as the scar-faced, evil-souled Sergeant Barnes who has seen so much combat that his men think that he cannot be killed; Willem Dafoe as the more junior sergeant disillusioned about the war and possessed of a sense of decency; soldiers, many of them black guys, slog ahead -- Forest Whitaker, Francesco Quinn, Richard Edson, Johnny Depp, Kevin Dillon. First rate Vietnam War movie -- probably the best. Set in 1968 when disillusionment is setting in. Sheen arrives and he is immediately dispatched into the interior with Charlie Company. The men engage in three or four violent engagements: the most famous of which is their terrorizing of a village that they suspect is harboring Vietcong soldiers -- Barnes kills a woman mainly because she is screaming and whining so much, and under orders the men set fire to the village; the final battle scene is lengthy and hugely violent - the men are sent out as bait to draw in the NVA for the kill; the battle rages for a long period with the North Vietnamese soldiers taking huge losses and coursing through the American camp in all directions, with the captain even calling in air power to bomb American positions overrun by the enemy; most of the American soldiers are killed. The depiction of combat is extremely realistic and gritty: hot, sticky, tropical; ants and bugs all over your dirty body; snakes slithering on the ground; actual combat is chaotic and unpredictable with no defined line of combat but threats coming from every direction; men are bloody, mutilated, dismembered; the Americans kill enormous numbers of the suicidal enemy soldiers, but a lot of them die too. American soldiers seem to be caught in hell. Nobody enjoys what they are doing nor understands why they are there; they do it because there is no alternative; when they are back at base camps resting up, they get stoned out of their minds to try to forget the horror they are living. Even the buddy bond of combat seems mostly missing: the men support one another when wounded, etc., but they show virtually no affection or real bonding -- they call one another insulting names (they don't seem to be in jest), get into fights, almost always avoid intimacies. The men seem reluctant to be killers, but thrust into the maelstrom of combat, they have little choice but to be as vicious as the enemy. The entire film is a morality tale. Berenger represents the black soul that everyone threatens to be -- an efficient and ruthless soldier, tried in combat, overcome by his worst impulses to kill obviously innocent civilians, and when given the chance, he murders his antagonist, Dafoe, in cold blood; a few of his men imitate his blackguard behavior. Dafoe is the decent soldier - disillusioned by three years of warfare, no longer believing that victory is possible (the scene with Sheen under the star-spangled evening sky), a good fighter, but insisting on decent behavior in the midst of the cruelty and the carnage. Sheen survives the final battle by a miracle; he finishes off the hated Barnes himself, and is then airlifted out: he muses about the Americans really fighting themselves (good vs. evil), and the importance of preserving decency and building a better world despite the horrible memories. A memorable, wrenching film of a national trauma and tragedy. (2008)

**Play Misty for Me** 1971 Clint Eastwood 3.0 Clint Eastwood as disc-jockey in Carmel, California looking often miscast and callow in his tight-buttied pants, big-collared shirts, and flowing hair; Jessica Walter smashing as psychotic sexual obsessive who calls Eastwood at the radio station to ask him "Play 'Misty' for Me" and then pursues him relentlessly; Don Siegel witty and avuncular as bartender in two scenes; John Larch competent as detective sergeant who is murdered by Walter at the end; Donna Mills as Barbie-like Eastwood girlfriend with minimal acting skills. Uneven, 70s-trendy film about the dangerous female sexual obsessive -- ladies' man Eastwood can't resist spending a night or two with Walter, and he pays the price when she pursues him, eventually with murder in her eyes. Eastwood is a steady presence despite his appearance and the frequent obtuseness of his character, who insists on keeping things to himself and on needling the police 60s-style; Walter however generates horror and excitement -- from her unpredictable behavior (showing up with groceries at Eastwood's house after their first night together), to lightning outbursts of profane anger (screaming and insulting a woman that is trying to hire Eastwood for a radio show in San Francisco), to violent attacks with meat cleavers and knives. Film builds to a tense and horrifying climax: one scene has Eastwood waking up in his bed to the

song 'Misty' playing, then seeing Walter hovering over him with big knife upraised, and then moving his head just in time so that knife plunges into his pillow. The conclusion has Walter holding girlfriend Mills captive in her house, killing Larch who comes to the door, then attacking and bloodying Eastwood with the big knife before he punches her in the face, through the glass window, and off the balcony to fall onto the rocks and into the surf below (in this film all houses are on the Carmel coast). Film exploits the beauties of the Carmel coast, its woods and its dunes way too much; one scene has Eastwood and Mills wandering for minutes through the coastal areas hand in hand; they end in a pond naked embracing under a waterfall in soft porn style, all to the accompaniment of Roberta Flacks' languid rendition of a popular song. Other filler includes a long and irrelevant scene from the Monterey Film Festival. It seems that the filmmaker was afraid that the movie wouldn't run long enough. Still, film is memorable for Walter's performance. (2007)

**The Player** 1992 Robert Altman 4.0 Tim Robbins thin, nervous, elegantly dressed, usually good-humored, tho arrogant as production head Griffin Mill who listens to pitches by writers; Buck Henry as writer hilariously pitching a story to Robbins; Fred Ward as studio security chief; Peter Gallagher as up and coming guy who might replace Griffin; Greta Scacchi as beautiful, Annie Hall-alike, no bra (nipples prominent), free spirit, artist, English accent girlfriend of writer who might be threatening Griffin; Vincent d'Onofrio obviously deranged as foul-mouthed angry writer threatening Griffin; Cynthia Stevenson as decent girl assistant to Mill and his fading girlfriend; Brion James as hard-boiled top executive in the studio; Whoopi Goldberg as bumbling Columbo-like investigating detective with a nose for lies; Lyle Lovett as comic-relief detective used as unnamed threat until identified as assistant to Goldberg; many cameos – Angelica Huston, John Cusack, Jack Lemon, Sidney Pollack, Harry Belafonte, Jeff Goldblum, Burt Reynolds (refers to Griffin as “asshole”), Lilly Tomlin, Andie McDowell, Malcolm McDowell; Cher; Terry Garr; Nick Nolte; Peter Falk as apparent joke on origin of Whoopi character; Julia Roberts on Death Row. Very entertaining, although rather long, sarcastic satire about Hollywood. Film focuses on the empty-headedness and ruthlessness of the Hollywood studios as demonstrated by their executives, on their treatment (often mistreatment) of writers, on the ability of Hollywood bigwigs to get away with murder. The standing joke is the producer saying to the writer “I’ll get back to you.” Hollywood movies are presented as imagination and entertainment with happy endings; the high concept approach is defined nicely toward the end of the film. The film focuses on the career curve of Griffin Mill: for a while he is in danger of being superseded by Peter Gallagher, and Griffin hatches a vicious plot to saddle Gallagher with an impossible project and then be around to pick up the pieces; Griffin of course double crosses everyone, and ends up on the side of Gallagher, to their mutual advantage. A second focus is the murder mystery: Griffin more or less accidentally kills a bitter writer whom he thinks has been harassing him with death threats (it turns out not to be the wrong one), and in the course of amusing interchanges with the observant, suspicious, foul-mouthed, and sarcastic police detective played by Goldberg (ably backed up by the equally amusing Lyle Lovett), he manages to dodge the bullet and end up on top. The romantic angle is perhaps the weakest part of the story with over long scenes and a questionable performance by Scacchi; but again Griffin gets the girl and in the process indulges sadistically in a brutal dumping of his old, sensible girlfriend. Ending is ingeniously sarcastic – as the reestablished Griffin is driving home to his wife Scacchi, he receives a call from the real threatening writer, except now he has used Griffin’s story for a screenplay he is pitching to the studio; Griffin accepts the story so long as he is guaranteed a happy ending! Which of course the writer is happy to oblige for the right price. He then returns home, is met by his adoring pregnant wife, and they retreat into their storybook cottage with happy ending music playing and camera craning away. A happy ending, but a highly ironic one. This film that critiques high concept in Hollywood filmmaking is in part a high concept film itself with romance, sex, humor, etc. (2009)

**Please Give** 2010 Nicole Holofcener 4.0 Catherine Keener as sympathetic, genuine, and pretty (what a smile!) as a middle class New Yorker with a tender conscience; Oliver Platt as her pudgy, light-hearted, somewhat clueless husband; Sarah Steele as cute, pudgy teenage daughter with her share of adolescent issues; Ann Morgan Guilbert marvelous as the cranky elderly (91) woman living next door who always finds the negative side and yet is able to make people smile; Rebecca Hall charming and not

particularly pretty as the sensitive and attentive granddaughter who mostly takes care of her; Amanda Peet as Hall's glamorous older sister -- just as cynical and cranky as the grandmother she does not like. Another slice-of-life comic drama filled with real, imperfect characters whom we love nevertheless because we recognize ourselves and our loved ones in them. Film has no clear beginning and no neat ending. It deals with the evolution of Keener's and Platt's marriage, the growing pains of 15-year-old Steele, Platt's mid-life crisis lived out in his affair with Peet, the ambiguous impact of Guilbert on the people around her, Hall finding a love interest who is much shorter than she is (Thomas Ian Nicholas), while Peet remains alone in her self-imposed isolation; the ending has life moving on through the death of Grandma, Steele smiling because her mother finally agreed her to buy a pair of jeans that cost more than \$200, and Platt ending his affair to face a rather uncertain future in his relationship with his wife. All performances are first rate so that we see ourselves, friends, and loved ones in the characters and we experience their experiences as if they were our own. Keener is the affective center of the film: she is a soft-hearted, kind woman who can't pass a street person outside her apartment without handing over at least \$5 and she experiences conscious qualms when she and her husband buy used furniture from the children of deceased older people and then sell it to upwardly mobile yuppie types for a good profit; and yet she is locked in mutually uncomprehending conflict with her feisty daughter (Steele terrific in her pouting fury and combat with her mother) and she is insensitive enough to say in Guilbert's presence that she and her husband are waiting for her to die so they can knock out walls and expand the size of their apartment. The back and forth between the nice girl Hall and the self-absorbed, insensitive Peet is always amusing when the viewer is not horrified by the latter's tactless put downs of her grandmother: when chided by Hall for not caring that her grandmother has died, Peet sarcastically sits down next to her, waits a few seconds, then pops up, proclaims "she's still dead", and strides out of the room. Platt's affair with Peet is the only incident in the film that left this viewer somewhat puzzled. Similar to a little soap opera, but tightly edited, more real in its emotions, and expertly written and acted. The director is very skilled with actors. (2010)

**The Pledge** 2001 Sean Penn 3.0 Jack Nicholson as depressed-acting retiree from Reno, Nevada police force who becomes obsessed with the rape murder of a child; Benicia del Toro unrecognizable as the mentally retarded American Indian who is pressured into confessing to the murder; Aaron Eckhart as ambitious whipper-snapper of an investigator who elicits the confession and opposes reopening the case; Helen Mirren in cameo as psychiatrist who asks Nicholson if he has always been a chain smoker and whether he is sexually active (!); Robin Wright Penn effective as Nicholson's lodger and eventual girlfriend and the mother of the child he uses as bait to catch the real killer; Vanessa Redgrave in cameo as murdered child's grandmother, who adds a smarmy image about angels lifting the child to heaven; Sam Shepard; Harry Dean Stanton. Offbeat detective mystery based on famous story by Swiss crime writer Friedrich Dürrenmatt. Nicholson becomes obsessed that del Toro was not guilty of the murder, and he sets off to find who did it. He discovers a pattern of three murders that could not have been committed by del Toro, and sticking close to the novel, he takes Penn in as a tenant and uses her eight-year-old child as bait to attract the real murderer (he even buys her a swing set and places it right next to the road where she can be seen). The film ends in contorted frustration: the stake-out with the girl playing with dolls next to the river organized by Nicholson is unsuccessful -- the perpetrator never turns up since he is killed in a bloody and fiery auto accident on the way. Nicholson turns on his heavy acting for some of the intense scenes, but through most of the film, his portrayal of a depressed man gives the impression of sleep-walking -- just plain dull; his puffy, pouchy face wears thin on the viewer. Perhaps his best scene is the very last one, where some time after the event he is seated in front of his run-down gas station muttering unintelligibly through an alcoholic haze. The scenery is beautiful -- alpine mountains and lakes often shrouded in rain and fog; but it is rather off-putting since the narrative is supposed to take place in the arid wastes of Nevada. The direction of Sean Penn is usually competent, although sometimes self-consciously arty. The film betrays a pessimistic view of life, reality and the American West: men of good will try their best to implement justice, but even when they are close to it, they are frustrated by fate (or is it luck?); after the accident, it doesn't seem that anyone on the planet knows who really committed the crime. (2010)

**Plein soleil (Purple Noon)** 1960 René Clement 3.5 Alain Delon as a callow but scheming Tom Ripley, Maurice Ronet flashes a lot of teeth but effective as Philip Greenleaf, murdered about halfway through film, Marie Laforet as sexy girlfriend of Philip. Twisty thriller based on Patricia Highsmith Ripley novel remade in middle 90s with G. Paltrow and Matt Damon. This original adaptation focuses more exclusively on the thriller aspects – brilliant twists and turns of plot, suspense and surprises – and leaves in the shade whether Ripley and Philip had a homoerotic relationship. Roughly first half of movie follows Tom’s and Philip’s relationship – subtly developed with the two men having an obvious perverse attraction, Tom in his famous scene staring at himself in a mirror dressed in Philip’s clothes and muttering sweet nothings to Marge as if she were there, Philip stranding Tom in a dinghy dragged behind the main sailboat while he has sex with Marge, the two basically preferring one another to the girlfriend, whom Philip unceremoniously puts ashore after he tosses her manuscript on Fra Angelico in the ocean, the two talking bizarrely about how Tom would go about murdering Philip *if* he did it, and then all of a sudden! he performs the act with his knife! We slowly realize that Tom is a daredevil psychopath, who will stop at nothing to get hold of Philip’s allowance from his father, but who probably enjoys more the cat and mouse with the authorities and bobbing and weaving to cover up unexpected developments. Much of the second half of the movie is devoted to Tom’s cover-up actions – how he forges documents, how he withdraws Philip’s money, how he uses Philip’s typewriter to keep a suspicious Marge at bay. When the unexpected occurs – e.g., Freddy appears and quickly realizes that Tom is posing as Philip – Tom murders him too (rather casually) and then covers his own footprints by blaming the murder on Philip, whom he has been playing but of course who we know is dead. Has a smashing ending: Tom has willed Philip’s wealth to Marge, Marge seems attached to Tom, the family accepts the will, and Tom is sprawled in a chair at a café happily thinking he will have both Marge and Philip’s money. But Philip’s father has arrived in Mongibello to sell Philip’s boat, and when it is winched out of the water, Philip’s body (wrapped in a tarpaulin) is attached to the anchor chain! Later, the police go to the café where Tom is resting happily, and when the waitress calls his name, he walks jauntily toward and past the camera – irony is that he is so confident, but that he will be arrested for murder as soon as he passes the camera. Print is in great condition (restored with the support of Scorsese?). Cinematography is bright and colorful with a matter-of-fact kind of travelogue look on the Italian coast. Wonderful close-ups to illustrate the characters, especially Ripley. Tone is pre-New Wave – stick to the plot, a little on psychology, pace the film well, focus on the surprises. (2006)

**Point Blank** 1967 John Boorman 3.0 Lee Marvin taciturn, relentless, mechanical, murderous as a former criminal intent on revenge; Sharon Acker in brief appearance as sexy wife (provided you can tolerate 60s fashions and hair); John Vernon in one of his first appearances as former partner who shot Marvin in Alcatraz and ran off with his \$93,000 and his wife; Angie Dickinson sexy and sixties as Marvin’s sister-in-law who seems interested in him and yet repelled by his impassiveness; Keenan Wynn as mysterious man who has his own reasons to help Marvin in his revenge campaign; Carroll O’Connor humorous, acting a bit like Archie Bunker in scenes where he appears toward the end of the film; Lloyd Buchner as one of the corporation executives who is a victim of Marvin’s rage. Interesting action film that comes across as a cross between a New Wave film and an American action film (typical of many American films in the late 1960s). Marvin often seems like a revenge machine mechanically eliminating the executives of the organization that Vernon works for; he says that he will keep climbing the corporate ladder until he gets his money back. At times Marvin is filled with ungovernable rage, shooting blindly at an empty bed where he thinks Vernon is lying, kicking a guy in the balls in a fight, pushing Vernon over the edge of a tall building in a fight; at other times he is impassive and deadpan, such as during the murders he commits or in striking scene in which a furious Dickinson (we are not sure why!) beats on him for a good minute without his moving a muscle. The film’s ending is difficult to understand: Marvin finally catches up in Alcatraz Prison with the man that appears to be the top guy in the organization – O’Connor; but he neglects to pick up the case with the money in it when O’Connor is shot; it is difficult to understand why Marvin would not insist on this, since the entire plot of the film revolves around his determination to recover “his” money. The visual and editing style of the film is striking and sometimes jarring: it takes place in a 60s Los Angeles with straight vertical and horizontal lines and shiny, sun-drenched surfaces; and the editing includes jump cuts, flash forwards, and many repetitions of Vernon’s

betrayal of Marvin, which are supposed to be psychologically revealing. Unusual action film that says a lot about where Hollywood was going in the late 60s. (2010)

**Polisse** 2009 Maiwenn (France) 3.0 Joey Starr as Fred, Algerian-French member of the Parisian Juvenile Police division – rough and emotional; Karin Viard, the blond member of the group that cracks up in the end; Marina Fois as Iris with dark hair as Viard’s partner; Maiwenn as the big-mouthed photographer who follows the cops around taking pictures (she is also the director). Long, rather loosely organized depiction of the operations of the Paris police’s child protection unit and the impact of their jobs on their lives. The film concentrates on about ten characters caught in the frustrations of their job – trying to protect children from abuse – sexual and incitation to crime – from their elders, interviewing the kids, interviewing the parents, trying to find a home for a black mom and her child, rounding up gypsy adults and children in a major operation, interviewing a teenager that gave oral sex to a guy who wouldn’t return her stolen cellphone unless she pleased him, taking to the police station a teenage prostitute that unleashes a non-stop torrent of abuse on the police officers, etc. The film also follows the private lives of the child cops: their marriages, which are mostly bad (it seems that most of them are going through a divorce), their struggles to cultivate their children, their partying in their free time together, in one case the development of a romance between two of them. The script focuses on the rough-edged Fred, who is totally devoted to the protection of children and thereby loses his temper several times in the film – when he is bad-mouthed by a teenage brat, when the bureau can’t figure out a way to keep a vagrant mother together with her child, when annoyed by a bureaucratic response from an administrator; he is so traumatized by the abuse he sees that he can’t bear to bathe his own child. Another focus is Viard, who has an enormous fight with her partner Fois toward the end of the film; the latter then unexpectedly commits suicide by jumping out of a window right after she is promoted to lieutenant; the film ends as her body falls in slow motion to the street. A radical jolt at the end of the film – the emotional tension of the job finally gets to her. The film has an informal feel, as if the main characters are improvising in front of a camera that just happens to be there; there are perhaps too many characters to keep track of; it sometimes seems like a series of television scenes that have been edited together to make a film. The film is a shocking testimony that sexual abuse of children is common in France, if not perhaps on the same scale as in certain other countries. Despite everything, the film holds your interest. (2011)

**Pollock** 2000 Ed Harris 3.0 Ed Harris as intensely suffering, brilliantly original Ab Ex artist struggling to be recognized (and to make a living); Marcia Gay Harden as Lee Krasner, also Ab Ex and his wife, who puts up with his violently alcoholic antics because she is convinced he is a genius (AA for best supporting actress); Jennifer Connelly as fetching black haired, big breasted girlfriend. Interesting, lovingly made biopic of famous Abstract Expressionist. Film focuses partly on Pollock’s inspiration and painting technique (good on the accidental discovery of drip, splash, gravity, etc.), and in his haltingly delivered interviews, Pollock gives an interesting explanation of what he is up to. Pollock intensely desires success and recognition; he is greatly helped in his quest by the support of Peggy Guggenheim, who gives him a stipend while he is still struggling and introduces him to gallery owners in New York. Film starts with the distribution of the famous *Life* magazine article, and then starts back at the beginning to follow his career all the way through to his renewed alcoholism (seems to undermine his creativity) and his death in car accident (under the influence) that also kills his girlfriend. Film focuses a lot on Pollock’s demons – alcoholism, self-pity, violence, tunnel vision. The main theme appears to be the big price that an artist must pay in any society for his inspiration; happiness and being well-adjusted are not an option. Film is informative and interesting; it is a bit repetitive – the viewer tires of Pollock’s ranting and raving. Ed Harris is excellent, at least as good as Harden. (2005)

**Ponyo** 2008 Hayao Miyazaki 3.5 Tina Fey as voice of Lisa, the spunky, reckless-driving mom of the little boy Sosuke living on the coast of Japan; Cate Blanchett as voice of Gran Mamare, the kind, beautiful, and optimistic sea/earth goddess who changes sizes at will; Liam Neeson as the bizarre father of Ponyo – very long hair, striped sport coat, and breathing in a bubble under water; Cloris Leachman, Lily Tomlin, and Betty White as three of the ladies in the senior home. Enchanting, although sometimes a bit puzzling, animated film by the famous Miyazaki based on Hans Christian Anderson’s



'Little Mermaid'. Ponyo is a small tadpole-like creature whose parents are the Sea Princess and Fujimoto; she ends up on the shore of Japan in the Inland Sea, where she gains a taste of meat and desperately wants to become a human. It is impossible according to the rules of nature, but she manages to get around the limits by using her father's magic; only when Sosuke proves that he loves her selflessly is the order of nature restored (previously the moon had approached the earth and flooded the whole coast) and Ponyo allowed to join Sesuko's family permanently. The message of the film is clearly environmentalist despite the occasional ambiguities: trash and flotsam and jetsam are depicted disapprovingly in many scenes; Fujimoto dislikes humans because of their impending destruction of the natural order of nature; the film begins with a carnival-like profusion of natural creatures in all colors and shapes swimming under water, and when Ponyo first swims toward land, she is dredged up with a bunch of sea-bottom junk by a trawling net. But the charm of the film is in the childlike optimism of the creator and in his prolific imagination. No character in the film is evil: Fujimoto, for example, may not like humans, but he soon shows his affection for all his daughters (Ponyo has dozens of little tadpole-like little sisters) and he ends by making no objection to Ponyo's humanization once her position is secured; Gran Mamare may be all-powerful, but she is filled with love for all her creatures and supports Ponyo's search for happiness. Ponyo is an irresistibly determined, affectionate, and energetic little creature: she attaches herself with all four limbs to Sesuko when she goes to hug him; the image of her fluttering joyfully mouth-to-mouth with Sesuko when she learns that she will be allowed to remain is unforgettable (although the duration of the image is too fleeting). Some aspects of the animation is a bit rough, especially of normal human movements; but key motions such as smiling (big mouths!) and hugging are handled eloquently; and the proliferation of bright water-color-like colors and multiple moving objects in the same frame (the sea life in the beginning, the ships in the sea later in the film, Lisa's car racing through the storm or rounding a long curve overlooking the sea with the wall whizzing by) are mesmerizing. The story could use more Disney punch, but the execution of the animation puts Miyazaki in a category of his own. (2009)

**Populaire** 2012 Régis Ronsard (France) 2.5 Romain Duris thin and often befuddled as small-time insurance agent in Lisieux looking for a secretary; Deborah François as pretty, blond, "modern" girl from small-town Normandy that wants more out of life; Bérénice Benjo ('The Past') as friend of Duris -- she thinks he should get married; Shaun Benson, flat-accented American husband of Benjo -- he is his supportive best friend. Charming, brilliantly produced, but rather vapid romantic comedy set in France in the late 1950s. 'Mad Men' style of clothing, cigarettes, personal mannerisms, the role of business and advertising in popular culture, and general cultural environment accurately recall the popular culture of the era. Much ado about the desires of "modern" women, although that seems to indicate mostly the desire to get a job, smoke cigarettes, walk down the street by one's self; ultimately women are the secretaries serving their male bosses, women are the ones applauding wildly at the typing competitions, and their ultimate goal is to land themselves a good-looking, good-earning man that loves them. French female audiences in 2012 must have responded with humor at the quaint behavior of their grandmothers in this transitional period. The focus is classic rom com: at first the principals have a professional relationship mainly preparing François for her competitions, although the viewer realizes long before either of them -- and especially the clueless Duris -- that they are keen on one another; in the meantime, excitement and interest is generated by François' participation in speed-typing contests, which were very popular at the time. After beginning with her self-taught, aggressive typing style, François learns to touch-type without looking, and she moves through several levels of competition 'Rocky' style to beat a nerdy, bespectacled American woman in the world finals in New York by a razor-thin margin! Because of the obstacles between the two principals manufactured by the screenplay, the viewer wonders whether François will have to sacrifice her long-suffering coach and sponsor, Duris, but all ends well with the two clutched in a final matrimonial embrace. Like all of its cousins, this romantic comedy suffers from predictability -- we all know exactly that despite all appearances the two are destined for one another; one must admit however that the journey to the destination is action-packed, colorful, and occasionally endearing. One wonders just what a 'modern' woman is; and why Benjo barges into Duris' family Christmas party to introduce François as his fiancée, when the two have never even talked about it; and why there have to be so many typing competitions. The compelling moments come mainly from the

charming star power of Francois. With its sunny mood and saturated color palette the film more closely resembles 50s American romantic comedies such as Doris Day's 'Teacher's Pet' than any French film this viewer has seen. The film even once evokes 'Vertigo', when the director has neon lights reflecting on the faces of Duris and Francois as they kiss for the first time. (2014)

**Possessed** 1947 Curtis Bernhardt (Warners) 3.0 Joan Crawford as woman suffering from paranoia and catatonia, who tells us the story in retrospect; Van Heflin looking young and fit as her lover and later fiancé of Crawford's stepdaughter; Raymond Massey looking a little delicate and over-the-hill as Crawford's employer and then loving and faithful husband; Geraldine Brooks flashing an engaging smile as Massey's daughter and unconscious rival of Crawford for Heflin's affection. Part of the comeback phase of Crawford's career, in which she no longer plays impudent flappers but looks gaunt and haggard as a woman haunted by mental illness. Film is essentially about mental illness: it opens with a striking picture of Crawford shuffling through the early morning streets of downtown Los Angeles; when she is safe in a well-appointed public hospital, she tells a kindly and patient psychiatrist (Stanley Ridges) the story of how she lost her mind. Flashback story is essentially her obsession on Van Heflin, who "fell out of love" with her, although it is mentioned on several occasions that she had suffered from mental illness long before; she marries Massey after the death of his wife (for a while Crawford thinks she was partially responsible), competes with Brooks for Heflin's affections, has semi-murderous visions, thinks she is haunted by the wife's spirit in the lake house, and finally emerges on the streets. Film forces the viewer to watch an expressionistic and often over-the-top Crawford emote powerfully; although sometimes it is too much, she conveys effectively the anguish of a person hopelessly and unrequitedly in love and entering into a serious mental illness. The film has many parallels with *film noir*. Although most of the film is shot in high key lighting, the spooky scenes have noirish shadows and contrasts between light and dark; it is told in flashback. In an interesting reversal, Heflin is a kind of *homme fatal*, who unintentionally leads Crawford to near destruction. He is not however the main cause of Crawford's problems – those are contained within her own mind. Also the main character is not destroyed; the film ends on a tentatively positive note with the doctor telling the ever loving Massey that there is good hope for his wife's recovery and that he needs to be patient. Count on a Hollywood doctor to breathe trustworthiness and optimism. (2007)

**Possession** 2002 Neil Labute 3.0 Gwynneth Paltrow fairly convincing as man-disliking English Professor of Gender Studies who falls in love with Eckhart, Aaron Eckhart rather miscast as American graduate student living in London – despite his aversion to romantic relationships (he says) he falls in love with Paltrow, Jeremy Northam as the hunky Victorian poet Ash that we see a lot of in flashback, Jennifer Ehle as bisexual English poet who falls in love with Ash despite her ongoing Lesbian relationship with another woman. Neil Labute stepping back from his cynical take on contemporary sexual gamesmanship and making film about two reluctant romantics falling in love, presumably under the influence of their mutual interest in the great Victorian lover poets. Set in the British museum and romantic old English country mansions against the backdrop of drop-dead gorgeous English country scenery. Eckhart makes a discovery about his research subject Ash, enlists the help of Paltrow, and they set off in pursuit of Ash's erotic truth like a Hardy boy and Nancy Drew in tandem. Paltrow is credible (although a bit too glamorous for a Women's Studies professor who professes a dislike of men), and while Eckhart does a credible job in showing his inner *Zerissenheit*, he is too hunky and too much branded by his previous cynical, exploitative roles in Labute's films not to be distracting. The two are threatened a little by a rival professor who resorts to all sorts of silly skullduggery to get the manuscripts, even to the point of digging up the grave of Ash (and then confronted in silly scene in the graveyard Hardy-Boy fashion by our two protagonists holding flashlights). Strength of the film is the development of the attachment between the two contemporary protagonists under the influence presumably of the Victorian lovers: despite resisting one another, our heroes seem to be drawn together by the deep passion of the Victorians: although they were modest and anxious to remain respectable in the eyes of society, the sexual passion of the Victorians was profound and spiritual – they were convinced that love, even though (perhaps because) illicit was eternal and connected to nature. Labute could have tried harder to bring out the irony – late 20<sup>th</sup> century lovers are smugly convinced of their superiority because of their freedoms

and lack of inhibitions, but they should go to the Victorians for a lesson in true romantic passion. Film ends with a couple of scenes that seem gratuitous – particularly the one of Ash meeting his daughter by chance in a beautiful heavenly meadow seems random and improbable. The film should have ended with the death of the Victorians and the consummation of the modern lovers. Still good effort! (2010)

**Poupoupidou (Nobody Else But You)** 2011 Gérald Hustache-Mathieu (France) 3.0 Jean-Paul Rouve as non-expressive, dead pan French crime writer that becomes fascinated with Candice after he arrives in Moul (Jura) in the dead of winter; Sophie Quinton as beautiful, sometimes Marilyn look-alike who is found murdered in beginning of film; Guillaume Gouix as hunky little policeman that helps Rouve in his investigation – he turns out to be gay; Clara Ponsot as sexy, semi-Goth hotel receptionist that falls for Rouve (but no luck). Very entertaining, although sometimes puzzling film about a pulp crime writer that finds the (beautiful) body of Quinton (Candice) in the snow in “Little Siberia” in the Jura region; he smells a cover-up in the eagerness of local authorities to characterize her death as suicide; he sets off in a private crusade – with the help of a friendly policeman, Gouix – to uncover the real events; in a rather unremarkable investigation, he discovers that Candice was killed unintentionally by conflicting drugs administered by the henchmen of her local politician lover (Ken Samuels) and some male fans, who give her date rape drugs. The film stands out because of its environment – like in the Coen Brothers’ ‘*Fargo*’, a small town lost and shivering in a vast ocean of snow, sometimes falling, covering everything in sight. Even more compelling is the appearance and character of Candice – beautiful redhead died to be a blond, a beautiful body bared to advertise a local brand of cheese (incredibly sexy commercial with her lying in only her skivvies in fake grass on a sound stage and eating voluptuously a mouthful of the cheese). The film gradually uncovers astounding parallels between Candice and Marilyn Monroe, whom she idolizes: not just her physical resemblance, but her unhappiness with being idolized as a sex object, her tendency to use her sexual attractiveness as a desperate attempt to find a man that she can be close to, her early marriage to a sports star (Joe Dimaggio), her unsatisfactory relationship with an “intellectual” (Arthur Miller), her sexual relationship with at least one leading politician (of course, a Kennedy), and finally her death through drugs (although in the film not through suicide). The film is less successful in developing the posthumous relationship between the imperturbable Rouve and the dead woman; the picturing of Candice’s past life through his reading of her diary is compelling (vividly presented in flashback; he says that she was a better writer than he), but Candice’s voice is inconsistent – she often seems to be speaking to the viewer from after her death rather than just through her diary. Wonderful framing device – Rouve drives into Moul past the commune’s sign, but when he leaves at the end of the film, the viewer notices that the sign is adorned with the figure of Candice, forever in his mind the face of the town. (2012)

**Pour une femme** 2013 Diane Kurys (France) 2.5 Sylvie Testud and Julie Ferrier (?) as the two sisters in the present (1980s) telling the story of their parents; Benoit Magimel as Michel, fervent Communist, Jewish survivor of the war, and father of the two girls; Melanie Thierry (‘*Princesse de Montpensier*’) a bit low-key as Lena, the beautiful wife of Michel, who marries him to save her from a death camp; Nicolas Duvauchelle as the good-looking brother of Michel, with whom Lena falls in love; Clothilde Hesme memorable as the independent, spirited wife of the head of the local Communist Party cell. Interesting historical and generational film that fails as a drama because of slow pacing and needless switching between the past and the present. The film is essentially about the predicament of Michel and Lena following World War II: he militating in the Parti communiste français and running a local haberdashery shop (in Lyon, constantly referenced by views of the cathedral); she with a little daughter and chafing a bit at the flatness of her life as a housewife without a refrigerator or laundry washer. Michel’s brother, Jean, shows up at the house with a companion; after much misdirection and manufactured suspense it turns out that the two men are agents of the Soviets, whose task is to assassinate residents in France who are personae non gratae with the Soviet state; one of the film’s anti-climaxes is finally setting their target’s rural house on fire (one presumes from the screams of the victim that he is dead). More central is the developing love affair between Jean and Lena, which drags on through most of the film; when Jean leaves for Italy after the murder, Lena – surprisingly? – decides to stay with Michel – after all, she realizes that she owes her life to him and perhaps she is concerned about the future of the

child that she has conceived with Jean. A title tells us that Michel and Lena divorced a few years later; the child turns out to be Lena's half-sister. A return to the present has the two girls (now around 40) assisting good-humoredly at the death of their father, Michel. Perhaps the best moment in the film has them deciding to tell their father the lie that Gorbachev and Yeltsin are dead; Michel, the unregenerate Stalinist, is then able to die with a smile on his lips. The film, another in Kurys' series of personal films about her family, is interesting for its depiction of the culture of postwar French Communism. It does not however have the emotional punch, nor does it evoke the empathy, of her other films – 'Entre nous', 'Peppermint Soda', etc. (2015)

**Prairie Home Companion** 2006 Robert Altman 3.5 Garrison Keillor as his scruffy, disorganized, low-key self hosting the last show in St. Paul before the Fitzgerald Theater will be torn down to construct a parking lot; Kevin Kline as a seemingly pointless Guy Noir who is in charge of the show's real security; Virginia Madsen as the dangerous lady (angel) who comes to fetch to eternity two members of the film's cast; Lilly Tomlin and Meryl Streep as two sisters (the only survivors of a family singing group) who perform in perfect humorous rhythm in the show; Lindsey Lohan as Streep's daughter who is fascinated with suicide; Woody Harrelson and John C. Reilly singing well and telling hilarious corny jokes both on and off the stage; Tommy Lee Jones as the hatchet man come to supervise the tearing down of the theater, and the band members, backstage people, and sound effects people from the original show. Very entertaining and engaging film for people who love the original radio show; the charm might be less compelling for those who weren't listeners. The film is essentially a record of a fictitious last show – the acts on stage and the conversations of the cast and hangers-on behind the stage. It has virtually no plot – you start at the beginning of the show with the knowledge that this will be the last one, and that is exactly what happens. Keillor, Tomlin, Streep, and the two cowboys are terrifically entertaining in their homey, folksy way. The piquancy of the drama comes partly from the knowledge that this is the last show, and the film becomes a nostalgic tribute to a bygone era of radio broadcasting with a live audience, sound effects men accompanying the radio drama, performers who are never seen by their listeners. Perhaps even more moving is the sense that Altman is really composing his own elegy – since he died only a short while after the opening of the film, one assumes that he knew that his death was imminent. The arrival of the white clad angel, the death of one of the show's veterans about halfway through, the impending destruction of the building, the readiness of the cast to move on probably all refer to his impending disappearance. Moving if you like the radio program and the movies of Robert Altman with "his unrivalled sense of chaos and his mischievous eye for human eccentricity." (NYTimes) (2007)

**Predestination** 2014 Spierig Brothers (Australia) 1.5 Ethan Hawke as the Barkeep, who is really a Time Travel agent dispatched from 1992 to 1970 to recruit agents and to prevent a bombing of New York in 1975; Sarah Snook emerges from the actress pack to play the Unmarried Mother, a double sexed woman-man, who gives birth and then turns into a male; Noah Taylor as Dr. Robertson, who appears regularly to give (often misleading) instructions. The film appears to be a pastiche of a time travel story, based on a short story written by Robert Heinlein in 1958. It has Hawke trying to stop the Fizzle Bomber, who apparently set off a hugely destructive bomb in New York in 1975; the Heinlein story has no such distracting subplot, but focuses on the main point of the original. The film is supremely confusing, having Hawke time travel (quite low tech machine hidden in a violin case) desperately back and forth from 1992, 1985, 1978, 1970, 1965, 1963, and 1945. What results is confusion. What does the sex change have to do with recruitment or the fizzle bomber? We learn that Hawke is the one who delivered baby Snook to the orphanage in 1945; after he more or less recruits the male Snook for the service in 1970, he time travels him back to when Mother met her seducer, and it turns out that the male Snook was the seducer (so he seduced him(her)self); Hawke is the man who sneaks into the nursery to steal the baby born from the affair, but in the second visitation he steals the baby apparently even before she is born. In the end Hawke ends up with the same abdominal surgery scars that Snook had acquired when her male organs were removed – meaning that he has acquired her identity (in the meantime, Snook is lying in a 1992 bed being prepared for service by the Time Travel police). Heinlein's story is also difficult to understand, but 1) it is short (12 pages) unlike the film with its proverb-loaded dialogue, 2) and it seems to focus on a sort of satire of the time travel genre, in which moving from period to period

(characterized as difficult in both film and story) has all sorts of unintended consequences (changing places with the Unmarried Mother?). With the thriller plot and the romantic overtones, the film gums up what seems to be the simple theme of the story. The film is an undecipherable mess. (2015)

**The Prestige** 2006 Christopher Nolan 3.0 Christopher Bale as young lower-class magician in turn-of-the-century London locked in a murderous competition with Jackman; Hugh Jackman as another magician with aristocratic background who sets off the rivalry when he becomes convinced that Bale murdered his wife; Michael Caine as older “engineer” who encourages Jackman (“The Great Danton”) to realize his dream of being the greatest magician; Scarlett Johansson in rather disappointing smaller role as the lover of (who one supposes to be) Bale; Rebecca Hall in meaty role as Bale’s long-suffering and betrayed wife. The film traces the acceleration of the rivalry from ruining and mocking one another’s shows to finally murder. Deeply set in an historical evocation of London around 1900 with emphasis on the public’s fascination with magic shows (they know that they are fake, but they still want to be fooled – so thrilling) and then the evolution of the profession toward including scientific advances, such as Frankenstein-style electricity darting around the Great Danton on stage. Film is cut in completely non-linear way: one starts with the condemnation of Bale for Jackman’s murder and his imprisonment as he awaits execution, but then flashbacks to tell the story, but often out of sequence leading the viewer continually to question what is happening. Story is somewhat hard to follow, but it is a lot of fun when you are dealing with the characters of the principals (the aristocratic Jackman being the better showman, but the cockney Bale the better magician), or immersing yourself in the scientific and show biz issues of the day. The film is primarily a puzzle plot piece that leads the viewer on a whodunit/whatdunit roller coaster ride. It is so complex and the ending is so confusing and runs by one so fast that you don’t know what to think (Who is actually dead at the end? Am I to believe that Bale had an identical twin that was not revealed to the viewer until the last minute of the film?). Contrived confusion is an indispensable part of any thriller, but when there is too much of it, it becomes annoying. Nevertheless, a fun ride that merits a lot of reflection and discussion after the movie is over. (2008)

**Pride and Prejudice and Zombies** 2016 Burt Stears 2.0 Absurd mash-up film that combines a faithful version of ‘Pride and Prejudice’ with a zombie narrative. Lily James as a charming Elizabeth Bennet; Sam Riley as the glowering Darcy; Jack Huston as the deceptive George Wickham; Douglas Booth as the very pretty Bingley; a host of other little-known (to an American audience) British actors playing the ‘P and P’ characters; the zombies remain nameless. Despite some good things, this is a film poisoned by its concept – mashing together two radically dissimilar genres. Much of the narrative is taken up by the conceits of ‘Pride and Prejudice’ – the pretty Bennet sisters giggling and plotting Hertfordshire marriages, Mom’s obsession with placing her daughters in wealthy families, visiting other gentle families and attending balls to that end, the curve of Elizabeth’s and Darcy’s relationship – from instant mutual antipathy to the inexplicable falling in love and big kiss at the end. The girls are very pretty in their gossamer, high-waisted gowns with their intriguing low-cut bodices; at one point, Darcy slices Elizabeth’s bodice, thus revealing almost the totality of that charming female organ. The girls are also trained to fight the zombies that are trying to take over all of England; proficient in the martial arts, they have super-hero, kick-ass combat skills, and when they dress for a ball they wear long knives in sheaths under their underwear (sexual symbol?). Zombies are located in confusingly defined regions and menace the fortified manor houses and palaces of the rich; they pop up at odd times threatening our heroines at a ball or when – inexplicably – they ride unaccompanied through the countryside. But since the filmmakers were aiming to include a teenage audience, the film has a PG-13 rating that limits the on-screen violence to blood-smeared faces and squishing sounds when a zombie head is pierced or its brains smashed. The film has a grand Armageddon finale between the forces of good – commanded of course by Darcy—and the forces of evil – the zombie army commanded by the human turncoat Wickham – in the “In-Between” area surrounding London. The ending demonstrates the film’s bipolar confusion: on the one hand, the battle with the zombies seems to be going very badly, on the other, the main Austen characters pair off heedlessly in solemnly intoned nuptials, during which no one worries about being overrun by hordes of the Undead. Some entertaining moments; but this viewer expects more consistency of tone and narrative. (2016)

**The Pride of the Yankees** 1942 Sam Wood (Goldwyn) 3.0 Gary Cooper inexpressive as usual and a bit long in the tooth to play the sweet-tempered, naïve, fidgety, socially awkward young Gehrig, but affecting and eloquent when he learns he is dying; Babe Ruth playing his good-humored and overindulging (food) self; a bespectacled Walter Brennan as supportive sports writer; Dan Duryea as cynical, smart-mouthed sports reporter; Elsa Janssen as quintessential immigrant mom – Momma – who wants her son to be engineer but then becomes his biggest fan – “Louie, Am I still your best girl?”; a young Teresa Wright cute as a button, a bit flirtatious, overflowing with good feelings as his girlfriend and then moving as a grieving wife when her beloved is dying. Sentimental, tasteful, well-made biopic about the noble, great Yankee first baseman. The film begins with his rise through college sports at Columbia, his years at the Yankees, his romance and romantically endearing relationship with his wife (they had no children), and finally his faltering on the field, his finding out that he is dying (the disease is never named), and ending with his “Today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth” speech in Yankee Stadium. The sentimentality shines through in many places: the cute immigrant family’s praise of America; his Momma’s attachment to him even to the point of interfering in his life with Wright when they are first married; heavy emphasis throughout on the couple’s adorable relationship – billing and cooing even toward the end of the movie; when Gehrig is diagnosed, the film has him facing his fate bravely and withholding it from his wife, whereas the truth was that Eleanor knew and Gehrig was kept partly in the dark (through with baseball but expected to live many years). Made during World War II, the film is patriotic with uplifting messages: Gehrig tells a kid in the hospital “If you want something hard enough, you can do it,” and then promises to hit two home runs for him and he delivers the next day; the immigrant family is proud of Lou and proud of their country proclaiming that everybody in America has an equal chance; Gehrig is held up as an example of American egalitarianism, where even the humblest in the crowd finds community and validation in the national pastime. The film handles well Gehrig’s discovery of his illness – both Gehrig and Wright express their pain with dignity – Gehrig shot in close-up in courageous silence, Wright sobbing but only in private. The viewer has to put up with an irrelevant dance and song sequence in the middle, as well as interminable drippily sad music through much of the end of the film. Although film is often sentimental, it almost always comes across as genuine. (2012)

**Primal Fear** 1996 Gregory Hoblit 3.0 Richard Gere as womanizing, well dressed, hot shot Chicago lawyer that loves publicity; Laura Linney as ex-girlfriend, who is the (not so competent) prosecutor of the court case; John Mahoney as chief prosecutor, who for a while is a suspect in Gere's search for the real culprit; Alfre Woodard as the rather laid-back judge in the courtroom drama; Frances McDormand as intense psychologist that questions Norton to see what she can find for Gere; Edward Norton as the accused in the murder of the Archbishop of Chicago. Well-paced courtroom thriller about the trial of a drifter (Norton) for the brutal murder of the Archbishop of Chicago. Characters are well drawn and well acted -- Norton makes an especially strong impression in playing his apparent dual personality -- the diffident, stuttering Aaron and the vicious, ill-tempered Roy. The screenplay first follows Gere in his investigation of the defense of his client: Aaron admits that he was in the room when the Archbishop was murdered, but that there was a third person that did it; Gere decides to plead not guilty, since he is convinced that Aaron is innocent, but he soon finds out that Aaron was the victim of priestly sexual abuse, thus providing a motive for the murder. The second half of the film is riveting courtroom drama. With the help of McDormand, Gere discovers that Norton suffers from a split personality, but since he has already entered a not guilty plea, he does not have the option of changing the plea to not guilty by reason of insanity. There remains the gambit of tricking the prosecutor (who usually seems more interested in getting back together with Gere than conducting a rational prosecution) into badgering Norton so extremely on the witness stand that he breaks down and reveals the violent Roy, who attacks Linney physically in the courtroom. Judge Woodard then rushes to the rescue, dismissing the jury, declaring Norton not guilty by reason of insanity, and sending him off to a mental hospital. When Gere visits his client in his cell to celebrate, Norton reveals that he is not really insane, but that the whole thing has been an act to get him off the murder charge. Linney refuses to strike up a relationship again with Gere. The film succeeds in both keeping the viewer interested in the proceedings and keeping him

off balance with the twists and turns. With its well-crafted plot and superior acting, the film resembles an excellent episode of 'Law and Order'. Well-crafted, entertaining diversion. (2014)

**Primer** 2004 Shane Carruth 2.0 Shane Carruth as Aaron, initially the leader of the two techies, but later bamboozled by his partner....; David Sullivan as the blond Abe, who co-develops the gizmo and then starts to use and develop it without Aaron's knowledge. Impenetrable "brain-bending" puzzle of a movie with virtually no narrative, almost no explanations; one suspects that Carruth made it intentionally incomprehensible to show his disdain for the non-nerds that might be watching. The premise is interesting – a couple of tie-clad, jargon-spouting employees of an engineering firm that conduct experiments in their garage (pace Steve Jobs) with an eye to making some money on the side. Instead they come up with a machine with interesting, although not necessarily profitable properties: at first it grows fungus extremely fast, indicating that it is somehow affecting time. The boys then construct large boxes that they can crawl into and be transported into the past; Abe does it first without telling Aaron, this leading to a fair amount of tension between them through the rest of the film. The viewer would probably have to submit himself to multiple viewings to see how it is actually done: e.g., since the process yields a double, the participants have to go to considerable lengths, -- hiding themselves in a hotel room for the duration of the process – to avoid encountering their doubles. Some things just never make sense and are not developed, e.g., one of the sponsors of their projects sinks into a coma, which makes the guys uncomfortable. As kind of a lark, the guys use their time machine to make money on the stock market – before retreating in time, they determine which stocks have appreciated dramatically in the last 24 hours, and then they invest in them when they emerge earlier in the day. The two show some moral sensibility – e.g., Abe travels backward in time several times to figure out how to keep the ex-boyfriend of his (?) girlfriend from shooting her with a shotgun at a party; if you don't get it right the first time, just come back to the present and transport yourself again. The film is shot and edited in a traditional style – mostly steady camera, classical editing (compare with the shaky, out-of-focus camera of 'Coherence'); the boys talk in a matter-of-fact calm way using a lot of jargon; none of the hyped-up exoticism of traditional time travel movies. Confusion is rampant: the viewer is constantly clueless about who you are watching – the original protagonists or their doubles, or perhaps there aren't any doubles? Why do the two get bloody ears? It would be even worse if there wasn't a narrator, who occasionally intervenes with explanatory comments. It is pretty off-putting to be handed a puzzle of a film, for which there is no solution. (2015)

**The Prince and the Showgirl** 1957 Laurence Olivier 2.5 Marilyn Monroe in one of her early "Method" roles as naïve, although not dumb, showgirl performing in England; Laurence Olivier trying his best to keep up with Marilyn as the uniformed, monocled, up-tight, starchy, mercurial Grand Duke Regent from Eastern Europe in London for the coronation of King George V (1911); Sybil Thorndike rather over the top as the quirky, hard-of-hearing mother-in-law of Olivier; Richard Wattis entertaining as stuffy Foreign Office official assigned to make sure Olivier is happy during his visit. Beautifully photographed period romantic comedy that never gels despite the presence of the incomparable Marilyn. Based on a play by Terrence Rattigan, the film takes place almost entirely in the apartment of Olivier. He invites Marilyn to a private dinner with the intention of seducing her. When that fails because she drinks too much, she spends the night in a spare bedroom. A dull subplot deals with political intrigue back home in Carpathia (fictional country corresponding to part of Romania) that pits Olivier against his son (Jeremy Spenser). Somehow Marilyn falls in love with Olivier, to which he responds wanly; the film ends with father and son reconciled (Olivier even tells him that he loves him); Olivier invites Marilyn to return home with him as his mistress, but she turns him down, and the last shot has her exiting the apartment to return to her job in the theater. Despite the presence of Monroe interacting with Olivier, the film suffers from several deficiencies: the plot lines in the film are practically non-existent – there is no suspense in either the romantic or the intrigue plot line to hold the viewer's attention; Olivier's Regent – supposedly a famed lady's man – is too stiff to develop any chemistry with the sultry Monroe – it is very difficult to believe that Monroe falls in love with him, and you have to have a telescope to notice that Olivier is finally reciprocating; even Monroe's performance leaves something to be desired compared to her early films such as "The Seven-Year Itch": her famous flirty dance routine is inferior to Michelle Williams'

version in “My Week with Marilyn”, and Marilyn’s voice is obviously dubbed when she sings a love song to the inert Olivier. Even so, the sets and the costumes are gorgeously gaudy Edwardian (with the exception of Marilyn’s white dress, which she wears in every scene except the first one), and the cinematography is sharp and colorful with many wonderful close-ups of Marilyn. The sprightly Marilyn shows that she is an accomplished comedienne with a mobile face; her confusion about the title of the nobility is amusing and endearing. Her persona has evolved somewhat from her clueless, dumb blond of the early pictures; in this film she is innocent, spontaneous, but she seems to know how to handle herself with men, e.g., making the decision not to return to Carpathia as Olivier’s mistress. Worth watching mainly to see the beautiful Monroe in her prime. (2013)

**Prince of the City** 1981 Sidney Lumet 3.5 Film about weeding out corrupt cops in the NYPD Special Investigative Unit (narcotics). Treat Williams good-looking, emotional family man, Detective Ciello, that goes to the Feds to get the goods on some Mafiosi and on crooked cops (but never his buddies in his own unit); Lindsay Crouse as his loyal, long-suffering wife, whose life is turned upside down; Jerry Orbach as SIU buddy, who is implicated toward the end of the film; Norman Parker and Paul Roebing as federal prosecutors, who guide Ciello through most of the film and then successfully defend him against prosecution at the end; Ron Karabatsos as fat crook that has a explosive, hostile relationship with Ciello; Bob Balaban as methodical, prissy, heartless US official eager to go after police corruption, whatever the consequences; Richard Foronjy, Don Billett, Kenny Marino, Carmine Caridi as cops; Lee Richardson as expensive hit lawyer. Very long (2:47 hours) follow-up to ‘Serpico’ about police corruption in the NYPD. Ciello goes to the Feds to give information; he meets a lot of shady characters wearing a wire, and on one occasion almost get killed (he is saved by a relative, Ronald Maccone who is later murdered by the mafia for refusing to hit Ciello); when it is time to testify, he goes into hiding (New York woods, then Virginia) under federal protection; after getting an important conviction (the Blomberg trial), the focus turns on ferreting out corrupt cops in the SIU; Ciello has to provide information on his friends, most of whom are destroyed by the process; in the last dramatic scene in front of the US Attorney, US attorneys argue in favor of prosecuting Ciello for perjuring himself 40 times, while his original handlers praise him for taking enormous risks to help the feds identify wrongdoers; the boss decides not to prosecute; Ciello, who has a teaching job to police academy cadets, is shunned from now on by his fellow officers. The length of the film is both a strength (it mimics the exhausting process of investigation and prosecution) and a weakness (much repetition of the process – collecting information with a wire, courtroom procedure, etc.). In contrast to ‘Serpico’, the film focuses sharply on the psychology of police officers: trained in conscience to enforce the law and defend the public, they nevertheless engage in corruption, including giving drugs to stoolies; feeling guilty, they are inclined to cooperate with investigating authorities; they are loyal to their fellow police officers, particularly their buddies in their unit (demonstrated by joking, horsing around, socializing with one another in their back yards). Ciello rather inexplicably agrees in the beginning to cooperate with the federal authorities; the decision eventually leads him into an inferno of insecurity, murder, and recrimination from his fellow officers. The film takes place in the mean streets of New York at the nadir of the city’s existence – bleak skies, damaged buildings, trash everywhere, huge cars bouncing down the streets, tagged walls, dingy rooms in police headquarters contrasted with the posh digs of the lawyers. A large swarm of New York characters, all the way from the most pathetic drug addicts, through the lower-middle-class cops worried about their pensions, to ambitious, hard-nosed Justice Department officials. The film is dominated by the experience of deceit (recording friends and associates on a wire, perjury) and betrayal, as cops turn against their buddies in order to get off the hook. The pressure on Ciello is so extreme that he becomes unhinged, violent. (2015)

**The Princess Comes Across** 1936 William K. Howard 3.0 Carole Lombard as ex-chorus girl American who pretends she is a Swedish countess with a Garbo accent to land a Hollywood contract – she is featured in some lovely soft-focus close-ups; Fred MacMurray as tall, dark-haired, handsome, good-humored, fast-talking, wisecracking smooth guy (bandleader who plays a mean concertina) courting the “princess”; Allison Skipworth as part of the con but with a distinguished and snotty British accent; Douglas Dumbrille as the French policeman with a barely serviceable French accent on board



ship; William Frawley good as wise-cracking sidekick; Sig Ruman heavier than ever with his characteristic sing-song German accent; Mischa Auer as eccentric Russian policeman who likes to drink (as does everyone in the film); Porter Hall as slimy would-be blackmailer. Garbo pretends she is a Swedish princess to get the good stateroom on a transatlantic steamer; she is courted by smoothie MacMurray, and then is in trouble when she finds blackmailer Darcy dead in her bedroom stabbed in the back with a pair of scissors. Budding romantic comedy then turns into Charlie-Chan-type murder mystery, as five inspectors and the ship's captain launch a group investigation. Ruman, who takes the lead in the investigation, is also found murdered. The viewer has no idea who the guilty man is, although we begin to suspect the policemen. The revelation of the murderer occurs in the fog on the ship after MacMurray sings a terrible song "My Concertina" for the ship's company. After some foggy footwork, we find out that Dumbrille is the villain (!), and the man who has been sneaking around the ship eavesdropping on conversations is the man who saves MacMurray's life. In New York Lombard confesses she is a fake, and ... the two Hollywood kiss next to a window with a view of the New York skyline. Smooth, light entertainment; excellent cast, the majority of whom are seriously underused (including Lombard). (2008)

**Princess Mononoke** 1999 Hayao Miyazaki 4.0 Clare Danes, Minnie Driver, Billy Bob Thornton, Gillian Anderson. Eye-popping, mythic, moving anime movie about Japan at the beginning of the Iron Age. Ashitaka has to journey to the forest area in northern Japan to remove curse imposed on him by bloody-worm boar demon. Film deals with conflict between forces of nature (different species of animals, the gods of the forest, etc.) and the humans who are trying more or less to get civilization into high gear – Iron Town headed by Lady Eboshi (smoking chimneys, blast furnaces, leper artisans making guns), and other samurai types battling with Eboshi but also against forest animals. Animation eye-popping – extremely beautiful scenes, clouds, forests, attention to detail (the way the wolves land on ground when they jump), very bright colors, fairly smooth movement animation (not as sophisticated as Disney). Tremendous imagination, e.g., the Forest Spirit, who assumes many shapes. Mythic feeling as we get caught up in primordial issues (civilization, the decline of the forest when cut down for smelting, etc.). Obviously conservationist message. No issues are black and white, however – Lady Eboshi is well intentioned and has given good work to ex-prostitutes (cute!) and lepers; even the ambitious fellow played by BB Thornton has good sense of humor. Ends "realistically" with San, the wolf girl, and Ashitaka attached to one another but agreeing that they would see one another only infrequently. Only criticism – film could have used some editing toward end: climax too drawn out. (2005)

**La princesse de Montpensier** 2010 Bertrand Tavernier (France) 4.0 Mélanie Thierry as Marie, the beautiful and passionate wife of the prince – she is in love with Henri de Guise; Grégoire Leprince-Ringuet as the soft-spoken, rather hesitant but jealous Prince of Montpensier; Laurent Wilson as the Comte de Chabannes, the learned, noble, conscience-stricken lieutenant of Montpensier and tutor of Marie; Gaspard Ulliel as the impetuous, charismatic, sexy Henri de Guise – he and Marie are in love; Raphaël Personnaz as the boyish although capable Duc d'Anjou, the king's brother and the future Henri III. Outstanding historical romance about the tragic love life of Marie de Mézières set against the backdrop of the French Wars of Religion around 1560. Marie is forced by her Catholic family to marry the reserved Montpensier despite her passion for the Duc de Guise; she and her husband never develop an affectionate tie because of his absence and perhaps their incompatibility; after several absences the married couple appear at the Paris court, where Marie is subject of the attentions of both Anjou and Guise and the object of the violent jealousy of her husband; despite the threats of her husband and the implorings of Chabannes, she makes love to Anjou; Chabannes is killed in the St. Bartholomew's massacre and Marie decides to join a convent, vowing to cut herself off forever from the vagaries of passion. The film is beautifully photographed: picturesque surroundings, especially in the country, realistic, colorful costumes, exciting battle sequences, and exquisite close-ups of Marie and the other principal characters. The historical background is (often unclearly) sketched in: the fanatical competition between Catholics and Huguenots, the life at the French court in Paris, the overweening ambition of the Guise family, the interweaving of romance and politics in the marriage tactics of the nobility, the classical ideas of equilibrium, sensibleness, and peace often pronounced by Chabannes, the curious marriage and

sexual customs that emphasize the subservience of women, who are often treated like chattel. The psychological peculiarities of the main characters are sketched in well enough, although this viewer would have appreciated a better understanding of the motivations and background of both Marie and Chabannes. The narrative focuses primarily on the romantic dilemmas of the fair Marie, who with her indecision and rashness often makes the viewer squirm uncomfortably. Even more compelling is Chabannes, who is played with deep feeling by Lambert Wilson: he is a man of Montaigne-like wisdom often singing to Marie the praises of self-control and submitting oneself to the dictates of reason, principles which he has to observe himself because of his own love for Marie and which he violates when he sees the depth of Marie's love for Henri – he arranges to have them meet; after vowing never to fight again when he kills a pregnant woman at the beginning of the film, he breaks his promise in the end to defend a woman being dragged off by ruffians and he is then killed in her defense. The image is of a noble man who stands up bravely for principle when living amidst violence and chaos and who then dies tragically when there is no way out for a man of virtue. Hard to imagine a better historical romance. (2011)

**The Prisoner of Zenda** 1952 Richard Thorpe: MGM 3.0 Stewart Granger playing the dual role of the drunken future king Rudolf of the central European state and the Englishman who substitutes for him; Deborah Kerr plays the romantically impassioned blueblood princess reluctantly betrothed to the real king, but she falls madly in love with the impostor; Robert Coote plays brother Michael, villainous and not always too smart, who lusts after Rudolf's throne; Jane Greer not making a big impression as another palace beauty who makes some wrinkles in the plot because of her passion for the highly unattractive Michael; James Mason perhaps a bit too suave as an intelligent villain who sometimes works with Michael, sometimes looks out only for himself. Third version of the famous swashbuckler set in Central Europe. Has intriguing beginning as Granger II agrees to stand in for Rudolf for his coronation and romantic sparks fly between Granger and Kerr, but intensity flags as we get caught up in unconvincing psychological motivation, plans that don't make a lot of sense, empty action sequences (e.g., the one where Granger exchanges gunfire with Mason in a village hut), smarmy romantic complications between Michael, Greer, Kerr, Mason, and Granger. Granger convincing as the center of the piece; Kerr starts well but fades in her final big scene when she has to choose duty – marry the real king – over love – flee with the English Granger to England; Mason entertaining with his suave, pungent, insinuating, exactly enunciated lines. Film ends with well executed swordfight between Granger and Mason in dark castle where the king was being held for ... well, we are not too sure. Film mostly shot on a soundstage; the cast rather small; costumes are neat and colorful, if resembling toy soldiers from a Victor Herbert operetta; some interesting sequences when Granger appears on screen simultaneously in both his roles. Suffers perhaps from the artificial 50s Technicolor and the blown up 50s romantic scenes. Still, the film generates fun for the viewer. (2009)

**The Private Affairs of Bel Ami** 1947 Albert Lewin (also wrote it) 3.0 George Sanders looking crass, a little paunchy and smug as a ruthless, money-hungry journalist using women for social climbing; Angela Lansbury as pretty, fun-loving young woman (with precise, elegant pronunciation) unreasonably and violently in love with Bel Ami (she names him in the beginning of the film); Anne Dvorak as classy woman who marries Sanders for mutual advantage; John Carradine as Dvorak's original husband; Susan Douglas as pretty teenager Suzanne also in love with Saunders. Elaborate Lewis-style costume drama based on the Maupassant novel. Sanders is perhaps not pungent enough as the exploitative Bel Ami, who will use and betray any woman in order to get ahead in the Paris of the 1880s. Women are depicted as pitiful victims who can't resist the charms of an unfaithful, brutish guy; even the innocent adolescent Suzanne, overlooks and excuses his most obvious faults. He marries Dvorak for pecuniary reasons (she is complicit), and when he gets his hands on some of her money, he traps her into an apparent assignation with another man, divorces her, and makes off with the cash. By appropriating an apparently abandoned noble name, he makes himself into a pseudo-aristocrat, and forces the banker father of Suzanne into accepting his marriage to his daughter (who is of course hopelessly in love with him!). His tricks however finally catch up with him: a jilted lover teams up with the sole surviving member of the noble family to challenge Sanders to a duel; lengthy depiction of the ceremony of late-19<sup>th</sup>-century

dueling in France; filmed with heightened suspense and melodrama with Sanders' opponent crawling on the ground until he is able to raise his arm and (apparently) kill Bel Ami, and the carriage of the women arriving too late at the last minute. Ending scenes in the film provide a kind of redemption for Sanders: in a brutal confrontation Lansbury makes him face into his evil ways, and in his last statement before the duel he remarks that the only two people he has ever loved in the life were Lansbury and her daughter and that he could have been happy with them. (The ending of Maupassant's novel has the hero prospering.) The film is fairly interesting, well cast and acted, and made with the usual Lewin elegance and inclusion of the arts (display of Max Ernst's 'The Temptation of St. Anthony' in shocking color to show Bel Ami's evil nature [recalling Lewin's 'Picture of Dorian Grey'], a musical score by Darius Milhaud). The copy is pretty good, but the images have not been sharpened by restoration. The film would have had more impact without the shadow of the Hayes Code – nary a sexual kiss or nudity, Sanders's passiveness and glimmers of decency, etc. Lewin perhaps missed an opportunity to create a truly memorable screen villain. (2011)

**The Private Life of Henry VIII** 1933 Alexander Korda (Britain)) 3.0 Charles Laughton in his most famous role as a vain, lovesick, impulsive, perhaps a little loony, not particularly handsome Tudor king of England; Merle Oberon extremely beautiful in brief appearance as Anne Boleyn just before she has her head cut off; Robert Donat as one of Henry's retainers, Thomas Culpeper, who makes the serious mistake of falling in love with Katherine Howard and having an affair with her; Wendy Barrie as the silly Jane Seymour who dies in childbirth giving birth to Edward; Elsa Lanchester as the arch, fakely innocent Anne of Cleves, who does not consummate her marriage with Henry but after agreeing to an amicable divorce, remains his good friend, even suggesting Anne Parr as his last wife; Binnie Barnes not particularly pretty but very flirtatious fifth wife who has fatal adulterous affair with Culpeper. Quite humorous, sometimes dramatic treatment of the character of Henry VIII from the time of the execution of Anne Boleyn until his dotage with Katherine Parr. The focus is on the character of Henry and the performance of Laughton, standing with his legs wide apart and his feathered cap perched jauntily on the side of his head, leering at the girls in the early part of the film, looking for a wife to laugh with and enjoy in the middle, and happy with being bossed and controlled by Katherine Parr at the end; he is self-indulgent, loves to eat as shown in the famous scene where he rips the limbs off a capon, gnaws on them messily and then tosses them over his shoulder; very amusing final scene in which Parr forbids a visibly aged Henry to eat any more, but he feigns sleep, she leaves, and he sneaks over to the dinner table, steals a piece of chicken, returns to his chair by the fire, takes a messy bite, looks at the camera and says, "And the best one was the worst one." Film does not make a point about the English Reformation, English politics, or even the morality or lack of some of his actions (the cutting off the heads of two of his wives is treated as more or less of a joke), but focuses on the humorous side of Henry's amours. Many scenes go for the comic, some with more success than others: scenes of the execution of Anne and Katherine are dramatized by the gossiping of the women watching the show while the carpenters work away on the scaffolding in the background; the king comes down from the head of the dining table, strips off his royal finery, and wrestles against a professional to victory to show the queen (Katherine) that he is still a man's man; Anne of Cleves and Henry play a hilarious game of cards in bed on their wedding night and the king has to leave his room in a rage to get money from his retainers to pay her off. Entertaining, although not moving historical film notable primarily for Laughton's classic performance. (2010)

**Private Lives** 1931 Sidney Franklin (MGM) 3.0 Norma Shearer as Sibyl, sophisticated, quick-witted, ill-tempered, often hysterical English woman divorced from Elyot; Robert Montgomery as Elyot, good-looking, debonair, good with words, quick to anger; Reginald Denny as Victor, duller, more slow-witted friend married at the beginning of the film to Sibyl; Una Merkel as Amanda, cute and prone to hysterics, coupled in rebound marriage to Elyot. Funny and sophisticated rendition of the famous Noel Coward play that delivers laughs but with a cynical view of marriage. Begins rather slowly in the Riviera hotel, where the newly remarried couples are in adjoining rooms; finally noticing one another, they gravitate back to their original partners. Sibyl and Elyot return to a Swiss chalet, where they alternately love, entertain, and fight with one another in the famous living room scene until the arrival of the other two. Victor's and Amanda's attempt at reconciliation degenerates into a hilarious quarrel, upon which

Sibyl and Elyot abscond and are last seen smiling and kissing in their train compartment (but of course the viewer doesn't believe for a moment that the concord will last for very long). At least in the movie version, love triumphs in the end, although a more appropriate ending would have the couple degenerating into another quarrel. An apparently faithful, even literal adaptation of the Coward play, produced only the previous year; Shearer and Montgomery apparently viewed and studied the performances of the stage players, including Coward himself. The film is indifferently, although competently, directed in the standard MGM style. The performances are however piquant and arresting, particularly Shearer's and Montgomery's – they are able to transit from ironic flattery and good humor into all-out verbal combat, and even physical violence, in very short bursts. This is particularly true of the living room fight scene, which withstands several viewings. The play has a pessimistic view of romantic relationships – no matter how harmonious and good-humored the moment, a knock-me-down donnybrook is just around the corner. There is however no exploration of why this is so – it just seems built into the human animal, where male and female are in fundamental competition. The genius of Coward manages to turn this rather depressing subject into often hilarious comedy. (2015)

**The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex** 1939 Michael Curtiz 3.0 Bette Davis in fidgety, rather histrionic performance as queen; Errol Flynn dashing, handsome as her true lover, who is also consumed by ambition; Olivia de Havilland sexy (décolletage!) in small role as lady in waiting smitten by Flynn; Donald Crisp as trimmer Francis Bacon; Vincent Price prissy and ambitious wearing shiny silver armor as Sir Walter Raleigh; Henry Daniell as Robert Cecil, Flynn's main adversary; Leo G. Carroll in a cameo role. Lavish Technicolor costume drama that focuses on the romantic and political relationship between Elizabeth and her much younger favorite, Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex. The film has little relation to actual historical events. Based on a popular play, the great majority of the film is occupied by dialogue between Elizabeth and Essex in the former's palace at Whitehall. There is a little pomp and circumstance with courtiers and soldiers marching with colorful banners into Elizabeth's throne room, and with Essex campaigning briefly against the Irish leader, Tyrone, in (a set-constricted) Ireland. The political background involves much intrigue among the main courtiers at court, mainly between the Raleigh-Cecil axis and the followers of Essex. Extremely ambitious and dissatisfied with his already favored status, Essex demands from Elizabeth that she make him co-ruler of the realm, presumably by marrying him. At the same time, it is a tragic love affair, since the queen is desperately in love with Essex, but cannot marry him since she is convinced that public opinion would condemn her and that, headstrong and proud as he is, Essex would be a terrible ruler. The end of the film brings the two into mortal conflict. In the only big surprise of the film, Elizabeth tricks Essex into disbanding his army, then has her own captain of the guard march dramatically into the throne room, arrest Essex, and send him to the Tower for execution. Elizabeth lets it be known that she would relent if he pleaded with her, but in the final dialogue, the proud and unbending Essex chooses death over humiliation (to the woman he loves!), and he marches off to the executioner's block – it took three blows to sever his head. Davis is problematic as the aging queen: her costumes are outlandishly lavish and elegant; the front part of her head is shaved to give her the high forehead. Her performance is nervous and fidgety: her hands her head, her eyes, even her body never seem to stop moving; her character doesn't have the gravitas and dignity of the real Elizabeth, nor of the other actresses, such as Glenda Jackson and Kate Blanchett, that have played the character. Not one of the best Bette Davis vehicles. (2015)

**The Producers** 1968 Mel Brooks 3.0 Zero Mostel as shady producer Max Bialystock positively dominates the film with his knavish, mugging, overacting comedy, Gene Wilder as meek, neurotic tax accountant and producer partner has some good routines, especially the bit with the shredded security blanket that he turns to when the going gets tough, Kenneth Mars initially hilarious as the Hitler nostalgic with the German Wehrmacht helmet but then he descends into tedious overacting, Dick Shawn again initially amusing as a kind of Elvis impersonator playing Hitler but we get tired of his adding "Baby" to Hitler's lines. Brooks's first film has very funny premise – Mostel pulls out all the stops to produce a Broadway flop so he can make off with the capital he raised from investors – but heavy-handed handling of comedy and the overacting of Mostel pretty much kills it off by the end. Some funny routines – Mostel's hypocritical wooing of old ladies (pretty cruel), Wilder's neurotic baby hysterics that are

calmed only by holding his blanket remnant against his face, Mars' initial fears ("I am innocent! I was only following orders!"), praise of Hitler (he was a great painter – he could paint a whole room in under an hour – two coats!); and some of the scenes from the play "Springtime for Hitler," especially the choral number with the high-stepping chorines in SS uniforms. Compared to Brooks' funniest films, perhaps this one suffers from an inadequate foil, i.e., Jewish humor as opposed to whole Hollywood genres satirized in "Blazing Saddles," etc. Brooks humor also lacks finesse and clear satirical objects; it gives you scatter shot humor (e.g., Jews, German émigrés nostalgic for Hitler, rock stars, elder swindle victims) delivered in a heavy-handed, often tasteless way. One has to give Brooks credit for doing something original and breaking taboos (like Lubitsch looking for the humor in National Socialism). (2006)

**Professor Marston and the Wonder Women** 2017 Angela Robinson 2.5 Story of the origin and development of a three-way sexual relationship in Boston in the 1940s; the plot is masked as an account of the origins of Wonder Woman, the comic strip heroine. Luke Evans as the sex-curious Radcliffe professor, William Moulton Marston; Rebecca Hall in film's best performance as Marston's liberated wife, who however is inhibited by traditional moral values; Bella Heathcote as a romantic Radcliffe student, Olive Byrne, who throws herself whole-heartedly into the relationship after a hesitant start; Chris Conroy as Olive's rejected fiancé; Oliver Platt makes an impression as Marston's eventual publisher. Ostensibly the film focuses on the genesis of the Wonder Woman comic out of the sexual curiosity of Marston; the character is based on a combination of the assertive, intelligent Hall and the quiet, romantic Heathcote – Marston once says that the amalgam of the two would make the perfect woman. The film is really about the formation of a Margaret Sanger-style, Kinsey-style three-way relationship composed of the married couple and Heathcote, who produces a child with Marston alongside the two that Marston and Hall engender. The investigation into the original Wonder Woman that frames the story shows that her sado-masochistic behavior (chains, whips, bondage, lie detector tests) comes out of Marston's sex curious behavior, which however he masks as an ideology to promote the independence and assertiveness of young American women, a delicious cross-section of them being seated rapt in Marston's classroom at the beginning of the film. The emotional heart of the film is the conflicts of Hall, who professes the tenets of free love and is willing to have sex with Marston's girlfriend and indeed falls in love with her, and yet she is constantly held back by her mainstream heterosexuality and her concern about the opinion of her neighbors and its impact on her children. The viewer's attention is often tried by the slow pace of the plot development, as the three decide step-by-step whether to set up their ménage à trois; a scene in which Wonder Woman is finally presented to the viewer in her amazon costume and subjected to loving, light bondage by Hall comes across as a bit ridiculous. The post-film story has a happy ending: when Marston dies of cancer in 1947, the two women continue to live together as spouses until the 1980s. (February 2018)

**The Promise** 2016 Terry George (Multi-national) 2.5 Big budget epic about a four-way love story set against the backdrop of the Turkish massacre of Armenians at the end of World War I. Oscar Isaac does heavy lifting as intense Armenian caught between two women and in the grips of the Armenian massacre; Angela Sarafyan as traditional Armenian girl betrothed to Isaac; Charlotte Le Bon, listless Canadian actress portraying (French) girl that Isaac falls in love with while studying medicine in Istanbul; Christian Bale hirsute and out of place as American reporter nobly fighting to report the massacres and retain the affection of Le Bon (who perhaps out of poor acting never seems to care much about him). The settings, much of which were shot somewhere in Portugal are lovely: mountain tracks among groves of trees and rocky crags set against blue skies; on location shots of Istanbul, where many of the characters seem to have palatial houses with terraces affording spectacular views of the Bosphorus. The script focuses on the love story. Most of the participants end badly: Sarafyan is murdered by Ottoman-Turkish soldiers (often in red fezes) along with her fetus; Bale loses Le Bon to Isaac and then vanishes; the latter disappears poetically in the Mediterranean when trying to load the refugees on French warships; Isaac escapes to the USA to tell the story and to preside over the wedding of one of his village protégées (the USA is the haven of the survivors of the massacres). Much of the film is given over to scenes illustrating the brutalization of the Armenians: beating and murdering of leading Armenians in

prison; work gangs on railroads in the Taurus Mountains; marauding Turkish cavalymen chasing and slaughtering Armenian civilians trekking in slow-moving columns; even Isaac's unsuccessful attempt to rescue moaning-howling Armenians enclosed in cattle cars and waving their arms out between the bars in obvious invocation of the Holocaust. The misery of the Armenians sometimes becomes repetitious, and the viewer meets with some relief the decision of the main Armenian group to entrench themselves in the mountains, put up armed resistance, kill a few dozen Turkish soldiers, and then with the help of the humanitarians escape on the French ships. Plusses: cinematography, especially of picturesque places, Isaac's acting, the first section that sketched in ably the political situation during the war, the courage of the film to be the first big-budget production to confront the Armenian massacre head-on. The minuses: the repetitive depiction of the sufferings of the Armenians; not infrequently its solemn, Bible-epic tone; the rudimentary acting skills of Le Bon, who usually comes across as a Canadian teenager rather than a world-wise French woman. (August 2017)

**Un prophète** 2009 Jacques Audiard 3.0 Tahar Rahim, unknown actor with innocent, often empty expression, who as Malik learns to be a criminal in prison; Niels Arestrup as seedy-looking César, the head of the Corsican mafia in prison. Long (2:40) film about an innocent young French Arab who is committed to prison for a vague crime and who working in the Corsican organization in jail, learns to be a ruthless criminal, in the end emerging free with what appears to be a rosy future. The film is grittily realistic about the worlds of prison and illegal gang activity: the prison is depressing and dirty, the prisoners are divided into mutually hostile ethnic groups (mainly Arabs and Corsicans), violence is an everyday event, Malik regularly deceives Cesar, even when he is supposed to be running errands for his organization when on leave from prison. The violence is particularly bloody and chaotic: in prison Malik bloody, chaotic, incompetent, messy, horrifying murder of a snitch. His execution of a rival gang member in the streets of Paris is equally chaotic: things do not go as planned, and Malik has to barge into an armored car and blaze away at close range (miraculously he escapes without injury and he can't hear for a while afterwards). A lot of jerky handheld camera, camera swooshing from side to side with characters speaking unpleasantly in Arab, Corsican, and slang-ridden French. The narrative is quite disjointed – the viewer is never sure of what exactly Malik is up to: is he simply following orders or is he branching out on his own with his brother? What happened to the Italian snitch in prison that Malik promised would have killed, etc.? The author also adds some arty techniques, e.g., a man's back is on fire (was he a spirit appearing to Malik in his cell?), a long sequence featuring deer running from a car and shots of deer heads and teeth (a car in which Malik is riding later hits a deer on the road), poetic shots of a plane banking over clouds to the accompaniment of soothing music. The film's point of view toward Malik is quite mixed. On the one hand, the viewer is horrified by his descent into ruthlessness and violence; on the other, we sympathize with him as underdog, and we are happy that his business prospers and that when he emerges from prison, he seems to be moving toward a happy and prosperous future that will include mating with his brother's widow (his brother dies of cancer toward the end of the film). The first part of film tends to be static, but with his extra-prison activities it picks up the pace in the second half. The film is interesting as an update of the crime genre, adding arty film techniques and the French prison milieu (largely Arab) to an old formula. It never does clarify the meaning of the title. (2009)

**The Proposition** 2005 Aus: John Hillcoat (Australia) 3.0 Ray Winstone as conflicted "sheriff" trying to mete out justice in the Queensland Outback, Guy Pearce as taciturn member of the Burns gang given the chance by Winstone to save his mentally challenged brother Mikey if he kills his brother Arthur (the proposition), Arthur perhaps the most riveting member of the cast – a poetry citing monster played by Danny Huston (son of John Huston) who tortures his victims before murdering them, Emily Watson as the civilized English wife of Sheriff Winstone. Gritty, dirty and vicious take on the American western as applied to the Australian Outback. The point seems to be that Australia's history is even darker and more brutal than the USA. Texture of the film is gritty and realistic – flies swarm everywhere, around the faces of characters when they talk, on the wounds of Mikey's back when flogged (an obvious reference to the penal colony root of Australia), over the bodies of the many dead. The town of Banyon is composed of a few wooden shacks; the faces of the locals are all haggard, worn, dirty and worried, the land is dry with magnificent vistas, often of spectacular reddish-orange sunsets that members

of the Burns Gang watch (these monsters love nature?). Plot is about the aftermath of the Gang's rape and murder of three local women: Winstone sends Charlie (Pearce) off to get his brother; tensions buds among the brothers who are holing up in a cave; Mikey dies as a consequence of the flogging inflicted upon him by the hateful snobbish and brutal Police Commissioner (?) over Winstone's objections; Charlie does not kill his brother, but they return to free Mikey; when he dies, they go to Winstone's isolated home to take revenge; Charlie however snaps and kills the brother who is raping Watson, and then shoots Arthur twice through the body; the two then sit together watching the sun set – presumably Charlie will commit suicide after Arthur dies, since the only thing he has is his family, and they all will be dead. The film ends in generalized destruction – all the Burns brothers are dead, Winstone and his wife are bloodied and traumatized: at what price justice? Is there such a thing as justice and civilization in Australia? There is no uplift or moral as you would find in a John Ford film. Charlie's character is perhaps a weakness of the film: he is the conflicted moral center, and yet his character does not reveal itself and his drastic action at the end doesn't make a lot of sense. Watson is also rather annoying as the suffering representative of genteel English civilization: her character complains a lot and doesn't really go anywhere, and one tires of Winstone's solicitousness. Nevertheless, the images and characters make this a memorable film. (2007)

**The Prowler** 1951 Joseph Losey (wr. Dalton Trumbo et al.) 3.0 Noirish thriller featuring a *homme fatal* who commits a murder in order to get a man's wife and money. Van Heflin as scheming small town cop frustrated by his humble state; Evelyn Keyes quite sexy as lonely wife ripe for exploitation since she wants a little love in her life and a baby (it seems her husband is sterile); John Maxwell as avuncular, normal cop friend of Heflin; Trumbo's voice serves as the voice of Keyes' husband heard over the radio. The film is particularly interesting in the first half up to the coroner's inquest. It begins with a short scene in which Keyes perceives she is being watched by a prowler and calls the police (Heflin and Maxwell). The persistent Heflin later pursues Keyes in her own home, courting her while her husband's voice is heard on the radio; after he seduces her, they know that their love-making will not be interrupted since they can hear hubby's voice on the radio; when he signs off with his signature "I'll be seeing you, Susan" (Keyes' name), Heflin knows it is time to leave. It becomes apparent that Heflin, who is resentful that he has not risen in the world, wants both Keyes and her husband's money. He returns posing as a prowler, and when Keyes' husband calls the police, Heflin responds and shoots the old geezer dead. The coroner's inquest returns a verdict of accidental death, despite Keyes' cluelessness and the potentially damning testimony of Heflin's partner. The second half plays out the self-destruction of the *homme fatal*. He quickly marries Keyes and moves to Las Vegas where he purchases a motor court (not the high-class mansion where Keyes had lived before). The twist occurs when Keyes announces that she is pregnant; since the baby was conceived before the death of Keyes' husband, when it is born, Heflin's alibi will be contradicted. The couple then flees to an abandoned ghost town in the Mojave Desert, where things fall apart for Heflin: when the baby is born, Keyes urges the doctor to flee with the child to protect it from Heflin; the police return shooting Heflin as he struggles hopelessly to escape. Under the Code of course, Heflin is doomed: he has had premarital sex (unusually frank for a 1951 movie) and murdered a man. Although some of the classic ingredients of film noir are not present (e.g., no voiceover), the film seems cut from the same cloth: much night photography and camera shadows, and a sense that Heflin is doomed to destruction. The film seems inspired by *Double Indemnity* except that the *femme fatale* is now a *homme fatal*, who destroys only himself and not his mate as well; Keyes will live on with her baby. The screenplay seems aware of class issues in American society, but its focus is on being an effective noir thriller. The final sequence in the desert is rather hackneyed. (2017)

**Public Enemy** 1931 William Wellman 4.0 James Cagney, Joan Blondell, Jean Harlow, Edward Woods as Mike. Excellent WB gangster film. Very realistic texture, set in Chicago (one assumes), working class Irish immigrants (Tom Powers) making their way in urban life; then moves to gangster milieu with snappy suits, tough guy behavior, gangster molls, etc. JC cocky ("I'll kick your teeth out one at a time"), dialogue full of underworld slang, becomes cold-blooded killer (even of horse that killed "Nails;" and when he exacts revenge on gang that killed Matt, he walks in fearlessly), but for

whom friendship with Matt Doyle really matters and with his characteristic affectionate nudge with his fist. Acting generally good; no early 30s fake accents. Direction is good; movie moves well from background about gangster youth through the increasing crisis as gangsters, and then the two gangs turning against one another. Sometimes excellent imaginative mise-en-scene such as: Cagney goes off screen to kill the horse that killed his boss; the different parts of the scene in which Cagney gets his revenge for the death of his friend, particularly Cagney's "dance" in the rain after he is shot; when an impatient Cagney squashes a half grapefruit in the face of his girlfriend; or when the sound of dumping coal in the street presages the murder of Matt. The camera almost always turns or cuts away when carnage occurs, such as when Tommy enters the café to exact revenge for the murder and the camera continues the long shot of the exterior of the café and we hear the shots from the outside. Interest held by rivalry and hostility between Tommy and his straight brother, and Tommy's affection for his Ma. Jean Harlow as floozy who seduces Tom; she is not however very believable with a tinny unclassifiable accent. Ends in a rising paroxysm of violence; final scene terrifying, when Tommy, who is "coming home" from the kidnapping and Ma, Tommy and Sis are happy that he has survived, is delivered dead but bound and bandaged standing at the door, and he falls heavily on the floor in front of his brother. Movie begins and ends with assurance that WB is not "glorifying" crime, but just depicting it, a big problem we as Americans will have to do something about. (2005)

**Pulp Fiction** 1994 Quentin Tarantino 4.0 John Travolta, Samuel L. Jackson, Uma Thurman, Bruce Willis, Harvey Keitel, Eric Stoltz (medical encyclopedia), Maria de Madeiros, Christopher Walken. Crazy ride through characters associated with a crime boss. All is unpredictable: characters are always in difficult situations, and then escape ... into stickier ones (Willis escaping Travolta, into Rhames, into the leather shop). The first time through you are completely surprised time after time (reminds one of the big jolt in 'Psycho'); the second time you are looking for meaning, but you end up thinking there really isn't any – e.g., what in the world is the meaning of the glowing briefcase, except perhaps a reference to 'Repo Man?' The movie doesn't seem to be about life, but is an extremely formalist excursion through the imagination of Tarantino, which in turn is based on the pulp level of American popular fiction, and perhaps of American movies (private eye flicks?). Movie has extreme energy and momentum – never bored for a minute, always the unexpected laugh or shock that keeps you involved. Tarantino loves to mix incongruous elements. Dialogue very entertaining and "off the wall." cf. the first scene when Travolta and Jackson, on the way to a "hit," talk about McDonald's in France (the Quarter Pounder is known as the "Royal" in France because they measure weight on the metric system), and then debate whether a foot massage is a sexual act and deserves retribution by husband. After the two hit men enter the apartment, they terrorize the "yuppie" drug dealers in steadily escalating innuendoes and threats, and then execute them to the accompaniment of a biblical verse (Ezekiel 25:17). Characters are extremely off-beat. Travolta is rather taciturn and marginally competent (Thurman overdoses on his date; he kills an assistant by mistake because Jackson hit a bump in the car; he gets himself killed because he didn't take sufficient precautions when he was going to the bathroom), but he is willing to debate heatedly with Jackson. Jackson is a charismatic leader, rather intellectual, and very precise in his expression reminding one of a good professor or a good debater (did Tarantino go to college?). Madeiros is very cute and naïve, and yet attached to burly boxer Willis, who in turn adores her and calls her "lemon pie." Thurman is young, cute, elusive, likes to have fun, seems to be flirting heavily with Travolta, but then overdoses silently and privately until the crisis. Keitel is very businesslike, the expert who knows his job (cleaning up the car messed up by Travolta's accident!) and just gets the job done. Rhames is bulldog-like, demands respect, and is horrified that he has been raped by the S&M guys in the shop basement. Walken is hilarious delivering the history of the gold (?) watch to child Willis in deadpan fashion, and then handing it to him after describing how many "asses" it has been hidden in (the child innocently takes it). Film has convoluted time line: after first two stories, it focuses on Willis story, and then flashes back to follow Travolta, "after" he has already been killed by Willis. The main plot development is that Jackson decides to quit the business and to wander the earth like a samurai warrior (Travolta counters that we call that living like a bum), whereas Travolta decides to stay, and he is killed by Willis in the latter's apartment. Movie wild roller-coaster ride; terrifically entertaining movie experience. (2005)



**Punch-Drunk Love** 2002 Paul Thomas Anderson 2.5 - 3.0 Adam Sandler leaving his normal goofball persona to play a neurotic loser working in a Spartan warehouse housing a toilet bowl plunger novelty business in Los Angeles; Emily Watson as pretty woman who inexplicably falls captivated head-over-heels in love with Sandler; Luis Guzman as Sandler's business assistant; Philip Seymour Hoffman in small role as ill-tempered mattress store owner in Salt Lake City – he aspires to be a small-time gangster boss. Puzzling, often surreal romantic comedy focusing on the possible redemption of Sandler through true love. Sandler's numerous bossy sisters introduce him to the angelic Watson, who is inexplicably mesmerized by him; Sandler gets into some trouble with an incompetent gangster organization led by Hoffman when he contacts a commercial phone sex service, but his troubles are overshadowed by his growing devotion to Watson; the film's ending promises their permanent union. Sandler is the focus of the film – always wearing an overly bright blue suit, isolated from all but his bitchy sisters, stammering when frustrated, possessing a bad temper that leads him to kick out sliding glass doors or wreck restaurant restrooms when he gets frustrated, suffering from unexplained weird obsessions such as collecting hundreds of packages of pudding from the super market so he can build up airline miles (even though he has no particular destination in mind), overcome by manic energy that leads him to run at full tilt through the street. The film does not attempt to explain how a sweet young woman could become so deeply attached to such a guy; Watson's character remains undeveloped. The director pulls out all his surreal, modernist stops to illustrate Sandler's damaged persona: overexposed, backlit shots of Sandler that turn him into a dark shadow; sudden, unexpected opening of the warehouse door; manically intense tracking shots of Sandler running down the street; aggressive, rainbow-hued "pillow" shots between the main scenes; rapid-fire edits especially in the scenes of violence; inexplicable symbols such as the little organ left in the street after a violent automobile accident. The film is sometimes amusing, such as in the profane shouting matches that Sandler engages with Hoffman and Sandler's humiliating attack on the incompetent henchmen that Hoffman sends out; and it is sometimes moving, especially in the scenes in which Sandler discovers the depth and strength of his emotion for Watson (he says it gives him superhuman strength to face down his oppressors); no doubt too that it is interesting to see Sandler depart from his SNL personality. To like and appreciate the film however, you will have to buy into the author's distracting art house style. (2014)

**Die Puppe** 1919 Ernst Lubitsch (Germany) Max Kronert as Baron von Chanterelle, anxious to get an heir by marrying off his nephew; Hermann Thimig as handsome nephew Lancelot, who doesn't like girls; Victor Janson as Hilarius, comical maker of dolls; Ossi Oswalda very cute and lively as Ossi, especially when she plays her own doll with jerky leg movements and arms protruding in front. Based on a story of E.T.A. Hoffmann, which was also used for ballet 'Coppelia'; takes place in the 1830s. Another of Hoffmann's automaton stories. Some harmless, greedy monks persuade the girl-avoiding Lancelot to marry a doll (automaton) to capture the considerable dowry from his uncle. When the inventor's apprentice breaks the doll, she is replaced by the real Ossi, so that during and after the wedding Lancelot is in the company of a real girl without realizing it. A lot of pratfalls and misunderstandings ensue until Lancelot realizes that he is in the company of the real thing, at which point the two -- obviously in love by now -- get married for real and live happily ever after; the uncle presumably pays them the dowry so that they can live comfortably. The treatment is naïve, light-hearted and comic without a hint of the macabre. Sometimes a little sexy -- mainly because of the irrepressible flirtatiousness of Oswalda and the unconscious liberties that Lancelot takes with her (undressing her, touching her when winding her up) -- but not really naughty, much less erotic. Cute and naive; little of the sophistication of the later Lubitsch. Nice originally composed piano score. (2014)

**Q&A** 1990 Sidney Lumet 2.5 Timothy Hutton a bit callow and non-responsive as Asst DA called in to investigate a police homicide; Nick Nolte bigger than life evil killer of a police lieutenant who gobbles up his role voraciously; Patrick O'Neal as DA chief in Homicide (?), who is sleazy in a respectable way and wants to run for public office; Jenny Lumet, daughter of Sidney, as Hutton's love interest -- she should never have gotten the role; Armand Assante as a Puerto Rican drug dealer with a feline way of acting. The third in Lumet's trilogy (starting with 'Serpico') about corruption and racism in the New York Police Department. The film is consistently hard-nosed and cynical -- we are hardly

allowed to come up for air. Racism is rife in the city of New York, where everybody runs in gangs (from white, Italian, Jewish, Puerto Rican and Black); it survives of course in the Police Department, where policemen are able to work together by making a joke of it. Enormous quantities of violence from the first scene where Nolte murders an object of his revenge to the end where there is a veritable bloodbath in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and the death of Nolte in his precinct office bleeding profusely from his neck. We get a good look at the seamy underside of New York society, where all policemen are on the take, slimy administrators dream of running for office, and chicly dressed cross dressers and prostitutes work for the police lieutenant. Nolte in his dynamic performance dominates the film, and there are plenty of other good performances from Assante, Patrick O'Neal, et al. The narrative of the film becomes almost irrelevant because of its excessive complications and the two hour plus length of the film. Hutton is distracting in his cluelessness -- on the one hand he is dedicated to his job and knows how to give snappy orders to the detectives under him, but on the other he mindlessly goes along with whatever higher up he is talking with; Jenny Lumet should go back to making cookies. Film ends in the depth of pessimism and cynicism: when Hudson suggests to his mentor (Lee Richardson) that they take down O'Neal, Richardson tells him that it is too big, that they should cover it up, and it isn't even the biggest thing that they have hidden. A film so bitter and cynical that it is hard to like. (2009)

**Quai des brumes** 1938 Marcel Carné (wr. Jacques Prévert) 3.5 Jean Gabin as an army desert on the lam looking for a way to leave France, Michèle Morgan as Nelly young woman under the guardianship of Michel Simon, Michel Simon as bearded middle aged man on the fringes (?) of criminality, Pierre Brasseur as a rather effeminate and cowardly hood who is always looking for Maurice and who shoots and kills Gabin in the last scene. Famous “poetic realism” feature dealing with the theme of alienation from society and nation, and the desire to escape (the location Le Havre is filled with ships that leave for faraway countries). Script is very talky and poetic, sometimes contrasting with the realistic decors and characters (many of them describe their feelings and ambitions in Prévertian poetic terms). Almost whole film is shot in French studios, although studio shots are mixed with location shots of ships and docks. Gabin arrives alone in Le Havre and finds a lot of kindness (Panama helps him in many ways, the angelic, Christ-like painter actually gives him his clothes and passport, and the doctor on board ship at the end tries – in vain – to help him escape). The bad guys – three hoods commanded by Pierre Brasseur – are less imposing; it turns out that Lucien, the leader, is a coward who is humiliated and beaten up several times by Gabin; but then Lucien gets his revenge by killing Gabin in the street at the end. Michèle Morgan hangs out at Panama’s trying to stay away from abusive guardian Michel Simon. She and Gabin fall gradually in love and spend a night of love together the night before he is supposed to leave for Venezuela; she is “astringent” in her scenes before the bedroom, but is “positively glowing” in bed in an effective portrayal of the happiness that consummated love brings. The love scenes between the two are very compelling. Gabin reluctantly adopts a small, very energetic dog who becomes attached to him and follows him throughout the film as a symbol of fidelity and relationship; when Gabin is killed, the dog breaks loose from his leash and runs through the streets to the body – a gesture that seems to represent the transition of Gabin’s soul and must have been copied by Buñuel at the end of ‘Los Olvidados.’ The film is about alienation, loneliness and fate: the lonely man tries to escape from his home country, and then tentatively starts to create a tie with another human being, only to be cut short by fate – he is caught up in the (rather incomprehensible) mystery of the disappearance of Maurice and is killed as a morally innocent bystander. Despite the action of some Christ-like figures, the vision of the film is pessimistic, individualist, unpatriotic and existential. (2005)

**Quai des orfevres** 1947 Henri-Georges Clouzot 4.0 Bernard Blier as devoted, wimpy husband who devotes all his jealous energy to his wife, Suzy Delair as bigger than life chanteuse Jenny Lamour, Louis Jouvet as quirky, endearing police inspector who had adopted a North African boy (he had been in the Foreign Legion), Simone Renant as the photographer who is secretly in love with Jenny. Beautifully photographed and directed light-hearted film nourish production by Clouzot after his return from cinematic banishment; he was obviously determined to be upbeat after being heavily criticized for his misanthropic classic 'Le Corbeau.' A rather routine murder mystery (origin Steenman) with a 'surprise' ending that is unimaginative and surprises almost no one. Set in the world of popular music in

Paris: plot is driven by Jenny Lamour's ambition and her connection with a womanizing producer that everyone hates (and hence the mystery of the guilty one). The strength of the film is not in the plot, which is quite ordinary, but in several other elements. The cinematography (as restored by Criterion) is sharp, detailed (wonderful sets), and with painstakingly controlled lighting; almost the whole film is shot on convincing atmospheric sets, a tribute to traditional studio productions. The milieu is convincing and entertaining – music people, aspiring starlets, ruthless music producers, washed out musicians, etc. The original song by Lamour, which is depicted from first essay to final expert performance in a series of edits reminding one of the 'Isn't It Romantic' from "Love Me Tonight," is seamless and thrilling. Lamour also sings showstopper French romantic ballad about halfway through. The direction – pacing of the editing and of the plot – is meticulously effective; the viewer derives great pleasure from the artistry of the filming technique. Scene in which Jouvét interrogates witnesses at the music hall recalls Hitchcock's '39 Steps' with the chorus girls high-stepping in the background. Characterizations are true and piquant: Blier's subservient husband trying to keep control of his ambitious, talented wife; Delair's effervescent, infectious personality carries through even when she is overacting a bit; Jouvet with his Maigret/Columbo mannerisms, his cynical asides and yet his emotional vulnerability (he thinks he is not attractive to women) and sensitivity (his paternal love for his adopted son, his world weary disappointment when he learns in the police station that his son had flunked geometry, his sensitivity for Renant's lesbian affection for Delair, etc.) draw us toward his character. Film does a great job depicting the methods of the French police – not above intimidation and pressure on a witness or on the suspect to get the confession – and always with humor. The film takes place just before and on Christmas Day with Christmas trees and policemen going home to celebrate with their families. Film ends happily – the guilty man (someone of no consequence to us) is behind bars, Blier is reunited with his wife (no problems solved there), and there is a strong hint that Jouvet might get together with Denant. Film ends with 'Diaboliques'-like humorous final scene with Jouvet son pelting him with snowballs. (2006)

**Que la bête meure** 1969 Claude Chabrol 4.0 Michel Duchaussoy, Caroline Cellier, Jean Yanne. Outstanding ironic and satirical tragic film by Chabrol. Set mostly in Bretagne. Charles' son is run down by hit and run driver; Charles solemnly swears that he will kill him. He finds sister in law, CC, who leads him to detestable bastard, Paul; ends up not killing Paul, but his son does it for him. On surface film is a thriller, but Chabrol is more interested in drama, moral irony, than in teasing audience with identity of the perpetrator. Acting strong all the way through, especially MD and Paul, who instead of speaking the usual pure Chabrol language, mutters vulgar slang every time he opens his mouth; even small roles are striking, e.g., Charles' housekeeper's outburst of grief in beginning of film. Scenery is beautiful with emphasis on the power of the sea (especially when Charles takes Paul sailing in bad weather with intention to kill, and at the end when we have a couple of minutes of violent surf on the Breton coast) representing the deep-running forces of nature that drive revenge. Plays like a Greek tragedy, reinforced by Charles' "lesson" to the boy about the deepest poetry of death in Homer's 'Iliad' (the spear runs through the Trojan's head emerging through his mouth, whereupon "he bites cold steel"). Charles seeks ultimate revenge on the man who killed his son; when he finds him and discovers that he is a detestable pig, he does not kill him, but Paul's son, a kind of pretty boy sensitive teenager, poisons him – the man who kills another man's son is murdered by his own son; when the boy confesses, Charles keeps quiet, apparently reveling in the prospect of the son of the man he hates also being destroyed. But then the unexpected occurs. At end he leaves a message for his girlfriend (CC) instructing her to give the police information indicating he did it and the boy goes free; then Charles takes his boat into the Atlantic to commit suicide. The moral twist is that love and mercy predominate at the end. Movie is also viciously satirical at the expense of the French bourgeoisie. French social occasions are empty of any human content – inane conversations with empty silences; Charles goes to visit the family and instead of solidarity and harmony, he discovers that everyone (except for vicious mother, who is moved only by her biological connection to her son) hates the father, and some of them want to kill him; Charles and CC discuss murder and revenge in restaurant while Chabrol cuts to beautiful flowers and the maître d'hotel cutting the duck up carefully into slices before serving. Charles himself is hardly "civilized," since he turns almost instinctively to revenge murder with little regard for the police (when he talks to them, he

seems to be thinking primarily of what he needs to do in order to find the killer). Music touching and beautiful; focus on one of Brahms' songs. This film has a powerful tragic impact. (2005)

**Que la fête commence** 1975 Bertrand Tavernier (France) 3.0 Philippe Noiret as Philippe d'Orleans, the weary regent of France; Jean Rochefort, as his minister, the ambitious Abbé Dubois; Jean-Pierre Marielle as the comical Breton insurgent, Marquis de Pontcallec. Early Tavernier historical comedy-drama dealing with the personalities and issues during the Regency of Philip of Orleans. Focus is on Philippe: tired looking and often talking about dying (he says that he smells of rot), favors aristocrats over middle classes and common folk (historically atypical of the royals), an agnostic close to atheism, valuing the Catholic Church only as a prop to the Bourbon regime, a wild womanizer and carouser seeming to flee from his philosophical emptiness and the decay of death toward a joyless pursuit of pleasure. Plot focuses on a feeble, minor revolt of the Breton nobility that is crushed easily – by simply arresting the leader, Pontcallec; the rebels, who wait in vain for Spanish help, have only three dragoons at their disposal. Rochefort is Philippe's trusted adviser, ambitious and equally skeptical about religion even though his goal is to become a cardinal – “Vous connaissez la Bible?” “Par oui-dire.” He also exaggerates the extent of the Breton revolt in order to make himself indispensable to Philippe. Narrative is a bit difficult to follow, the extras look like modern people in period costumes, but acting is good, costumes and locales are colorful, and the script and mise-en-scène evoke the culture of the day. The Regent and his prime minister disagree about whether to favor the power of the aristocracy; churchmen at court are hypocritical and care only about money, power, and prestige; everyone however believes in consulting the fortune teller, including the irreligious principals; women are sex toys present only to please the guys; some of the characters are speculating in M. Law's Mississippi Company (hints of collapse toward the end of the film). Some full frontal nudity including pubic hair. The film ends with references to the French Revolution, thus suggesting that the Old Regime fell because it was rotten to the core. Entertaining, even occasionally insightful, especially for students of French history. (2016)

**The Queen** 2006 Stephen Frears 4.0 Helen Mirren in thoughtful, riveting performance as QE II at the time of the death of Princess Diana, Michael Sheen almost as good as PM Tony Blair (all charm and teeth); James Cromwell excellent as dim bulb, knee jerk Prince Philip, Alex Jennings as a paranoid Prince Charles, dorky but trying to turn Diana's death into a plus for himself, Sylvia Syms good as the Queen Mother, Helen McCrory as Cherie Blair, who actually cooks dinner for her husband and three boys in their own home. Deft mixture of history and educated conjecture about the impact of the death of Diana on the royal family in the following week. The main issue is the royal family's resentfulness against her and their initial determination to hole up in Balmoral Castle rather than honor her with public recognition. The center of attention is Elizabeth: Mirren portrays her as stiff upper lip and inflexible, but as the film progresses we come to glimpse her human side. She became queen when just a young woman and she is dominated by her sense of duty to her nation and “her people”; she thinks that the British people want her to be imperturbable and rock solid. But we realize that she has feelings too: she is surrounded by deference (all those servants!) and emotionally retarded family members (Philip and Charles). Gradually her watching of the mourning for Diana on television and the insistence of the Prime Minister bring her around to going down to London to pay public tribute. Lovely helicopter shots of the Scottish Highlands and her confrontation with a beautiful 14-point buck (representing the nature that she has never had, and perhaps the endangered monarchy?) are arresting. She is genuinely upset with the (belated!) realization that she and her family are not much loved; despite her reserve, we feel her disappointment. Perhaps most moving is the very subtle evolution of her relationship with Blair. In their first meeting, she is careful to establish her superiority (“Winston Churchill sat in the seat where you are now.”), and after some irritation at PM's constant phone calls, she comes around to him – after all, he does care about the survival of the monarchy (he has big arguments with Cherie and his own staff about it). In her last scene with Blair, she at first avoids shaking hands with him (again to establish her personal independence of her first minister), but then thaws; she talks politics with him; she expresses her own doubts about how she handled the crisis, and gently chides him for taking advantage of the Diana episode for his own benefit; we know that they will have a closer bond when she invites him to walk with her in the Palace gardens while they have their monthly conversation. Cherie, who is anti-monarchist, thinks

that Blair has fallen for the Queen because she resembles his mother. Delicious satire of the protocol and stiffness of the royal household, and their friction with the informal “modernizing” government. Finely directed and even better acted: Mirren’s performance is finely nuanced; we are thrilled at the subtle revelations that Elizabeth has her sensitive side. This is the almost perfect film. (2006)

**Queen Kelly** 1929 (silent) Erich von Stroheim 3.5 Gloria Swanson, who co-produced with Joe Kennedy and ends up firing Von Stroheim, Seena Owen as the pathologically jealous nymphomaniac queen, Walter Byron as the prince betrothed to the Queen but who falls in love with a lay girl being educated in a convent. A late silent film for which the producers were tempted on several occasions to add sound. Very baroque and fascinating incomplete film; Von Stroheim shot about one-third of it, luckily most of the European footage; after his firing in Jan 1929, Swanson completed film with abrupt ending in which the Prince discovers Kelly’s death (excluding whole planned African sequence) and released it in 1931; was a moderate success. Byron is rather stock handsome playboy prince, who cannot help falling in love with a commoner girl despite rabid objections of the Queen; Swanson gives herself plenty of material for acting, from her flirting with the Prince when the latter is out for a military exercise to the lengthy seduction sequence in the prince’s apartments. Everything is over the top (baroque) and highly detailed and perfected under VS’ obsessive direction. Art direction of the Queen’s palace is enormously sumptuous, from the mechanical Prussian-like guards to the sumptuous dinner table of the Wedding Party to the erotic art and objets d’art everywhere visible. The Queen is an insane, over the top, erotic obsessive, who is seen largely nude in her first scene, and who beats Kelly almost to death with a whip (erotic overtones) when she finds her in bed with her fiancé and pursues her across the palace in a jealous rage. Very famous scene is second big sequence in which Swanson attracts the attention of the Prince when she (intentionally?) drops her drawers while the soldiers are passing along the road. The print is wonderfully restored, and gives a great idea of the proliferation of visual detail characteristic of a VS film. Plot and subject of the film are pretty standard fare – true love transforms and redeems the hero and wins out over simple erotica. Authors had to look over their shoulders at the censors, but the film would have been completely gutted after 1934. (2008)

**The Queen of Versailles** 2012 Lauren Greenfield 4.0 This inspired documentary follows the fortunes of the billionaire family of David Siegel, the founder of Westgate Resorts that sells time shares all over the world. The first part shows David on top of the world, just having constructed an enormous residential tower in the heart of Las Vegas, living cramped in a measly 27,000 square foot house and in the middle of construction of a 90,000 square foot one that they are imitating as best they can from their viewing of the French Palace of Versailles. Views of the antiques and bric-a-brac they have collected from (apparently) Europe remind one of the great storage room in the last scene of ‘Citizen Kane’. Siegel and his wife open up their house to Greenfield’s cameras and questioning over the course of four years; they are generous with their time and quite honest and forthcoming in answering her questions. Siegel has a triumphant tone in the first half of the film – his time share company is the largest in the world, he claims – although without giving details – that he was personally responsible for the election of George Bush to the presidency in 2000. The second half of the show however takes on a different tone: when the financial crisis hits in 2008, his creditor banks close in on him, force him and his employees to take pay cuts, and move toward foreclosing on the Las Vegas Tower that Siegel has \$400 million of his money (he says) invested in; the family has to temporarily abandon construction of Versailles and put the shell on the market, they lay off most of their 19 domestic help, and their crowded (!) house turns to chaos with dog poop on the white rugs. Their lifestyle however does not seem to change that much: they still give elaborate parties and Sharon maintains her compulsive buying binges, although this time she shops for Christmas presents at Walmart (filling three or four push carts) instead of a department store. The film ends with the announcement that the banks have foreclosed on the Las Vegas tower. Although both spouses are the epitome of crass nouveaux riches and don’t seem to have an ounce of appreciation of history or the arts in them, it is difficult not to like them: they seem affectionate enough toward one another except toward the end when financial problems are taking their toll; they seem devoted to their children, although they do very little to discipline them; they are open in front of the camera, even revealing embarrassing details about themselves; (they do seem indifferent to the hardships of their

domestic help, one of whom – a Filipina – hasn't seen her own children in over 15 years!) The differences between this new American oligarchy and the robber barons of the late 19th century is interesting: whereas the Vanderbilts and the Rockefellers instantly turned themselves into aristocrats aping the culture of Europe, these folk see themselves as essentially regular American Joes like everybody else, except that they just have more stuff and are always trying to get more. By extension the film gives fascinating insights into the Great American Housing Bubble and the impact of the collapse on all of us. (2012)

**The Quiet American** 2002 Philip Noyce ('Rabbit-Proof Fence') 3.0 Brendan Fraser as the sincere, unassuming "Quiet" American, Thomas Pyle, working allegedly in US government's Economic Aid Mission in Saigon; Michael Caine as, weary, "old and fragile", morally exhausted English journalist, Thomas Fowler, writing distractedly for the London Times in Saigon; Do Thi Hai Yen as Phuong, beautiful, elegant, rather chilly and inscrutable Vietnamese girl the two men compete for. Based on Graham Greene novel, the film focuses on the insecurities of a weary, older man set against the backdrop of political intrigue in 1952 Saigon. The film is narrated by Caine, beginning with Fraser's murder and then flashing back to the development of their friendship, their competition for the attentions of Phuong, who is Caine's live-in girlfriend, and the gradual revelation that Fraser is a CIA agent and no humanitarian. Fraser is no actor, but he stands for the Idealistic (?) American confidence (1952) that the French are finished in Vietnam, that the country is worth saving from the Communists, and that the Americans need to create a native Vietnamese Third Force, even if its leader is an egomaniac and does not shy away from terrorist acts (the gruesome bomb scene in the streets of Saigon); Fraser regrets the bloodshed, but thinks it necessary to save the country from the Communists. The contrast between the weary Caine and the brash Fraser is of course emblematic of the passing of responsibility from the tired French to the energetic, well-equipped Americans. Fraser's murder is presented in thicket of ambiguity – Was it the Communists or the Third Force that murdered him? Fowler appears to have collaborated in the act; but was it out of political disgust or was he just trying to eliminate a romantic rival? Intense, colorful late colonial atmosphere – night clubs, dog carcasses at the entrance to restaurants; wet, muddy, dark, rainy, mildewed exteriors and interiors. Exquisite close-ups that however become rather stilted because of the passive acting of both Fraser and Phuong, who remains through the film an object of beauty looking for a good marriage. Caine is the real subject of the film, purportedly a depressed older man past his prime, holding on to life with his relationship with Phuong – "If I were to lose Phuong, it would be the beginning of death." The film has however a happily-ever-after postscript: Fowler reunites with a passionate Phuong and remains in Vietnam to report the subsequent American build-up. Caine's performance is natural and eloquent, although he has little help from the other two principals. (2015)

**The Quiet Earth** 1985 Geof Murphy 3.0 Bruno Lawrence bald and appealingly masculine as New Zealand leading man – he is the "last man on earth" after energy experiment gone awry; Allison Routledge as pretty red-headed, sprightly and energetic young woman that he thankfully meets about halfway through film; Peter Smith as Api, a shallowly written Maori character who appears toward the end to engage Lawrence in contest for alpha male. Absorbing and occasionally haunting science fiction film that has Lawrence alone in Auckland and environs after he awakens following a suicide attempt. The first part of the film is the most intriguing, as Lawrence goes on materialistic binge, stealing cars and trucks (since all animal life forms have just disappeared, the viewer is spared the sight of millions of decaying bodies), occupies the most luxurious house in town, dresses in women's clothing (desire for companionship?), and proclaims himself dictator of the world giving speeches to an audience of cutout figures of Hitler, Churchill, etc. Intriguing shots of Lawrence removing blankets from a baby crib to find it empty, and wandering through a devastating airplane crash site and standing next to a huge aircraft tail amidst the wreckage. Things become less interesting when he meets up with Routledge (their first embrace – out of relief for no longer being alone – is striking) and the two of them have a gay old time having sex and exploring Auckland in hot rods and trucks. More dramatic pseudo-intensity ensues when they meet up with Api and the two men throw off sparks out of racial competition (Api resents Lawrence's assumption that he will be the leader) and sexual rivalry (at the last minute Routledge decides to have sex with Api). The final act of the film becomes a thriller with Lawrence racing toward the

experiment station with a huge truck filled with dynamite to head off the next cosmic event. The science fiction, while a stretch, is more interesting than the drama. The three protagonists have survived because they were all at the moment of death when the decisive cosmic event occurred – Routledge had just electrocuted herself with a faulty hair dryer (just like a woman!), Api was being drowned by a friend because he had caused the guy's wife's death, and Lawrence had just committed suicide out of anxiety and guilt about the failed experiment. One presumes that the three were the only New Zealanders left behind, while the rest of the world's animal population had been transported to some kind of new dimension (but there must have been a lot of the earth's six billion people dying at the decisive moment). While Routledge and Api are flirting and cavorting (Api plays perhaps the most laid back orgasm in film history), Lawrence becomes convinced that a second event will occur at a particular time. When he is able to set off the simultaneous explosion, he is transported to a beach (in another dimension?), where there is an impressive painted scene with multi-water-spouted clouds and a huge image of ringed Saturn rising slowly behind. The viewer goes away without really understanding what has happened, but the idea and the imagery are compelling and memorable. Despite its weaknesses, the film sticks in the mind. (2013)

**The Quiet Man** 1952 John Ford (Republic) 3.0 John Wayne stepping out of his accustomed western role to play non-nonsense American boxer come to retire to Ireland after he has killed an opponent in the ring; Maureen O'Hara in quintessential, colorful role as young Irish woman with fiery red hair and a matching quick temper; Barry Fitzgerald as humorous, sunny-tempered, alcoholic leprechaun of a man doing his duty as quaint comic relief; Ward Bond as equally good-humored parish priest who prefers to fish and who knows the ways of the world; Victor McLaglen as loud, ill-tempered (but basically good hearted) brother of O'Hara who must consent to the marriage of Wayne to his sister; Mildred Natwick as the widow who ends up marrying McLaglen. Over-long, good-humored John Ford (Academy Award!)romance that would have dragged a lot more than it did if it weren't for the star power that Ford assembles. The plot is very simple: bearing his dark secret, Wayne falls in love with O'Hara; with the help of townsmen he soon marries her, but out of personal pique McLaglen refuses to turn over the dowry; outraged at this stain on Irish tradition and her reputation, O'Hara badgers the reluctant Wayne until he agrees to fight McLaglen with his fists; when after the two administer a good thumping to one another, McLaglen finally hands him the money, Wayne throws it in the fire, McLaglen weds Natwick, and everybody lives happily ever after. The film is full of the Irish blarney and sentimentality that one would expect from Ford. Not a mention of the "troubles" in the recent past, the priest and the Anglican vicar (Arthur Shields) get along famously, and although all the men are constantly traipsing in and out of the pub consuming large amounts of Guinness, no one gets hurt and the drunks are inevitably happy and innocuous. Irish people are colorful and lovable; they love to drink (bottles everywhere), sing hackneyed Irish ballads (which are repeated endlessly on Victor Young's score), go to the races, lose their tempers, reconcile, and fight with their fists (when no one gets really hurt). The on-location cinematography is beautiful and poetic, but the alternation with obviously artificial close-ups shot in the studio rather undermines the effect. Although low-key as always, Wayne is surprisingly believable as a guy determined to get his girl; with her red hair, flashing eyes, quick, childlike movements, and her stubborn resolve to stand up for her rights while passionately loving her man, O'Hara is the visual and emotional center of the film. Aside from the fight that travels across the village followed by a crowd of people, the most memorable scene is the one in which Wayne angrily retrieves O'Hara from a train, and then drags her (rather violently) across the fields to give her back to her brother if he does not produce the dowry. Both principals are very much in love, but one wonders how the marriage of two such strong-willed creatures will fare. Would have benefited from about 15 minutes of cutting. Charming, classic film that sometimes tries one's patience. (2010)

**A Quiet Passion** 2016 Terence Davies (Britain) 4.0 Terence Davies' insightful, moving, disturbing account of the emotional and philosophical life of poet Emily Dickinson (1830-85). Cynthia Nixon in passionate portrayal of the adult Dickinson; Emma Bell a bit more charming as the adolescent Dickinson; Duncan Duff with some peculiar facial expressions as Emily's brother, Austin; Jennifer Ehle co-starring with Nixon as Vinnie, Emily's sensible, relatively sunny sister; Keith Carradine steady as

Emily's kindly, but often inflexible father; Joanna Bacon (Britain) as Emily's sad, sickly, melancholy mother; Catherine Bailey stands out as the sisters' outspoken, free-thinking friend – her presence (not historical) brings out Emily's rebellious ideas; Jodhi May as Austin's charming wife, Susan – she has a memorable scene in which she confesses to Emily her fear of sex with a man; Annette Badland very colorful as Emily's outspoken, traditional aunt. Although apparently filmed in Belgium, the film gives a lovely, evocative portrait of mid-19th-century Amherst, Massachusetts – lawns, elegant small house, light-filled Biedermeier-style interiors lit by candlelight at night when the family sits around together or when Emily write her poems in the early morning hours, the cohesive domesticity of the God-fearing, although broad-minded family, their social life based on literature and music. Davies presents Dickinson lovingly as a quiet, home-bound woman who delves passionately into the (religious and spiritual) mysteries of existence; she refuses to marry, and even ridicules her only true suitor, in the conviction that being subjected to a man in the institution of marriage would preclude her from writing her poetry. The film comments extensively on the place of women in mid-19th century Massachusetts, who are expected to abandon any private ambition to marry and serve their husband and children in their early 20s. In comparison to her pretty and sunny-dispositioned sister, Emily is plain, severely dressed, and her personality becomes increasingly more dour as she grows older (she dies in her early 50s). Nixon reads a selection of her poetry on the soundtrack (Dickinson wrote 1800 poems, only seven of which were published in her lifetime), showing her insight into nature, the culture she lived in, and particularly her horrified fascination with the essential question of “eternity” – the purpose of human life and the question of the Christian message of life after death, issues she never settled. She was never able to decide whether she believed in God, and she died a luridly painful death (kidney disease causing acute convulsions) without the comfort of faith. The film ends with masterfully pessimistic compositions: as Emily's coffin is driven to the cemetery and placed in the carefully prepared grave (with a cornice around it), Nixon reads Dickinson's most famous poem (“Because I could not stop for Death”). As you would expect from Davies, the film has no comfort for the skeptic. Lovely, insightful, philosophically pessimistic film. (September 2017)

**Race** 2016 Stephen Hopkins 3.0 Straightforward biopic covering the experiences of Jesse Owens from 1934 until his triumph at the Berlin Olympics in 1936. Stephan James as the determined, hard-working Owens, who has to overcome multiple obstacles to make it to Berlin; Jason Sudeikis as his coach at Ohio State – he was a track star himself, almost making it to the 1924 Olympics; Shanice Banton as Jesse's long-suffering wife and (out-of-wedlock) mother of his child; Jeremy Irons as Avery Brundage, the champion of US participation in the games despite the campaign to boycott; William Hurt in cameo role as member of Olympic Committee, who argues for the boycott; Carice van Houten appears periodically as Leni Riefenstahl, sparring with the tight-lipped Goebbels (Barnaby Metschurat) about her artistic freedom while filming ‘Olympia’; David Kross as Luz Long, the German long jumper that lost to Jesse and then congratulated and befriended him – his anti-Nazi stance helps give the picture of Germans some respectability. The mostly accurate film is quite entertaining. The focus is of course Owens' success through hard work and prodding from his coach: his setting of three world records at the Big Ten Championship in 1935; the meticulously produced picture of the four victories at the Berlin Games (largely based on the images of Riefenstahl). The scenes in Berlin – the stadium, the crowds, the fanatical cheering of Hitler when he enters the stadium, the interaction with Luz, etc. are all memorable. The subplot of the attractive Riefenstahl receiving her commission from Hitler to record the games and her infighting with Goebbels is entertaining, although truncated. The screenplay places much more emphasis on the pressures on Owens – his drive to make it to the Olympic Games and win, the pressure from the NAACP and elsewhere not to go to the games in order to register a protest against Nazi racism. In the end, his passion to compete wins out; in any case, the film depicts the virulence of anti-Black racism back home in Columbus, Ohio, where Neanderthal-type football players and their coach regularly make racist remarks and shout insults at Owens. The most compelling dramatic moments in the film come from Owens' relationship with his coach, who draws upon his failure to make it to the games in 1924 to motivate his star. The film drops the story after Owens four-way victory, ignoring the ups and downs of the last 40 years of his life. (2016)



**Rachel Getting Married** 2008 Jonathan Demme 2.0 Anne Hathaway in heavy, scenery chewing role as self-centered, obnoxious drug addict released so she can participate in her sister's wedding; Rosemarie DeWitte not very pretty but effective and genuine as her older sister getting married, who has to stand up to Kym; Bill Irwin as affectionate and codependent father of the girls – he is over-the-top trying to keep the girls from fighting; Debra Winger as the outwardly charming but still bitter divorced mother – she is remarried to a prosperous man. Perhaps the most irritating, obnoxious (although well-made) movie of the year. The narrative has Kym (Hathaway) returning for the wedding, and then the viewer having to suffer from the girls and parents trotting out all the family skeletons (especially the accidental death of the girls' younger brother), donnybrook confrontations between Kym and Rachel, and endless footage of typical wedding moments that would drive even the most enthusiastic proponents of Dogma 95 to distraction. The realist nothing-happening footage includes: perhaps 10-12 minutes of rehearsal dinner blather with virtually no subtext -- more superficial and mind-numbing than the real thing; a contest between Irwin and the bridegroom over who can load the family dishwasher faster and the most efficiently – subtext being the passing of the domestic housekeeping torch from father to son-in-law(?); the endless wedding, which seems to be a mix of New Age and Eastern with cutesy personal innovations, seemingly everyone dressed in Tibetan costumes (or something else just as cool), and a music ensemble playing mindless music influenced by Indian and Tibetan harmonies; as Mick Lasalle of 'SF Chronicle' put it, the scenes had about as much interest as a documentary chronicling slow-drying paint. Political correctness is also off the charts: a Black family is marrying a lily-white Connecticut one, and there is nary a reference to ethnicity or the possible stresses and strains of such ethnic mixing; in other scenes we have a balanced mixing of white, eastern, and Black, and when the bride and groom are ready to cut the wedding cake, there is a piling up of hands consisting of course of a rainbow mix of skin colors. The film does score in some categories. No doubt that the two principal actresses are convincing and entertaining, especially the narcissism of Hathaway – when she rises to toast the bride, her sister, at the rehearsal dinner, she ends up talking mostly about herself and making amends (according to the AA program) with family members. The sparks that flash between Kym and Rachel over those rattling skeletons are entertaining and surprising; and the scene where Kym and her mother get into a virtual fistfight over the death of Kym's younger brother (she had killed him in an auto accident when she was under the influence) is shocking and rattling. One is sometimes tempted to look on the movie as a satire of empty-headed liberal correctness, but unfortunately the tone is quite sincere and earnest. The film ends with some hope (unrealistic!) that Kym will eventually find a satisfying romantic relationship with the guy from Hawaii that she impulsively fucked the first hour they met. It is praiseworthy that someone in Hollywood is making a film out of the regular molds (e.g., romantic comedy), but this movie misses the mark; back to the drawing boards. (2010)

**Rachel Rachel** 1968 Paul Newman 3.0 Joanne Woodward plain-looking as highly repressed 35-year-old in small US town; Kate Harrington very believable as her old school, boring, unimaginative, emotional, annoying, and insecure mother with a heart condition; James Olson fairly hunky as rather honest cad seducer, who after meeting Rachel in a drug store and asking her if she wants “some action”, helps her emerge from her life-long funk; Estelle Parsons as Rachel's histrionically religious and covertly lesbian fellow schoolteacher. Small movie about psychological repression in a traditional American small-town setting. Film was designed by Newman to feature the considerable acting talents of wife Woodward. Rachel teaches school and otherwise stays at home to take care of her mother; but she dreams about having sex with acquaintances, has an obvious need for a connection with children, and wants to break out of her emotional and social prison. Parsons has her come to Bible-thumping church with her, where Rachel has an emotional breakdown; afterwards she meets Olson and has an affair with him, thinks she is pregnant (she isn't), is abandoned by Olson; in finale she decides to move to Oregon and she persuades her mother to go with her; the last shot shows her on the bus heading for a new life. Film is touching and honest: we identify with Rachel and care for her. The theme of breaking out of an emotionally repressive society was quite common in the late 50s and in the 60s – Berman's 'Wild Strawberries' and 'The Graduate' come to mind. The emotional suffering and yearning, which was very appealing to a 60s audience, seems a little dated in 2009. Film has interesting editing transitions: some are illustrations of Rachel's state of mind (e.g., passionately kissing the hand of her school principal).

Others are flashbacks with seamless transitions where Woodward turns into a six-year-old played by a convincing blond child actress. The flashbacks show her as a lonely child mocked by other kids and surrounded by death since her father was an undertaker: memorable scenes of her father handling the dead bodies of children, the grief of the parents, her father's panic when he finds Rachel hiding in the straw basket that had contained a child's body. Although the relationship between death and being emotionally stifled is not explicit, one can empathize with Rachel's suffering. Excellent acting; well directed; just a little flat and dated in places. (2011)

**Radio Days** 1987 Woody Allen 3.5 Julie Kavner as narrator's mother who listens to soap operas on the radio but has to settle with her apparently unemployed husband; Michael Tucker as his father, who is a business failure; Wallace Shawn as the Masked Avenger; Diane Wiest as Mom's sister who is dying to get married but can never find the right guy; Mia Farrow as a dim-witted baby-voiced cigarette girl who wants to be a performer; Danny Aiello as gangster; Diane Keaton has a cameo as a nightclub singer; a lot of other cameos from Allen regulars. Delightful nostalgic recollection of Allen's childhood in decent working class neighborhood in Rockaway Queens. Narrated by Woody Allen recounting his experiences as a child (he appears as a red-headed nine-year-old), most of them centered around the radio, which is constantly on the soundtrack. Radio is lovingly presented as the entertainment medium – sports, quiz shows, advice shows, gossip shows, etc. – that the whole family rallies around. Film runs through dozens of family and neighborhood characters who are usually eccentric and quirky. Begins with hilarious sketch about two burglars who answer the phone in a victim's house and then they win the grand prize on "Name that Tune". One narrative string is Diane Wiest's romantic entanglements: Wiest's hot date turns into a disaster when the 1938 Martian landing comes onto the radio and he flees the car where they are making out; when she finds a handsome nice guy, it turns out he is gay weeping for his lost love. Another string is the hilarious career of Mia Farrow – starting as a cigarette girl with a shrill New York lower class accent, she is almost murdered by a gangland character with the assistance of his mother, but they decide to help her get into showbiz, she is rejected in her audition to sing a laxative jingle, she then teaches herself painstakingly to speak with a distinguished Anglicized accent and gets her own radio gossip show. Some significant satire of Jewish religion – Woody gets in trouble with the rabbi when he uses the Palestine money for a Masked Avenger ring and a hilarious scene in which Abe is furious about his "Communist" Jewish neighbors played by Larry David, who plays the radio during a fast day – they don't believe in God, only Stalin. "Bicarbonate is too good for him. He deserves an enema!" Woody learned to love popular music from the radio – Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, 'September Song', Tommy Dorsey, Glenn Miller's 'American Patrol', Count Basie's "Take the A Train", hot Latin music including Xavier Cugat, Tito Puente, and Carmen Miranda – the music is a nostalgic trip down memory road. Then the war comes: USO performances; patriotic programs that tell the kids to look out for German submarines (little Woody thinks he spots one). Mostly affectionate and uproarious picture of Jewish family life in New York: a large number of family members live in one apartment – they are usually shouting and arguing; the parents often denigrate their children, arguing with the rabbi as to who gets to whack Woody on the head; although when they begin to feel anxious, they pet and snuggle him. All the boys in school are terminally horny. But in the long perspective it was a wondrous childhood that Allen treats with great affection. The atmosphere is reminiscent of Fellini's "Amarcord". (2008)

**Raging Bull** 1980 Martin Scorsese 4.0 Robert DeNiro, Joe Pesci, Cathy Moriarty, and a host of bloodied boxers. Famous film about the career and personality of Jake LaMotta, the Bronx bull; he finally wins the Middleweight Championship, but then squanders it, losing again to Sugar Ray Robinson in the early 50s. The fight sequences are unequalled – incredibly violent, visceral and bloody; punches land with extremely pungent sound effects, spittle and blood flying, fight scenes shot from the point of view of the boxers (the spectators are simply a roaring background), moments of slow motion when point of view switches from objective to LaMotta's or his foe's subjective perception. LaMotta is an aggressive, mindless sort of boxer, charging in blindly like a raging bull or a mad dog with little regard for the finesse and strategy of a Sugar Ray; but it usually works. Most of the movie is shot in wonderful black and white with color interlude only for the flickery home movies of weddings, appearance of children, etc. in the middle of the film. Most of film deals with Jake's personal and romantic life. Pesci

is his kid brother, who is essentially sensible despite his foul language; he does however lose patience with Jack when the latter beats him up after Jack's fight with his wife. LaMotta is a very difficult personality – filled with anguish, anger, violence and guilt that make his life a misery, but fuels his boxing career. It is not clear what the origins of this are, but it clearly has something to do with his religious background (sex and violence scenes occur in rooms with religious images and symbols), and more with his sexual presuppositions. Although he depends on Vickie (Moriarty in her first role; he tells her “Don't leave me. I would be a bum without you and the kids.”), he sees her and other women as objects of his lust, or once married, madonnas who are unfortunately still whores underneath and always on the lookout for sex with a man. LaMotta is mostly non-verbal, never communicating clearly with others, speaking only to express primal emotions like anger, jealousy, hungry, need for sex, etc. When feeling close to his wife (wanting sex), he is incapable of endearments; he cannot see her as companion or friend, but only as lover – even here possession and ownership have more to do with it than love. He is consumed by anger, hatred and jealousy; he despises his first wife (she disappears abruptly after their first scenes), and most of his scenes with Vickie deal with his obsessive jealousy – he is convinced that she is “fucking” everybody she knows, including Joey. His anger easily boils over into violence; he slaps Vickie frequently, and finally punches her out when she tries to interfere with his attack against his brother. Hard to conclude that his sexual hang-ups are not responsible for his misery. Postscript of film is Jake's subsequent career as a bad, marginal nightclub entertainer telling hostile jokes, composing doggerel poetry, and reciting from Shakespeare to sparse audiences; DeNiro gained 50-60 pounds to portray how far Jake had fallen. In this period Jake loses his wife and children, is thrown into jail on a morals charge (underage 14-year old girl), and has a violent sort of epiphany in a prison cell where he pounds on the stone wall with his fists shouting “I am not an animal!” although he has always acted that way in the film! He is working and still alive at the end, but there isn't much left of him. There is some “redemption” at the end, but it is partial and attenuated: he is remorseful about what he has done (does this realization come from God's grace?), but it is too late to turn around his relationships with his brother and his ex-wife; the film leaves him as a pitiful, overweight entertainer. The biblical citation (John 9) at the end suggests that whereas Jake was once “blind”, he can now “see”, but one wonders what this newfound sight consists of. Very intense, loud and violent movie that never lets up; pretty exhausting experience. Movie makes more sense if you see it as Scorsese's autobiographical reflection on his own, sometimes self-destructive life. (2005)

**Raiders of the Lost Ark**      1981      Steven Spielberg      4.0      Harrison Ford, Karen Allen, Ronald Lacey creepily memorable as Toht, Paul Freeman a bit effeminate as Nazi cooperator Belloq. Roller coaster ride of an entertaining film based on the pulp fiction comic entertainment of the 30s and 40s – Tarzan, Flash Gordon, Superman comics, even the Disney comic of Scrooge McDuck with the three nephews in search of Incan treasure, etc. Film seeks to plunge us into one exotic adventure after another with nary a pause to catch our breath – the jungles of South America (actually shot in Hawaii), a college campus in the USA, Tibet, flying on a DC3 with map in background, Cairo and archeological site in the deserts of Egypt, afloat on an old hulk in the Mediterranean, a rocky isle in the Aegean Sea, and back in Washington. Action sequences are amazingly expert and dynamic: Indy's flight from the traps in the Incan cave, the fight in the Tibetan tavern, the search for Allen in the streets of Cairo, Indy's troubles in the Egyptian chamber crawling with snakes, the fabulous chase through the desert to recuperate the Ark, the finale special effects extravaganza when all the Nazis are zapped. A lot of humor throughout that makes the film even more entertaining – Allen socks Indy on the jaw for deflowering her ten years ago, the famous showdown in the streets of Cairo when the fancy sword wielding Arab fighter is shot down coolly by Indy with a shrug of the shoulder, Indy's fear of snakes that he has to overcome when he is in a chamber filled with them crawling and slithering in every crevice. Indy is blindly determined and dedicated, supposedly as an archeologist, but really as an adventurer who will stop at nothing to achieve his goal. Allen is matter-of-fact gum-cracking American who drinks men under the table and looks out of place in a pretty dress and who gradually warms up to Indy (we are glad when they finally indulge in a romantic kiss). A lot of scenes recall literary or film references – e.g., the black-suited Nazi villain with the prominent teeth and thick glasses (Lacey) reminds one of the police chief in 'Frankenstein'; the last

scene in which U.S. bureaucrats hide the crated ark in a vast storage warehouse recalls the final scene of 'Citizen Kane', etc. John Williams' music is non-stop but very good. No film entertains better. (2010)

**Raising Cain** 1992 Brian DePalma 3.5 John Lithgow (at least two characters), Lolita Davidovich. Roller coaster thriller about child abuse – Lithgow obediently collects (kidnaps) children for his father (I think a separate person also played by Lithgow) in order to conduct experiments about multiple personalities. Lithgow expertly and creepily plays man who has had multiple personalities injected into him by his evil father – himself, the criminal and ruthless Cain, the little boy Joshua (who appears twice in the movie), and his sister Margo. Author doesn't care much about the issues except as excuses to scare the wits out of the viewer; and he doesn't care much either about consistent plotting since a lot of movie doesn't appear to make sense – for example, it is probably impossible to figure out whether Davidovich is dead (murdered by her husband or perhaps by Cain) or whether Lithgow imagined the murder and she is thus able to come back and talk to police and participate in the operatic ending. Lots of gut-wrenching surprises, sometimes one after the other, much to the entertainment of the viewer; and you can never be absolutely sure what is real narrative and what is dream and fantasy. Perhaps it makes sense that movie is so schizoid -- has multiple personalities itself – since that is the theme of it. Full of DePalma's bravura sequences. Saturated color with searching camera to reveal something very unpleasant when unexpected (and usually accompanied by shocking music); uses slow motion sequences in moments of crisis to give that operatic effect (when the runners go by the car where Lithgow has chloroformed a woman in the beginning; most notably in the extended ending when complicated action at the motel is choreographed in slow motion with rich music and color). Excellent operatic/symphonic score by Pino Donaggio. Also a five-minute steady cam sequence in the police station as the two policemen follow the theorizing doctor into the elevator and then to the morgue in the basement. Fascination with multiple personalities goes back to 'Psycho' and to 'Sisters.' Also makes use of video images – particularly with TV monitor of child set up by over solicitous Lithgow, and then used again when he (thrill!) catches view of a woman in the child's room, who turns out to be the wife that we thought he had just killed! Great postscript when Davidovich pursues her child into the wild park, she hugs her, and then moves aside, and there is Margo hovering over the two in red (Lithgow in drag!!!) And then End! We are left hanging; no one is safe. What a ride! Makes little sense, but who cares?! (2005)

**The Rape of Europa** 2006 Richard Berge, Bonni Cohen 3.0 Well-produced voice-over documentary about the destruction and recovery of art works – including buildings – in World War II. Focuses on the bizarre art appreciation of Nazi leaders, especially Hitler and Goering, who had no compunction destroying a great part of Europe but who preserved and confiscated works of art in order to add to their private collections (modernist decadent art of course not included). Many beautiful things stolen from Austrian Jews (the famous Klimts recently in LACMA), and the huge number of priceless paintings stole from Jewish art dealers in Paris – as a political concession artworks owned by the French state were generally not touched. The Nazis were more virulent when dealing with other inferior races: the "Polish" central city of Warsaw was blown up because the Poles, being an inferior race, did not deserve such, but Cracow was judged a German city and was thus spared; during the invasion of the Soviet Union, everything denominated Russian was destroyed, including the homes of Pushkin and Tchaikovsky and the summer palace of Catherine the Great. The heroine of the story was Mlle. Valland, one of the curators of the Jeu de Paume where the Germans stored their stolen works in Paris before shipping them to Germany – she kept a detailed list of all the works there, where they came from and when and to where they were shipped. Film also makes reference to the huge damage done to historical buildings by Allied bombing and artillery bombardments, emphasizing infamous Monte Casino (its destruction played up in German and Italian propaganda) and the devastated Camposanto in Pisa. But the Americans more or less redeemed themselves by sitting up a Monuments Unit that sought to catalog and begin restoration of the destroyed buildings in Italy, France and then Germany. Interesting stories about where the Americans found the stolen paintings and other artworks when they moved into Germany – a salt mine visited by Eisenhower, Bradley, and Patton in the center (also contained much of the gold from the Deutsches Bank), Goering's redoubt in the German Alps, Hitler's salt mine near Linz, where he

planned to build a huge art complex, Neuschwanstein where most of the stolen Jewish art from Paris was stored. Although most works were returned, some significant ones are still missing. (2011)

**Rapt** 2009 Lucas Belvaux 3.5 Yvan Attal as arrogant, hyperactive, big-shot chairman of a Paris business firm; Anne Consigny quiet spoken and patient as his wife; André Marcon calm and steady as Attal's second in command in the business. Riveting thriller about the kidnapping of a wealthy Paris industrialist, his experience during captivity, the suffering of his family (wife and two daughters), the police attempts to recover him safely, and then his safe return that leaves his life in shambles. As thriller the film is very effective – snappy editing (e.g., avoiding tedium by cross-cutting between Attal's dungeon scenes and the scenes with the police and the family), continual narrative movement despite the length of the film (about 2:10), successive suspense issues raised in the viewer's mind (Are they going to kill him? Do they really intend to release him? How will his family receive him upon his return?). The originality of the film lies in the portrayal of the character of Attal and its consequences. He is presented from the beginning as a hyper-kinetic, impersonal, highly arrogant business tycoon preparing to accompany the French President on a trip to the Far East, maintaining a mistress in a Paris apartment where he visits in a hurry on his way to a business meeting, and losing large sums of money gambling in casinos. As a result, the viewer is not entirely on his side when he is kidnapped – we feel he got what he deserves, and we hope more for justice to be done, the kidnappers be caught, than the protagonist escape unscathed. The media frenzy reveals that Attal is a big-time womanizer and casino high-roller. When he is released by the kidnappers, his reception back in the city is frosty: the police half-suspect that he organized his own kidnapping to get his company to pay his debts (!); his family is alienated from him – his wife seeks a divorce at the end, and his daughters won't talk to him; and his business associates decide to jettison him as chairman since he is now clearly damaged goods. When Attal returns to his house, he asks only to be with his dog, he refuses to apologize to his wife or his daughters, and when they reproach him for it, he explains angrily that he owes explanations to absolutely no one. The film ends with Attal's life devastated: true, he is still rich, but he has lost his family, he has been expelled from his job, and in a last scene in which a note arrives from his former captives with only the word "Calyso", he is reminded that they expect him to pay the ransom now in return for his release, and if he doesn't they have promised to kill him and the women in his family. The film ends a bit up in the air – with him in a real fix. (2012)

**Ratatouille** 2007 Brad Bird 3.0 Patton Oswalt as Remy, the rat with the heightened sense of smell who wants to become a chef; Ian Holm as Skinner; Lou Romano as Linguini, the human protagonist who befriends Ratatouille and turns out to be the heir of the great chef Gusteau; Peter O'Toole as Anton Ego, the great sour-faced food critic (based on the appearance and mannerisms of Richard Nixon); Brad Garrett as Gusteau; Janeane Garofalo as Colette, the intense large-nosed sous-chef that falls in love with Linguini. Entertaining, essentially children's movie about a rat who becomes a sort of chef (living in Linguini's toque and guiding his cooking from there). The film follows most of the rules for children's movies -- cute animal characters with adorable sad eyes, rags to riches story, suspense, lots of chases with zany happenings and close escapes, sweet love story between Linguini and Colette, cutesy business about Remy controlling Linguini's movements by pulling at various tufts of hair, good guys and bad guys who aren't that bad (the chef and the food critic) with of course the good guys ending up on top (although Linguini and Colette have to open a new restaurant since Gusteau's is closed down for rat infestation). Plenty to appeal to adults, though. The film is set in Paris in colorful, ideal-realistic fashion -- typical French cars (2CVs, ground-hugging Citroens), cobblestone streets with characteristic street lamps and "Défense d'afficher" signs, barges on the Seine, realistically realized gourmet kitchen with gleaming copper pots hanging from hooks, and several glorious, romantic views of the Eiffel Tower from every loft apartment we visit. The computer-generated animation is top rate -- endearingly convincing mobile faces, especially Remy with his sad puppy eyes; realistic slithering rat movements along the floor, large swarms of them streaming from behind hiding places forcing their way under doors and up walls; very fast, exciting motion sequences packed with surprises. Adult pleasures include an intimate portrayal of the gourmet food business -- the snobbery, the teamwork in the kitchen, even the small movements of sprinkling condiments into the soup and wiping the excess sauce off the edge of the plates, the expectation as the critic puts the gourmet version ratatouille into his mouth and we await his verdict, etc.

The plot is too slight -- not much happens and the issues are not great; too much time spent in chases and not enough in character and plot development. Some well-aimed satire at French food snobbery, the caution of the lawyer, the grouchy self-importance of the critic. Entertaining film about the Parisian food business, but too focused on the juvenile "wow" factor for most adults. (2009)

**Raw Deal** 1948 Anthony Mann (Reliance) 3.5 Dennis O'Keefe (looking like a bigger, rugged Alan Ladd) as escaped con with a good side and bad side; Claire Trevor as his hardboiled, loyal lady, who is jealous of Hunt; Marsha Hunt as attractive admirer of O'Keefe – decent girl; Raymond Burr as Rick, a suave, treacherous, vicious, and sadistic (but also nervous, cowardly) crime boss, who arranges for O'Keefe to escape from prison while hoping he will be killed; John Ireland as criminal that likes to build houses of cards that symbolize how the best laid plans go awry. Compelling low budget film noir. After O'Keefe escapes from prison, he drives from somewhere in Washington through Oregon, on to Crescent City, and finally to San Francisco (usually referred to as "Frisco") – the film even supplies the viewer with a marked road map. O'Keefe is accompanied most of the way by the two women; his push to escape is soon complicated by his thirst for revenge when he finds out that Burr has double-crossed him. The film consists of darkly lit, night-time shots of cars driving down the highway, use of a day-for-night filter, interior shots in rooms and inside the car, and a lot of close-ups; Trevor supplies an episodic voice-over that helps create a sense of inevitability. Aside from the push to escape, the film focuses on whether O'Keefe will be morally lost – Trevor stands for a safe escape with a hard-boiled gangster moll – or will he somehow return to the innocence of childhood – Hunt is the good girl that pulls him toward salvation; she even suggest that he give himself up. In the end Trevor, who is with him on a ship in San Francisco ready to sail to Panama, decides to send him back to his true love Hunt; O'Keefe is shot by Burr, but then dies contentedly in Hunt's arms, while the emotionally crushed Trevor looks on. The ending is completely tragic: O'Keefe does not live to enjoy his "breath of fresh air", and the two women are forlorn and alone. The plotting of the film is often confusing as O'Keefe navigates back and forth between the two women, but it is more than compensated by the tense suspense and some outstanding mise-en-scene. Although Burr's part seems underwritten, the scene in which he throws fire into the face of his girlfriend is memorable for its pyromaniacal viciousness. When O'Keefe arrives in Crescent City, the camera spots him next to a large upright stuffed bear with its hands raise; after O'Keefe raises his hands, the unseen Ireland emerges with a gun; a long and violent fistfight ensues. The expansive beach and surf scene where the two women walk past one another switching cars is notable; even more so is the famous scene that shoots Trevor in a close-up with her face reflected in the glass of a wall clock as she contemplates in voice-over whether to tell O'Keefe about the jam that Hunt is in. The film does not have a femme fatale, but remains a thoroughly enjoyable film noir, where director and cinematographer manifest ingenuity in overcoming budgetary limits. (2013)

**Ray** 2004 Taylor Hackford 4.0 Jimmie Foxx in incredibly realistic, sometimes electric performance of Ray Charles, Regina King in pungent performance of girlfriend Margie, who is not afraid to stand up to dominating Ray, Kerry Washington in more mainstream role as wronged wife who remains faithful, Clifton Powell as Ray's old manager – Ray turns on him toward the end of the movie. Rather long movie (2.5 hours) that pulls out the tear-jerking stops (Ray's recollections of his mom, his brother George who died in a childhood accident about which Ray feels guilty, Ray's overcoming his heroin addiction at the end through a vision/dream in which he reunites with the two of them), but it is still moving and interesting. Chronicles Ray's career from late 40s to about mid-60s. Foxx is absolutely convincing and moving as Ray – he masters the stiff legged walk, the stiff-bodied swaying, the open mouth and toothy grin with the head thrown back, the blind man's mannerisms; he portrays well Ray's absolute devotion to his music (more than heroin, his women), his workaholic ways, and his hard-headed business sense (he changes recording companies from Atlantic to ABC Paramount and dismisses Jeff with little compunction when he suspects him of stealing), and his high-living Beverly Hills style and celebrity status. Similar in plot to 'Walk the Line' – difficulties and tragedies brought by artistic creativity and sudden celebrity, the struggles of creating your success, searching for redemption and peace (Cash gets it when he finally gets Carter to marry him, Ray when he breaks his heroin habit, accepts the death of his brother, and returns to his wife), etc. Movie is extremely good on Charles' music – a wonderful

selection of his hits that take us from his early Nat King Cole style, to his adaptation of soul, gospel and blues (some black patrons object to him stealing religious music), then to big band and orchestral pop ('Georgia'), and then country music when the movie fades out; all of his songs are shown to emerge from his life situations, e.g., 'Hit the Road Jack' when Margie leaves him in disgust, etc.; the viewer learns a lot more about the music than in the Cash movie. An excellent mainstream Hollywood-style musical biopic. (2009)

**Le Rayon vert (Summer)** 1986 Eric Rohmer 3.5 Marie Rivière, Beatrice Romand. Exceedingly eloquent and moving low key film about young Parisian woman wandering around France looking for happiness, and (perhaps) finding it in a last minute moment of epiphany. Delphine is neurotic, lonely and depressed; she has a very low opinion of herself; and if you don't pay close attention, she can be very annoying. She is afraid of experience, preferring to being alone or playing with children, walking alone in nature (in a window meadow in Normandy, beside a glacier in the Alps, along the beach and over the rocks in Biarritz), to sharing anything with others; and yet she hates it and frequently bursts into tears in self reproach about her loneliness and worthlessness. She doesn't want to sail or swing with the kids (because it makes her sick); she wears a one-piece bathing suit, she won't bare her breasts; when guys try to talk with her, she runs away; her loudly proclaimed vegetarianism (about which she is interrogated at great length by acquaintances in Cherbourg) comes across as timidity and defensiveness. She can be very talkative (in Rohmer, semi-theorizing way), but she generally remains silent. Chance seems to play a part – with several references to astrology, fortune reading, and picking playing cards up from the ground; and she meets her final friend by chance in the train station, and hears the conversation about the "rayon vert" (from a novel by Jules Verne) by chance as she passes a group of tourists in Biarritz on the steps. In final ten minutes, she meets the guy, warms to him, smiles (although still hesitant), and takes him to the bluff overlooking the beach, where she sees, crying – the last green glimpse of the sun! It is a beautiful epiphany, as she finally breaks through to touch another human being. Film has a religious feeling: there seems to be a spiritual presence in nature, Delphine appreciates nature and the search for something profound in life, and the green ray appears to refer to the power of God in the world; He acts in mysterious ways and pushes us toward union with other humans, although perhaps not in the rather promiscuous and manipulative fashion of the Swedish girl she meets on the beach. A deep running and subtle, mysterious poetry. (2006)

**The Reader** 2008 Stephen Daldry 3.0 Kate Winslet as ex-death camp guard who has a love affair with the teenager Kross; Ralph Fiennes rather lugubrious as the grown-up Kross, always depressed-looking and tortured by life; David Kross as the Fiennes teenager, often bemused and indecisive; Lena Olin in dynamite appearance as wealthy, glamorous New York woman who is a death camp survivor; Bruno Ganz a bit ponderous in small role as law professor. Interesting, but flawed drama about – one cannot be sure: perhaps guilt and other aftereffects of a premature love affair between Kross and Winslet; or perhaps about how the war crimes of Germans affects people not directly involved. Film is narrated from the perspective of Fiennes in 1995; it starts off in flashback with a bang by depicting hot sexual affair between the 15-year-old Kross and the voluptuous and ardent Winslet, who lives in a shabby apartment; the viewer can't help but wonder where the film is going. With movements forward in time Kross/Fiennes discovers that Winslet had been a SS camp guard and she had been partly responsible for the death of 300 Jewish women who burned to death in a church. For some reason, Kross decides not to give the court information (Winslet is illiterate) that would have cleared her from serious punishment, and she is condemned to life imprisonment. When she is about to be released on parole, however, she hangs herself. Although much of the viewer's focus is on the profound impact of Winslet's performance, the film is really about Fiennes' coming to terms with his past with Winslet; and it remains ambiguous whether he is suffering so because of some emotional/sexual injury stemming from the affair, or whether the problem is really about his complicity – perhaps as an intimately involved fellow countryman – in Winslet's crimes. One's best guess is that he refrained from giving the court the favorable evidence because he feared that she would be embarrassed at her illiteracy (or was it because subconsciously he was so horrified by her death camp participation that he thought she deserved severe punishment). As Mick Lassalle says, Fiennes' unhappiness is a bit incredible – if Mick had had such an encounter with a

beautiful woman when he was 15, rather than drag himself around all depressed looking and neglecting to form lasting relationships or be honest with his mama, he would still be bragging about it to all his friends. Film is arty, beautifully framed and photographed, and dead serious; after the beginning nary a moment of comedy. (2012)

**Rebel Without a Cause** 1955 Nicholas Ray 2.5 James Dean in his iconic role of middle class teenage Angst, 16-year old Natalie Wood as his girlfriend, Sal Mineo as cute little kid seeking surrogate parents in Dean and Wood (actually he was homosexually attracted to Dean), Jim Backus as absurdly hen-pecked husband who wears an apron to underline the point, Corey Allen as gang leader and the guy that dies in the chicken run. The film that made James Dean an eternal icon of middle class teenage Angst and rebellion (as opposed to the inner city kids of 'Blackboard Jungle'). Dean carries the movie as far as it goes – sincere anxiety and suffering, jeans and a red jacket (that he generously give to Plato in final sequence), slouched over and head down as he speaks. Film hammers relentlessly on the plight of teenagers who are abandoned by their parents – they are absent (Plato's parents are divorced, send him a check for support and he is raised by a Black woman, who truly loves him), the father rejects the affection of his daughter (Wood's father slaps her hard when she tries to kiss him on the cheek!), the mother is a stupid ninny and the father is hen-pecked and weak and unable to speak straight to his son and give him advice. The effect is often ridiculous, partly because the director wants to spotlight the plight of abandoned teenagers, partly because of censorship, which refuses to allow the film to discuss the real problem (Wood could be out on the street hooking, Dean could already be an active member of the gang). Script would have benefited from a little balance and more openness about the viciousness and responsibility of some of the kids. Very famous for the chicken run sequence on the cliffs resulting in the death of Corey Allen – spectator cars in double line, Natalie Wood in white dress raising her arms for the car lights to go on and then lowering them suddenly to start the race, Allen catching his sleeve on the door handle and thus being unable to jump at the last minute and plunging to his death. The three kids escape to the abandoned house and start to form their own substitute family, cavorting in the same swimming pool where William Holden drowned in 'Sunset Boulevard' (1951). Mineo acts very strange (perhaps because he is jealous of Dean's and Wood's developing romantic relationship), and he goes bananas at the end, dying from a police bullet (but film is very careful to cast the police in a good light – they warn him repeatedly about his possession of a gun). House sequence is sort of dreamworld idyll where they all play like children seeking the childhood none of them ever had because of their ineffective parents. Hollywood censorship of course rejects any sexual connection between the two principals. Ending suggests reconciliation – there is an implication that Dean has purged his hostility, he introduces Wood to his parents as "my friend," and his parents seem wiser and semi-reconciled (she starts to make negative remark about the girlfriend, Backus shuts her up, and she takes it and smiles at him). Reminiscent of other 50s hard-hitting dramas, where much of the drama is gutted by rampant censorship (how about 'Cat on a Hot Tin Roof?'). Film has virtue of helping to launch the phenomenon of youth rebellion that carries over into Civil Rights and anti-war political activity in the Sixties. It makes one be thankful for the end of Hollywood self-censorship. (2005)

**The Reckless Moment** 1949 Max Ophuls 4.0 Joan Bennett convincing as harried, conscientious Balboa Island middle-class mom trying to save her daughter from the consequences of her actions; James Mason also convincing and sympathetic as a small-town Irish gangster that falls in love with Bennett; Geraldine Brooks looking a little mature for 17-year-old teenage daughter, who regrets her infatuation with an older man – a little late. Beautifully directed Ophuls film about an upper middle class California mom that gets into deep trouble when she tries to cover up her daughter's role in the accidental death of her boyfriend. Mason comes along demanding blackmail money for incriminating letters written by Brooks to the boyfriend. Much of the film shows Bennett rushing around (followed by Ophuls' ineluctable moving camera) from bank, to loan company, to pawn shop trying to find the money. The twist is that Mason falls in love with Bennett: he shows himself a good kid ashamed of how he has betrayed his family; perhaps he also covets the prosperous middle-class lifestyle of Bennett. The film has a tragic and noble ending: Mason kills his low-life boss while protecting Bennett, and in a well-stage auto accident he sacrifices his own life taking the blame for the original murder so as to shield Bennett's



family from harm. The film has wonderful characterizations and performances from Bennett and Mason. The narrative and film style generate a great deal of disciplined momentum that holds the attention of the viewer. Ophuls' famous moving, gliding camera always keeps Bennett in view, prowling around her, following her up and down steps and into shops and backroom bars in her desperate quest to save her family from shame. Too bad that the print viewed by this reviewer was of poor quality. The film reminds one of Hitchcock's 'Shadow of a Doubt', in which threatening outside forces disrupt the orderly middle class existence of an American family. The difference is however that in the Hitchcock film the outside threat is clearly evil (1943 makes one think of Nazis) and virtue obviously triumphs at the end when the psychopath Uncle Charlie is killed, whereas in Ophuls' film one senses the privileges of Bennett's family, the class distinctions between the family and Mason, and the injustice of a fundamentally noble person sacrificing his life to preserve the reputation of a privileged family. The film has certain noir elements – dark shadows in the cinematography especially toward the end and the sense that Bennett is caught in a trap that she will not be able to escape (but she does). Engaging, moving film. (2014)

**The Red and the White** 1967 Hungary: Miklos Jancso (Hungary) 4.0 A large number of actors and actresses playing nameless soldiers and nurses in an episode in the Russian Civil War in which Red and White forces are struggling in disorganized fashion for control of a sector near the Volga River. The action centers first on Red prisoners taken by White forces (well disciplined and wearing Black uniforms) in a large monastery complex (weather-stained masonry walls with puddles of water and mud everywhere); the prisoners are assembled, released under the impression that they are free, but they then discover that the exits from the monastery are shut and they are hunted down like rats by the White soldiers. The film then follows some Hungarian soldiers (volunteering in the fight to defend the Revolution) who manage to escape and then hide among the wounded in a nursing station established in large traditional Russian wooden structure; the film then follows the arrival of a White detachment, their terrorizing of the nurses (especially the young, pretty ones), the indiscriminate execution of patients they suspect of being Bolsheviks (a favorite method is forcing them to jump in the water and then spearing them with long pikes); then somehow the remaining Reds take over killing the White captain who is in charge of the mayhem, and then charging a long White line of soldiers in suicidal fashion – all the Reds are felled by a single devastating volley. The film does not really take sides, although the majority of its senseless atrocities are committed by the Whites, who seem more interested in tyrannizing, terrorizing and torturing their prisoners than doing anything of military value; the only military engagement is the senseless charge at the end of the film. The soldiers also commit atrocities against the civilian population: a Cossack lieutenant calmly prepares the rape of a pretty farm girl, even instructing his soldiers to wash her, but then he is interrupted by a superior officer, who for some reason strips the would-be rapist of his sword and insignia, stands him up next to the river (the ever present Volga) and has him shot; later when the Reds take over the hospital, they unceremoniously execute the pretty brunette for treason, even though her offense is vague, to say the least. The cinematography is unforgettable: shot in high contrast black-and-white widescreen and in very long takes; the camera takes in large horizontal expanses of the grass-covered rolling hills and the river, moving gracefully to keep galloping horsemen in the frame or to follow the always random-seeming action; sometimes there are close-ups of the officers or perhaps one of the prisoners, but their faces are always inexpressive masks interested only in barking orders or perhaps plotting to escape but never revealing the depth of a human being underneath; and then the camera moves again to observe something happening in the distance. Deaths seem inexplicable: they are recorded in a long distance shot in which it is hard to decipher what is happening; or perhaps an officer looks up and shows fear in his eyes (no cut to what the threat is) just before he is gunned down. Technically beautiful film packing an eloquent anti-war message. (2008)

**The Red Badge of Courage** 1951 John Huston 3.5 Audie Murphy, Bill Mauldin, John Dierkes, Andy Devine, Douglas Dick (the Lieutenant). Only 69 minutes, so hardly a feature film. Movie emerges in 1951 after the struggle chronicled in Lillian Ross' book. Fun to watch the movie after reading Ross' book. Completely realist ethic with cinematographer going for the polished period look of the Civil War photographer Matthew Brady; image on dvd is brilliantly crisp, well lit. Visual shots very pleasing in high quality black and white photography. There are too many shots of scenes with Southern

California mountains in the background. Very expressive, but real close-ups, several scenes in which moving camera comments eloquently – Dierkes’ death scene, and scene of soldiers sleeping before final battle. Generates fair amount of pathos for the kids sent to die in the Civil War; the theme of the futility of war seems to come through more than the nobility of winning the badge of courage (a wound). Several scenes of Confederate and Union soldiers fraternizing or feeling sorry for one another – Union soldiers remark that they have lost a lot of men; Confederate sentry tells Henry to retreat into shadows so he won’t have to shoot him; Confederate standard bearer is photographed as brave and reluctant to give up his flag; Union soldiers are friendly to capture Confederates at the end of the movie. The narration by James Whitmore is pleasing and relates the movie to the novel by Stephen Crane; sometimes is not necessary to carry the story, but the emphasis on theme is underlined by the narration; I doubt that it takes away much from Huston’s intent. Battle scenes good with the “fog of war” (dust and smoke), period uniforms, correct battle tactics, although extras are a little sparse. Good realistic texture that gives one some impression of what it must have been like; hardly any idealizing or making things more beautiful or brighter than they really were. Story if from common soldier’s point of view; no one seems to know the big picture – who is winning the battle, how our engagement fits. Very moving acting scene by John Dierkes as he dies in long track down the road and then shot up to his face as he pronounces his last words in the field. In end, movie is about the psychological and spiritual experience of fighting in a war, from the fear and uncertainty before the battle, to the moment of panic, and then the regret and remorse, and then facing into his duty. Henry does have good luck getting there (getting his “wound” from one of his own, and meeting up with the cheery advice of Andy Devine). It is clear that it is important for us to have courage and do our duty; but that also war takes a terrible toll on its participants. And in end Henry is sensitive to the beauty of nature, and dreams of returning to the farm and peaceful occupations. (2006)

**Red-Headed Woman** 1932 Jack Conway (one of Harlow’s first MGM films; written by Anita Loos) 3.0 Jean Harlow red-headed, sexy (body sensed beneath her clothes; breasts loose and showing next to her dress, her dresses a bit tight on her butt; slinky low-cut bathrobe), lively, good humored in childlike way, but scheming and persistent in her campaign to seduce boss Brent – she attacks men with compulsive kissing – , and convincing when she has a childlike ground fit; Chester Morris as married virtuous Legendre Jr. handsome with a determined prizefighter’s profile and a set jaw and the manner of a teenager; Lewis Stone distinguished and reserved as Legendre Sr.; Una Merkel cute and lively as Sally, Harlow’s roommate – she maintains a down-to-earth working girl’s patter with Harlow throughout film; Leila Hyams as Irene, Morris’ wife; Henry Stephenson as Charlie, an elderly Legendre business associate. Charles Boyer in small role as chauffeur. Amazingly frank on the subject of sex. Starts with very persistent and sexy seduction of married boss Brent; when caught by his wife, freeze sets in. After, sexy scene in which Merkel takes off pajamas and Harlow puts them on; camera is coy; she flashes her garter on her leg. Seduction scene with Brent in Harlow’s bedroom is violent with slapping (mistaken by Merkel outside the door for sex sounds), and she finally gets him by locking him in and putting the key to the door in her bosom – fade out. Irene divorces him for his infidelity, but plot still hangs: despite Brent’s marriage to Harlow (she really has him by the balls! And she talks baby talk with him in an insinuating way), Irene decides to counterattack – “You caught him with sex, but sex isn’t the only thing in life and it doesn’t last long...then he’ll want love, and love is something you don’t know anything about and you never will!” Harlow is true social climber, but marriage is frustrating since Morris’ family and friends will have nothing to do with her. She seduces over-the-hill Charlie (she is straightening her stocking as he, fully dressed in evening clothes, looks disconsolately out the window). She pursues him relentlessly with hugs and kisses, and then maneuvers him into proposing marriage to her; but at the same time she is carrying on an affair with Charlie’s chauffeur (Boyer dressed in immaculate chauffeur’s costume), whom she kisses with some passion. When her double dealing is discovered, Harlow decides to go back to her husband (cluelessly thinking that he would accept her). When however Brent gets back together with Irene, Harlow stupidly shoots him but doesn’t kill him – scandal! Clever ending – two years later at a Paris racetrack, Harlow is still the center of attention and is the French-speaking girlfriend of an old French goat; as she drives away, the camera pulls back to show the chauffeur – Charles Boyer! Decidedly unCode ending resembling ‘Trouble in Paradise’; Harlow does not pay with her life or happiness. Entertaining risqué Depression comedy with a lot of psychological

improbables and silly plot turns. Nice pop song 'Red Headed Woman' sung by alto tenor in a night club. (2010)

**Red River** 1948 Howard Hawks 3.0 John Wayne, Montgomery Clift, John Ireland, Walter Brennan, Harry Carey, Sr., Noah Berry, Jr., Joanne Dru. Epic western, Hawks' first, about Wayne's driving of 10,000 head of cattle on the Chisholm Trail to Abilene, Kansas to save himself from bankruptcy (no longer market for cattle in Texas, since the Civil War is just over). Lots of epic shots of crowds of cattle and cowboys on horseback moving through the western terrain, although not as arid and picturesque as John Ford's Monument Valley. Dmitri Tiomkin's score is symphonic playing folk music and western music, and is a bit too much for the small screen (perhaps it worked better on the big one). Famous departure scene of series of close-ups of cowboys whooping when Wayne says it is time to get moving. Wide open epic location shots interchange with quiet conversations in campsites filmed on studio sets. Danger to enterprise comes mainly from within. Wayne as obsessive-compulsive who cannot change his mind once he has made it up – completely bull-headed; also as drive progresses, he gets progressively worse ordering executions of cowboys who left the herd, etc. Where did he get the authority? And then he reads the Bible over them when he buries them! His right-hand man is adoptive son Montgomery Clift (Matt), who is more civilized and modern, does not want to resort to violence unless required; and who in a key moment – like Captain Queeg in *Caine Mutiny* or Mr. Christian in *Mutiny on the Bounty* – takes the drive from his father; thus we develop oedipal conflict between father and son for possession of property (?), and perhaps for Joanne Dru at the end. Some good humor, especially with Walter Brennan, who loses his teeth to his Indian assistant, and can't talk clearly enough for Wayne after that. Ending is too soft perhaps. Clift finds good-humored, benevolent businessman in Abilene, who has been waiting for him to arrive and gives him great price for his cattle. Wayne comes charging in reeking revenge against his son; he would have killed Clift, but latter refuses to draw his gun; after two fight with fists, Dru tongue-lashes them about how they really love one another, and they are reconciled in the last frame. Happy ending seems forced. (2005)

**Red Rock West** 1992 John Dahl 3.5 Nicholas Cage as essentially moral, honest, and a bit dim-witted drifter in Wyoming looking for a job but caught up in a murder plot; J.T. Walsh as the sheriff of the town who wants his wife dead; Lara Flynn Boyle as the normal city-looking would-be victim but she is just as vicious – perhaps more – than her husband; Dennis Hopper as Lyle, the contract killer from Texas who is vicious but also edgily humorous. Terrific little updated film noir set in Wyoming with empty plains and vistas of distant mountains, decayed towns and seedy bars, trucks roaring by on the highway, and trains moving into the distance toward the mountains, most of it shot at night. Texture of the film quite reminiscent of Coens' 'Blood Simple', especially the bar! But the film is slightly more serious and less arty. Large numbers of plot twists (Cage is taken for the contract killer, but then Hopper shows up, the audience finds out the truth about Boyle, etc.). Long section toward the end when everybody is in Lyle's car with Lyle and Cage insulting and teasing one another; and the film climaxes with a protracted bloody confrontation in a foggy cemetery where J.T. Walsh is wounded in the neck with a pocket knife thrown by Lyle, and then Lyle is impaled on a bayonet on a war memorial and then, after scaring the shit out of the audience by appearing suddenly behind Cage, he is shot nine times in the chest by Boyle – and he finally falls dead! Boyle and Cage, who have had sex, then escape by hopping a freight train, but in a fit of honesty, Cage throws her off the train with her money after she has tried to kill him; she is arrested by the police, and he rides off toward the mountains in the train. Wonderful soundtrack with unaccompanied guitar music and country western songs. The film was released first to video, and only then released in theaters when the buzz was strong. A great example of sleeper films coming up through the Independent channels. A kind of combination film noir and Coen Brothers. (2008)

**The Red Turtle (La tortue rouge)** 2016 Michael Dudok de Wit (Netherlands) 3.5 Moving animated life fable without dialogue done in the Japanese Ghibli style. Since there is no dialogue in the film – only non-verbal signs of frustration, relief, etc. – there are no actors. The film was produced primarily by the Japanese Ghibli Studio. It is essentially a fable about human life on the planet, its

evolution and interactions with its environment. The nameless man is swept onto a small island by a fearsome storm – no idea where he comes from. He becomes accustomed to the island, has some adventures, and then – apparently unhappy at the prospect of becoming a modern-day Robinson Crusoe – he builds successively three rafts, all of which are destroyed by a huge red turtle. The turtle then appears awkwardly on the beach, where the vengeful man kills him by turning him on his back. To his surprise, the turtle’s carapace cracks, from which emerges a beautiful young woman with flowing red hair. They mate, living peacefully and happily together, and produce a son, who is of course the apple of their eye until – also feeling the urge to move on to unseen horizons – he leaves in the company of three normal-hued turtles; there is no indication of his destination. The parents, clinging to one another, grow older (can be detected only by their grey hair); the man dies peacefully on the strand looking at the setting moon; the grief-stricken woman then turns back into the red turtle and swims off into the sea. The film is serenely beautiful and affecting. The backgrounds, which emphasize the smallness of the human characters compared to the immensity of the sky, sea, and even the beach, are executed beautifully in minimalist watercolor; they become increasingly monotone as the film progresses. The human figures are flat and move rather awkwardly; the meditative quality of the film is emphasized by the lack of dialogue. The music by Laurent Perez del Mar is symphonic and soothing, adding to the quiet depth of the film. The human characters interact quietly and humbly with their environment, eating mussels, cleaning fish, gathering water from a fresh water pond behind the bamboo forest bordering the beach. The allegorical meaning of the red turtle is ambiguous: he forces the man to stay on the island, he provides him with a mate (something like Venus emerging from the sea), and then after the death of the man absorbs the only remaining human life on the island to set off again into the sea. Boredom is staved off by periodic adventures – the raft wrecks, the man (and then the son) almost drowning, the impact of a huge tidal wave that destroys the forest facing the beach (but no permanent harm to the humans). Mysterious, meditative, quietly beautiful small film. (May 2017)

**Redbelt** 2008 David Mamet 2.0 Chiwetel Ejiofor as interesting and curiously charismatic (for a low-key guy) as idealistic ju-jitsu instructor and guru; Tim Allen; Joe Mantegna; Alice Braga as Chiwetel’s Brazilian wife. Rather uninvolved fight picture about a ju-jitsu instructor with a ju-jitsu business in Los Angeles; despite his initial refusal to get involved in competitions, a variety of plot complications force him into it, and he emerges victorious at the end winning the red belt. Film obviously has a parentage with the ‘Rocky’ genre and the triumph of the reluctant expert in the final competition, but the Mamet treatment gives it a more realistic/curious (typical Mamet mixture) character. Many plot complications include a budding career as film producer for Ejiofor, business problems for Braga (the need for money leads to Ejiofor’s decision to compete at the end of the film), Ejiofor’s meeting with a strung-out female lawyer and his attempt to redeem her (which is only partially successful), his unwitting contribution to the discrediting of a police officer (TV actor Max Martini), who eventually commits suicide. All of the subplots are left more or less unresolved – e.g., Martini’s bereft widow denounces Ejiofor; he remains silent and turns away; end of story line. Film is filled with Mametese dialogue: Mantegna delivers his usual ambiguous and repetitive lines, and there is also a lot of tough talk intimidation. Entertaining to watch as we analyze the differences between the way that Mamet deals with the material compared to mainstream directors. But the film seems incomplete, and since we are not invited into the mental and emotional lives of the main characters, the viewer remains pretty much on the outside. (2006)

**Reefer Madness** 1936 Louis Gasner Cast of mostly good-looking, unknown bit players. Thelma White stands out as gangster moll who regrets her role with great emotion and then commits suicide by jumping out of a window. Mise-en-scène, editing, acting generally adequate. Short exploitation-propaganda film whose frame is a pompous lecture by a civic leader on the dangers of marijuana to our youth. The film involves 30s teenagers doing typical things for the age – dressed in well-tended middle-class clothes, studying at their school (college or high school?), driving around town in their convertibles, drinking root beer and eating ice cream sodas at the soda fountain, boys and girls visiting with one another on the parents’ sofa, etc. Then they go to parties in the supplier’s apartment and they dance wild swing, make out, and smoke cigarettes and marijuana provided by the parasitical

gangster-style dealers. The first symptom of marijuana smoking is hysterical laughing that seems to go on for a long time. Soon extreme behavior and tragedy intrude: the girls begin to strip, couples retire to bedrooms to have “tawdry love affairs”, grades at school collapse, kids drive too fast and run down pedestrians in the street, and then attempted rape, anger, violence, and death. A decent kid is framed for the (accidental) death of pretty Mary; when he is condemned to death by a hanging jury, the actual perpetrator goes on a marijuana binge that leads to insanity (while White plays wild, Liszt-like music on the piano). The program has a more or less happy conclusion when White turns state’s evidence, the verdict against the kid is vacated, and the real murderer, who is now a babbling idiot from his marijuana excesses, is committed to life reclusion in a hospital for the criminally insane. The film ends with the speaker’s comments on the responsibility of the nation to protect its children against “demon weed”, “the vicious pitfalls of marijuana”. The film has virtually no dramatic punch because of its absurd exaggeration of the psychological and social effects of marijuana. (2009)

**La règle du jeu** 1939 Jean Renoir 3.5 Jean Renoir as Octave, a rather pitiable hanger-on of the haute bourgeoisie who is a nice guy and the clown (the bear) of the party, Nora Gregor as Christine, the chatelaine who believes in ultimate romantic love, Paulette Goddard as cute, round-faced servant girl who is loyal to Nora but who likes to have a good time, Marcel Dalio as Robert, the chatelaine who loves his wife surreptitiously but still has an old mistress that he has not been able to get rid of, Gaston Modot as the garde-champêtre husband of Paulette, Schumacher, whose jealousy leads to the final murder of the aviator, Roland Toutain dull and straight arrow as André Jurieu, the aspiring lover of Christine. Infinitely famous satirical farce by Renoir that somehow does not satisfy. Partakes of the Feydeauian farce, the play of mistaken identities of 'The Marriage of Figaro', the uppity soubrettes of Molière or of Marivaux; the final scene in the greenhouse at the end is reminiscent of 'Figaro', but is transformed into a critique since it ends in murder through mistaken identity and blind jealousy rather than forgiveness and harmony as expressed in Mozart's work. The film does not end up a paean to love, but as a harsh criticism of the irresponsibility and flightiness of the upper bourgeoisie and their working class servants on the eve of the disaster of World War II – everyone is pursuing their own pleasure with no regard for the interests of the whole or even of the others; vows of fidelity are not taken seriously – even though recently married, Christine has little affection for her husband but is looking for romantic fulfillment elsewhere and finally finding it – no surprise! – in the aviator, but then again in the person of her old friend Octave; among the servants (who mirror the attitudes and events in the upper classes), Paulette is more than open to the blandishments of the unattractive Marceau while her husband plunges into blind, violent and murderous jealousy. Violence lurks in the background: the long hunting scene is disturbing since the editing juxtaposes the repetitive shooting of many animals, the most disturbing deaths coming with the rabbits, one of whom crosses his paws before dying, and because the participants are so unconscious of and indifferent to the destruction that they are causing. After the seemingly harmless, farcical interlude of the party and the comic performances, tragedy returns for real in the shooting death of Jurieu by Schumacher. Like Mozart, Renoir mixes the comic/farcical and the serious/tragic and the romantic, but in this case the viewer comes away a bit at sea. Many symbols and stylistic flourishes: the film begins at Le Bourget airport in the dark, then proceeds through daytime scenes at the chateau only to end again in the garden in the dark. Dalio's hobby is to collect mechanical birds/clocks, thus evoking the fine mechanical toys loved by the aristocracy in the 18<sup>th</sup> century at the expense of genuine human relationships; during the masked ball performance he proudly unveils his latest acquisition – a huge calliope that makes a symphony of music and birdcalls. Renoir's mise-en-scene and editing is very graceful and beautiful – especially during the party scenes there are bravura editing sequences that advance the many subplots of the film; in one scene filmed in deep focus there are three layers of action each of which is distinct – in the foreground Dalio is commenting on events of the evening, in the middle ground Paulette is watching intently, in the background Octave enters to prepare his departure with Christine, etc. Film suffers a bit from not having clear protagonists and clear plot direction – Who is the center of the film, what is its theme? It is very open-ended, inviting second and third viewings to try to solve the puzzle(s). (2007)

**La reine Margot** 1994 Patrice Chéreau 3.5 Isabelle Adjani as Marguerite, the raven-haired, ivory-colored skin, exquisitely beautiful daughter of Catherine de Medicis; Virna Lisi speaking Italian-

accented French and looking like a witch or a death's head as the forever conniving Catherine; Daniel Auteuil like a timid wild animal at court as Henry of Navarre, the Protestant called to Paris by Catherine (apparently) to marry Margot; Jean-Hugues Anglade as the scruffy, neurotic, insecure Charles IX, thoroughly under the thumb of his dominating mother; Vincent Perez as de la Mole, the handsome Protestant lover of the insatiable Margot; Pascal Greggory as the mustached younger brother of the king, le Duc d'Anjou, perhaps incestuously tied to his mother and (at least at times) plotting with her to put him on the throne. Extraordinarily vivid, yet confusing and historically fanciful film about the events surrounding the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre (1572) in which fanatic Catholics under Catherine de Medicis murder tens of thousands of Protestants gathered in Paris for the marriage of Henri and Margot. Film focuses on several lines. The first includes the machinations of Catherine, who seems to have engineered the massacre in the most faithless way, and who resorts at least twice to poison, both attempts going astray (the first one kills Henri's mistress instead of him, the second killing her own son through a slow, excruciatingly painful death instead of Henri); at the end of the film she seems happily united with her second son Anjou as he begins his reign of 14 years. The other thread follows the amours of Margot, who can't seem to go very long without a man in her (in the beginning of the film she wanders through the streets of Paris looking for a lover); she makes passionate love with de la Mole, while she gradually comes to an understanding with Henri (after hissing at him during their wedding that she would not share her bed with him), the two agreeing to a political and personal alliance, a friendship that would last to their deaths, the film epilogue tells us; at the end of the film, the royal assassins execute de la Mole (Margot looks disconsolately at his severed head) and Margot escapes to Navarre to throw her lot in with her husband (the two later become king and queen of France upon the death of Henri III, the former Duc d'Anjou). The film is often very frustrating for the non-French viewer not intimately familiar with the politics of the royal family: at the beginning characters are introduced carelessly and as the film progresses the viewer expends too much energy untangling the political and affective relationships of the major characters. Every scene is presented in highly dramatic and lurid fashion: much dark interior cinematography focusing with a wobbly camera on close-ups of faces whose identity one is not sure of; the movement of the characters seems highly stylized – broken, jerky, inconsistent rushing of characters in and out of the frame; overly long, extremely gory massacre scenes featuring vicious killing with swords and pikes and hundreds of gore-covered dead bodies in the streets; explicit sex scenes (e.g., between Margot and de la Mole) that include explicit shots of male genitals and female pubic hair; scenes between Catherine and her poisoner-executioner-soothsayer in which the latter predicts that Catherine's children would be eventually replaced on the throne by Henri and he prepares the poisoned book on falconry that Catherine intends to kill Henri; the long, slow, painful death of Charles IX from the accidental poisoning, in which he sweats blood from his pores and stains Margot's white dress as he pleads for affection. Arty, off-beat film style causing too much confusion in the viewer, but a powerful and memorable film experience. (2008)

**Relatos salvajes** 2014 Damian Szifrón (Argentina) 4.0 Great variety of Argentine actors appearing in six separate stories including Ricardo Darín as explosives engineer, who becomes fed up with parking enforcement in Buenos Aires, Leonardo Sbaraglia as out-of-control driver in road rage episode, and Erica Rivas as furious, savagely destructive bride in the last episode. Very entertaining, well-made, eye-catching series of six skits set in contemporary Argentina. The deal mostly with frustrated characters, often bent on revenge, who carry their anger to absurd lengths; taken together, the stories portray an exasperation with current conditions in Argentina that expresses downright hatred for the arrogance of the country's ruling elite. In the first episode, passengers in a jetliner find that they have been mysteriously gathered to die because of various offenses against the pilot (he is never seen); since the parents are missing, the plane then crashes into them as they sit reading the paper next to their posh swimming pool – the final shot is a growing shocking surprise. In the second episode, an obnoxious, sarcastic Mafioso becomes the murder victim of a (hesitant) waitress and a murderous female cook in a rural greasy spoon, who at first tries to poison the bastard, but ends up stabbing him repeatedly in the back with a kitchen knife. The third episode – perhaps the best – has Sbaraglia driving down a highway near Salta in a sleek Audi; he gets into violent conflict with an unidentified man driving an old pickup truck; they smash windshields with tire irons, the truck driver defecates on Sbaraglia's windshield, both

of their cars end up half-submerged in a river, where Sbaraglia is almost hung from his seatbelt, and when the truck driver tries to ignite the Audi, both men are consumed in a gasoline explosion and are burned to a crisp; the final black humorous shot has the camera track in on the charred skeletons of the two men seemingly embracing inside the foam-covered car. Darín's episode shows his escalating frustration as his car (a little blue Chevrolet) keeps getting towed in Buenos Aires; his visits to offices to protest and get his car back run up against a bureaucratic system designed to maximize the city's income; his frustration reaches the point that he sets a trap setting off explosives when the car is towed for the third time; the ambiguous ending has him feted in the city as a folk hero. The fifth episode – perhaps one of the weaker ones – presents a wealthy Argentine living in a palatial house, whose son has killed a pregnant woman in an auto accident; in an effort to save his son, the dad persuades the gardener to take the blame, but when the lawyer and the public prosecutor get wind of the deal, they demand their own pay-offs; the father goes along for a while, but when the sum of the proposed bribes reaches several million dollars, he backs out in disgust. The final one rivals the second in its immoderation. When bride Rivas discovers at her joyous wedding (lots of dancing, drinking, singing, and laughing) that her groom has just cheated with one of the wedding guests, she become enraged to an unhinged extreme, covering her wedding dress in blood when she falls through a plate glass window, reducing her husband to tears and the party to shambles; he becomes almost equally violent; the episode has a surprise ending with the two apparently reconciling with a passionate kiss in front of the few remaining guests (the ending would have been probably more effective if the camera had just surveyed the damage). The film is shocking in its critique of Argentine culture; it never fails to hold the viewer's morbid interest; the short films are also extremely well-made. A tribute to the bitterness endemic in Argentine society. (2015)

**Religulous** 2008 Larry Charles 3.0 Amusing and moderately informative documentary by Bill Maher on the foolishness and evils of organized religion. He begins with a long section focusing on the hypocrisy, idiocy, and gullibility of American Bible-thumping Christians, and then makes lesser reference to Catholics, Muslims, orthodox Jews in Jerusalem, and various independent groups such as the marijuana church in Amsterdam, Scientologists, and Mormons. When interviewing his subjects, Maher is usually blunt and sarcastic (the most thin-skinned of his interlocutors are evangelical Christians who often walk out of the room when they realize that Maher is not a sympathetic interviewer), but he remains almost always good-humored. While the interviews replay, he comments -- usually sardonically -- with subtitles added later or comments recorded while subsequently driving around in his car. Maher focuses less on the dangers posed by (extremist) religious groups than on their foolishness and absurdity in believing nonsensical fairy tales and myths such as the virgin birth, three persons in one God, who the prophet Mohammed met outside the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem at the time of his ascension to heaven, the "suicide Mission" of the supposed Son of God. His bravest and most amusing bits deal with American evangelicals – excerpts from TV programs where they speak in tongues (absurd nonsense babbling, according to Maher), evangelical preachers successfully begging for money from their flock, interviews with preachers who brag about their expensive clothes (gospel of prosperity) or shamelessly proclaim themselves to be the reincarnated messiah, rather reasonable-acting Israeli entrepreneurs who have developed elaborate gadgets to avoid infringing orthodox Jewish prohibitions against pushing buttons or using arm muscles to propel wheelchairs. His Muslim interlocutors are invariably moderates, who proclaim the peaceableness of the Quran and the Muslim religion, which Maher of course undercuts with pictures of Muslims rioting in the streets or proclaiming jihad against the infidels, etc. Perhaps the most moving moment is the prayers of the "Truckers for Christ", who put their arms around Maher and pray for the salvation of his soul after he has spent several minutes pointing out the absurdities of their beliefs. Maher ends the film with a peroration on the necessity of ending the influence of religion to enable the progress of mankind: "Religion must die for mankind to live." He never expatiates on what a world without religious faith would be like. (2012)

**Remember** 2016 Atom Egoyan (Canada) 3.5 Christopher Plummer as confused nursing home patient with periodic dementia commissioned by Landau to execute the Auschwitz Blockführer that allegedly murdered both their families; Martin Landau as the intellectual nursing home inhabitant that sends Plummer off on his assassin's mission; Dean Norris excellent as rabidly Jew-hating son of a

deceased German anti-Semite (he is not however the man Plummer is looking for) ; Bruno Ganz as old codger that turns out to have been a member of the Afrika Corps during the war; Jürgen Prochnow as the last man that Plummer hunts down – he turns out to have been a Blockführer, but not the one Plummer was looking for. Intriguing, thriller-like film about hunting down a guilty man, but with a twist – the hunter has to operate in confused fits and starts since he has dementia. Plummer travels a kind of road movie across Canada and the USA until the finale in a beautiful house on the shore of Lake Tahoe. The film produces a fair amount of suspense, as Plummer pursues his search from suspect to suspect, his quest often interrupted by age-related mishaps – forgetting what he is supposed to do (he has to consult Landau's written instructions regularly), imagining that his wife is at his side whereas she has died a short time before, falling down in the streets of Reno, etc. His performance is moving and convincing – fear and confusion in his eyes and movements, a trembling hand when he raises his Glock against one of the suspects, and yet determined to find his man and not afraid to kill in self-defense. The long sequence with the Jew-hating Norris is memorable: Norris is at first friendly with a man he assumes is also anti-semitic, but when he sees the tattooed serial number on Plummer's arm, he goes berserk and Plummer shoots him and his dog down (very bloodily) in self-defense. Entertaining suspense is created by the expectation that Plummer's gun, which he carries around in a Dopp Kit, will be discovered (it is often ignored or admired in gun-rich North America). The narrative crisis in the Tahoe house is tense and tricky: by pointing his gun at Prochnow's granddaughter, he gets him to admit that he was a Nazi killer (on the deck with a lovely view of Lake Tahoe!), but then Prochnow denies that he is the man that Plummer is looking for; that man is Plummer himself! He was a Blockführer himself! Plummer then shoots Prochnow and pulls the trigger with the gun placed against his own head. On the one hand, an exciting, tragic ending. And yet Plummer's psychological motivation for pursuing murder is murky and barely developed: how could he commit to vigilante justice with a pistol, when he had been one of the perpetrators himself? He had completely forgotten about his past? His dementia covers it? A bit artificial, but marvelous performance from Plummer and some blockbuster scenes. (2016)

**Repulsion** 1965 Roman Polanski 3.0 Catherine Deneuve as mentally ill young woman living in London who slides into violence against men; Yvonne Furneaux as Catherine's inattentive sister; Ian Hendry as Furneaux's rather callow boyfriend; Colin Fraser as Catherine's admirer who would like to get to know her better. Polanski's famous first western feature, filmed in Britain and in English (although with two French actresses). The film focuses entirely on Deneuve's experience; it is a first-person slide down the hill of insanity; we always see things subjectively through Deneuve's eyes; aside from an ambiguous shot of a photograph of her standing without expression behind her family, there is no back story explaining how she got there. Deneuve's plight is about aloneness – she is often walking and lying alone in her sister's apartment, and when she is with other people, e.g., in the beauty parlor where she works or in the kitchen with her sister, she barely speaks and never makes eye contact. Her problem is quickly revealed to be a sexual fear of men; she is offended by her sister's boyfriend staying over in their apartment; she suffers grievously when they have noisy sex in the next room; when she kills, both times it is a man: her would-be boyfriend, who is bashed on the back of the head (she then drags his body into a filled bathtub (why? In order to evoke "Les diaboliques"?); and her landlord, who when he enters the apartment to collect the rent, makes the mistake of coming on to her, thus evoking a bloody and slow death through the straight razor. She would appear to be a paranoid schizophrenic – on several occasions she has fantasies of being raped by intruders (even though she struggles in horror, one wonders how much of the fantasy is wish fulfillment rather than just fear). Polanski manifests a mastery of horror techniques: the focus on the straight razor in the bathroom, the rotting rabbit carcass that Deneuve does not throw away, her obsession with the cracks in the ceiling and the walls of the apartment, the frightening old faces and catty comments of the women that Deneuve works on at the beauty parlor, the hands reaching out from the walls to grab her (shades of Cocteau), the distorted cavernous spaces of the rooms at the end of the film. He also uses sound effects expertly to enhance the aloneness and the tension: the ticking of the clock, the sound of footsteps, dripping water faucets, or just complete silence. Still, this viewer's reactions was often interest rather than fright, admiring Polanski's craft rather than being sucked into the film and having one's wits scared out of you. Perhaps just because his techniques have been much imitated by others? (2010)



**The Return** 2003 Andrei Zvyagintsev 3.0 Enigmatic, pessimistic, existential-style drama apparently about a father's abandonment of his children. Konstantin Lavronenko as mysterious father who returns home after an extended absence; Nataliya Vdovina in brief initial appearance as his wife; Vladimir Garin as older son, Andrei, who tries to reconnect with his father; Ivan Dobronravov as younger son, Ivan, who is more stubborn and resentful than his brother. Set in a mysterious, ruined, and abandoned landscape (actually filmed right outside St. Petersburg), the film relates a father's return to his two sons after 12 years' absence; embarking on what he describes as a fishing trip, he takes them through empty streets for lunch, and then to a lake, where they happen upon a ruined dinghy, which they tar and then row through a threatening storm to an island; on the island, the three go fishing, camp out, climb a mysterious, highly rickety tower (apparently just to look around), and later the father sneaks off to a ruined cabin, where he unearths a small strongbox, which he then hides in the little boat (contents never clarified). The film studies the relationship among the three. Lavronenko is stern, distant, and authoritarian, although his worst violence with the boys is to slap Andrei several times after disobedience. The more pliant and conciliatory of the boys, Andrei seem inclined to give his dad a second chance. Ivan however is stubborn, defiant of his father's wishes, and quick to anger; the two boys are emotionally close – they share feelings when they are falling asleep in bed. Ivan's anger boils over when his dad beats Andrei; he climbs the steps to the top of the tower, and when his dad follows him, he slips and falls to his death; the boys manage to drag dad's body into the dinghy, but after they reach the mainland, the dinghy drifts back onto the lake, where it sinks carrying the father's body to the bottom. The boys are left bereft on the shore. The film style is eloquent and mysterious. The outdoors environment, which is filmed in expressive, wide-screen black and white, is bare, bleak, and abandoned; shots of the characters are invariably framed by the landscapes – bare, crumbling walls, picturesque pine forest next to the lake, a sandy beach with stormy, dark clouds in the background; the camera is constantly gliding to the side, seemingly searching for a more eloquent angle; shots are held for a long time, as if to emphasize the gravity of the subject. The feeling is tragic and intense: abandonment and abuse by a parent in our cruel world is a serious thing; after the drama of losing their father, the boys are no better off than in the beginning of the story. (February 2018)

**The Return of Rin Tin Tin** 1945 Max Nosseck 2.0 Rin Tin Tin III, a German shepherd; Donald Woods as the "kindly" Fr. Matthew who – always smiling benevolently – tries to help shy misfit Paul find his way in the USA and find security and a sense of belonging; 13-year-old Robert Blake as Paul the refugee kid who is a war orphan; Claudia Drake as the kind widow trying to find a home for Paul. The film was shot in one of the California missions near Santa Barbara; some pretty shots of California landscapes. The DVD color film quality is close to atrocious – the color tint changes from scene to scene, is always fuzzy and poorly lit, and night scenes are indecipherable; the last scene in which RTT fights with someone or some dog takes place in almost total darkness. Camera focuses a lot on the dog doing basically nothing; very good at jumping over fences; focuses a lot on the boy and the dog getting to know one another, and on their affection and loyalty for one another, and the big Blakean smile he brings to the face of the boy. RTT helps Bobby do chores – e.g., herding the chickens into the coop. Film very Hayes Code – the priest and the boy pray, and the boy learns that he has to leave behind his bad memories, suffering, and cynicism, and he has to *believe*; the priest repeats that nothing is impossible with faith; the dog teaches him how to trust and love. The crisis comes when his owner claims him, and sets out to retrain him, and refuses to return him. The dog attacks his cruel owner and runs away a couple of times, and Paul prays that all will work out. Facile ending in which Rin saves the life of the bad owner; and then he is transformed and gives the dog to the boy. (2011)

**Revanche** 2008 Götz Spielmann 3.0 Johannes Krisch as Alex, a quiet, rather passive, low key gopher in a brothel much in love with an Ukrainian prostitute; Irina Potpenko as Tamara, the prostitute, whose body and personality (and broken German) light up the first half of the film; Andreas Lust as Robert, the rather wimpy policeman psychologically tortured by having killed Irina when escaping from a robbery attempt; Ursula Strauss as Susanne, the large breasted wife of Robert – she has an affair with Alex, when the latter hides out on his grandfather's farm after the killing; Hannes

Thanheiser as the soft-spoken, slow-moving grandfather of Alex. Slow moving but dramatically effective film about how a normal man deals with revenge. Alex is strongly attached to Irina; he decides to rob a bank so that she can escape from the brothel (she is an illegal immigrant); in the getaway she is shot and killed by policeman Robert; Alex hides out in his grandfather's farm, which happens to be next to Robert's home in the country; although declaring his need for revenge, he hesitates, and ends up having a rather brutal affair with Robert's wife. The film ends when Susanne discovers that she is at long last pregnant (by whom?), and she has a final conversation with Alex in which he states his intention to stay on the farm until his grandfather's medical condition is resolved and promises never to say anything to Robert about their affair; long shot of the empty farmyard ends the film. It is apparent that Susanne might have approached Alex for sex so she could conceive a baby (and thus save her marriage). The film is divided essentially into two parts: the first part in the brothel and ending with the robbery is interesting and moves at a strong pace; the second part on the farm drags – long shots are held on faces while we puzzle out what the characters are thinking, Alex seems always to be chopping wood to get ready for the winter, Robert is running through the woods with his track suit on looking unhappy and powerless. The film seems to be about the rejection of revenge by the quiet, although seething, Alex, although it ends ambiguously. It is unclear whether Alex promised Susanne that he will leave Robert alone and let them enjoy the advent of their baby. He remains a passive character who apparently doesn't mind that he was used by Susanne.... (2012)

**The Revenant** 2015 Alejandro Iñárritu 3.5 Survival and revenge drama emphasizing spectacular cinematography and winter grittiness set in the 1820s West. Leonardo DiCaprio (AA) with none of his celebrity appearance remaining as relentless trapper Glass, with a Native American spirituality and great affection for his son and deceased wife; Tom Hardy as one of his companions – ruthless, violent, and murderous despite his frequent hypocritical reference to religion; Domhnall Gleeson perfectly American as the ethical, commanding leader of the trapper group based in Fort Kiowa; Forrest Goodluck as DiCaprio's half-breed son, Hawk; Will Poulter as Bridger afflicted by his conscience. Adventure movie with aspects of romantic and spiritual drama. Action sequences dominate: the initial attack by Arikara Indians, who kill about three-quarters of the trapper party; the unforgettable bear attack against Glass; Hardy's murder of Hawk and abandonment of Glass in a shallow grave; and the final revenge struggle between Glass and Hardy that results in the (apparent) death of both. The bear attack is so brutal and realistic that the viewer wonders how it was done: the sequence is shot from up close to the victim; the bear returns a second time, ripping DiCaprio's flesh through his clothes, jerking his body back and forth with his jaws, and leaving horrible wounds on his shoulder, back, and throat; the two then tumble into a ravine, the bear ending on top of Glass. The bulk of the film is taken up by Glass' struggle for survival: against the spectacularly beautiful yet hostile environment (entirely desolate, snow and ice everywhere, beautiful mountains, bounteously flowing rivers, the camera alternately holding steady to observe the terrain and panning through the trees often pointing upwards) he struggles to treat his wounds (stuff straw to plug a hole in his throat), set his leg, find food, find shelter (cutting open the belly of a dead horse to warm himself until a storm passes over), grunting, groaning, wheezing constantly as a sign of his resolute determination to make it back. Although the viewer assumes that he is revenge-bent against Hardy, it is not stated explicitly until Glass makes it back to Fort Kiowa. Both Americans and Indians (Arikara and Pawnee) are dressed in raggedy winter clothing often with fur exteriors and seem entirely miserable in their struggle against the harsh environment. White people have a shifting, complex relationship with Indians: the Arikara take pelts to French agents to buy horses and rifles; Glass was at one time married to a Pawnee woman and has a son with her; the Pawnee are persecuted by their hereditary enemies, the Sioux; after killing Hardy at the end, the Arikara party bypasses Glass leaving him to his natural fate. The director's attempts to confer thematic significance on the narrative are not always convincing. Flashbacks and magic-realism style visions establish Glass' love for his wife and son, and the ending of the film, where the visuals go to black and the viewer is left only with Glass' wheezing, imply that he will soon die and be reunited with his wife in the afterlife. The central survival sequences sometimes last too long; but film is evocative and compelling survival adventure. (2016)

**Revolutionary Road** 2008 Sam Mendes 3.0 Kate Winslet in searching performance as young woman who wants to be an actress (be something "superior") but who gets stuck in 1950s suburbia; Leonardo DiCaprio looking prosperously plump as Winslet's quick-tempered husband -- he is more susceptible to the call of the suburbs and corporate success at Knox Corp, where his father had worked before him; Michael Shannon as mentally unbalanced math professor, who seems to stand for the full madness of suburbia, something toward which Winslet is progressing; Kathy Bates made up and dressed like 50s housewife as real estate friend of Winslet; David Harbour as thick-set next door neighbor who has brief fling of desperation with Winslet. Melodrama that examines the fate of people who don't fit into the America of 50s suburbs and corporate work. Nice images of behatted DiCaprio taking the commuter train to New York with hundreds of other like-dressed and like-acting men (not a female face in the crowd). Film follows the progressive and seemingly inevitable deterioration of Winslet's and DiCaprio's relationship. DiCaprio says he is dying in the environment, but when he is offered a promotion he is pleased and decides his job is not so bad after all. Winslet seems to be in a hopeless cul de sac from the beginning: she says she wants to be an actress, but she doesn't seem to be much good at it and she gives it up; she hatches a plan for the whole family to move to Paris, where she can get a good-paying job at NATO and Leonardo can pursue his destiny, but that seems condemned from the start; afterward she can't find a way out; she gets pregnant (she already has two children, whom she appears to ignore), and spends the rest of the film plotting a self-induced abortion, which she believes will be ok so long as it is done before 12 weeks. Both parties have brief, meaningless flings. The fights between the two are extreme, vicious, and head-splitting: Winslet evinces desperation, while DiCaprio shows a violent temper. After the last fight Winslet walks into the woods, and decides to go ahead with the abortion; the next morning she is eerily quiet, supportive, and affectionate with Leonardo -- the way 50s housewives are supposed to be; she then attempts the abortion, and bleeds to death in the hospital. DiCaprio is heartbroken, does not remarry, and moves to New York City (where they all should have lived in the first place) to be with his children. Film is unremittingly negative about the destructive pressure of 50s business and society. The couple never seems to have a chance; their one solution (Paris) was a pipe dream; DiCaprio is a somewhat thick-headed fellow who is willing to adapt; Winslet seems almost mentally ill in her inflexibility -- she almost always seems hopeless and desperate. Were the 50s really that oppressive and stultifying? Were all suburbanites unhappy? What about the big fertile garden that Connecticut suburbanites live in? Film does have genuine pathos at the end -- one life ruined, one person forever scarred. (2009)

**Reykjavik-Rotterdam** 2008 Oskar Jonasson 2.5 Baltasar Kormakur as Kristofer, mild-mannered Icelandic security guard who decides to make one last smuggling run to raise money for his family; Lilja Nott Porarendottir as Kristofer's long-suffering, over-worked wife; Inqvar Eggert Sigurdsson ('Jar City') as Steingrimur, ex-boyfriend of Lilja and friend of Kristofer -- he wants to get back to together with Lilja. Intricately plotted thriller about criminal smuggling and the drug trade in Reykjavik that has too many narrative ellipses and clichés to engage the viewer fully. The first part of the film establishes Kristofer with his wife and two boys; they are perennially short of money since Kristofer has a criminal record and can't get a well-paying job; he decides to make "one more" smuggling run to Rotterdam to make a bundle so he can make a down payment on a home. The second part focuses on Kristofer plotting the deal with his buddies on board the ship, and intercuts it with a picture of Lilja's difficulties at home and Steingrimur's campaign to get intimate with her again now that he has arranged for Kristofer to be away (and hopefully caught by the customs police); some of the best sequences are the comic violence in Rotterdam where Kristofer turns up with his cash replaced by newspaper and he is dragooned into a street heist of a large American modernist painting (obviously one of Pollock's). In the very confusing finale, Lilja bumps her head and is taken for dead (!), she is almost buried in a cement pour in a construction site, but is rescued at the last minute, and the family moves into a new house where in the last scene they are painting the walls (using the Pollack canvas as a drop cloth!). One can't help but lose track of the intricate plot: Lilja's brother steals the money and goes into business himself dealing drugs; the drugs are found in the end in a vacuum cleaner in the ship captain's house, whereby one asks whether the captain, who was ranting through much of the film against Kristofer, was really behind the diversion of the money to drugs (?). We know at the end that Kristofer will henceforth be

prosperous, since somehow the illegal alcohol was sunken in the sea by the conspirators and it floats to the top at a designated spot, much to the joy of two crew members waiting for it on a barge. The film is well-acted by the three principals, it is tense and suspenseful at times, and it builds a new atmosphere of place and profession (the seaport and the ship). The confusing plot complications, however, are a constant distraction. Perhaps the film would have benefited from a better editor? (2011)

**Ridicule** 1996 Patrice Leconte 3.5 Fanny Ardant as flirtatious widow countess in the court of Louis XVI; Charles Berling as the sensible and sensitive noble engineer from new Bordeaux; Judith Godreche as the delicious young woman with lovely, well displayed breasts; Jean Rochefort as deadpan delight as her father and a physician also at the court; Bernard Giraudeau terrific as the slick courtier abbé. Marvelous costume drama set in Versailles in 1783, only six years before the outbreak of the French Revolution and the collapse of that way of life; as displayed on the screen in the prologue, “a time when vices were without consequences but ridicule could kill”. Berling comes to Versailles to get support from the king to drain the swamps in his area, and although a virtuous man, he gets caught up in court intrigue in order to get an audience with the king; he discovers that he has a gift for repartee. The virtuous sensible provinces – unaffected beauty and dress, interest in things that make a difference (science and engineering), personal virtue, an attachment to Rousseau (and not Voltaire who is presented as a man of the corrupt court), a willingness to teach deaf mutes to communicate by sign language – are contrasted with the intrigue of the court and its fetishing of ‘bel esprit’, the ‘bon mot’, and ridicule of the weak and sluggish of tongue. Rochefort is a transitional character; he is a sensible man who does something useful (a doctor), but he is also appreciated at the court and he is interested enough in wit that he keeps a notebook of the best he has heard; he is the one who introduces Berling to the right people. Film is essentially a costume romantic comedy: tension builds between the lovers (Berling and Godreche) because of Berling’s dalliance with Ardant, but all ends well when Godreche understands the practical reasons for his weakness, and they live happily ever after caring for their peasants. Fabulous decors obviously filmed on location in 18<sup>th</sup> century chateaux, and colorful and accurate period costumes, some of them like the grey wigs worn at the costume ball at the end over-the-top to show the corrupt foppishness of the Court of Versailles. Delicious epilogue during the Terror when Rochefort is in exile in England; a gust of wind blows his beloved stylish hat over the cliff, and his English friend quip “Better to lose your hat than your wit!” Rochefort appreciates his saying as “humor”, apparently contrasted with French wit in that it eschews ridicule. Although lovers are a bit callow, delightful film – historically accurate, amusing, literate script (rather easy to understand), fetching characters, excellent historical appointments, beautiful women. (2009)

**Rififi** 1955 Jules Dassin 4.0 Jean Servais as Tony le Stéphanois who is the head of the gang that robs the jewelry store, Carl Möhner as Joe le suédois, close friend of Tony and a fond husband and father, Robert Manuel as Mario the happy and outgoing Italian confederate, Jules Dassin as César le milanais, a safecracker who barely speaks French and has a weakness for women, Marcel Lupovici as Pierre Grutter, the vicious head of the hoods that run a Montmartre nightclub. Stunning classic French crime caper movie – its 30 minute silent safecracking sequence set the standard for later movies. One can see the influence of ‘Asphalt Jungle’, especially in Cesar’s weakness for women that leads to disaster in the last part of the film. Photography is truly stunning – expressive close-ups of the men sitting around the poker table (especially the ravaged face of Servais), the wet, shining streets of Paris early in the morning, the views through windows (when the three men in the café are discussing the smash and grab of the jewelry store in the beginning) and from the inside of phone booths, the artfully composed shots of different quarters of Paris, as, for example, Tony drives his convertible back to Jo’s home where he can reunite the child with his mother. One has clear impression of what Paris looked like in the mid-1950s and it never looked more beautiful. The first part of the film is devoted to Tony getting together his team to rob the jewelry store; the second part to the famous heist scene (obviously imitated by Dassin himself in ‘Topkapi’), and the third part to the bloody and tragic complications after the caper – Mario and his girlfriend are murdered, Jo’s son is kidnapped, and Tony rescues the boy and wreaks vengeance on the Grutter gang. Tony is the moral center of the film – he is sick (constantly coughing, sometimes producing suspense as during the alarm cracking scene where you have to be quiet), alone and alienated

(he has no idea what he wants to do with his share of the loot), and a bit cruel in his treatment of his ex-girlfriend Mado, whom he beats up in a sadistic scene after making her strip; but he always has a soft spot for the little boy (his godson) and he redeems himself, even in the midst of murder, by rescuing him at the risk of his own life. The four men have a strong tie among them – band of brothers – remaining loyal even after they bend from weakness; there is honor among thieves (contrast with ‘Cercle rouge’); film ends tragically since all of the men are dead at the end; in a memorable scene César is shot by Tony himself when he learns that he was the one who had (unwittingly) betrayed the rest (“Tu connais la règle”). A good metro follow scene. The final car ride in which the little boy counterpoints the tragedy with squeals of delight as he waves his cowboy gun is a pessimistic touch – when he grows up, will he be a hood like his dad and die a miserable death? Excellent performances, excitement, suspense, and especially wonderful mise-en-scène make for an almost perfect film. (2006)

**Ringu** Japan 1998 Hideo Nakata 3.5 Very effective low-key horror movie from Japan. Merging of Japanese country folklore (island of Oshima) and urban legend: a ghost, looking for revenge, murders people through an appearance on television, in a videotape. Secret kept effectively with low-key journalistic investigation until very end when pix of Sakato crawling out of the TV monitor is truly horrifying and shocking (Sakato dolls subsequently sold very well in Japan!) – we had no idea that the heroine’s ex-husband would be the one murdered! People die with no blood being shed. A special vision of horror associated with modern technology – phone ringing after viewing videotape, the flickery progressive images on the two videotapes. Sense of danger and impending disaster depicted very well through quiet long shots of internal corridors and small Japanese middle class rooms with very little on sound track until discordant music suddenly appears in times of crisis. Some of the plot details unsatisfying – too much ESP, why is Sakato so angry, and strained plot twist at end (have to show a *copy* of the tape to someone else in order to save your life?). (2005)

**Rio Bravo** 1959 Howard Hawks 3.5 John Wayne as Sheriff Chance, Dean Martin as Dude the alcoholic deputy, Ricky Nelson non-acting as Colorado to draw in the teenagers, Walter Brennan as priceless old codger deputy who keeps the jail, Angie Dickinson as the woman gambler love interest, Ward Bond as friend of Chance killed early in film, Claude Akins as the killer put in jail, Pedro Gonzalez-Gonzalez. Late classic western dominated by the decent, solid, looming, reassuring presence of John Wayne as the sheriff trying to hold an outlaw in his jail until the U.S. Marshall arrives to take him to try him for murder. Film has very slow pace as we spin out the thin plot and follow all the side plots in leisurely way. Walter Brennan is very picturesque as cantankerous old codger who argues with Wayne about everything and talks back, much to the latter’s amusement. Dean Martin delivers the most dramatic performance: starts off as a stumbling drunk (things went bad because of a woman; his degenerate condition shown by amused bystanders throwing a coin into a spittoon and having him retrieve it), but he teams up with Chance, cleans himself up, goes on the wagon (beer is ok for a recovering alcoholic), and is big help to the sheriff. Ricky Nelson also joins the sheriff’s team, but his acting is null, and he doesn’t have a lot of lines (thank heavens). Angie Dickinson is the love interest, a woman gambler with a checkered past (gambler with a heart of gold?), who however makes a play for Wayne that is eventually successful; a bit amusing to watch Wayne’s efforts as a lover – the woman definitely takes the initiative. Cast includes a picturesque comic Mexican sidekick (the hotel owner played by Pedro Gonzalez-Gonzalez) and his wife; the undertaker is Chinese. Rio Bravo is a border town in Texas where things are pretty wild – everybody walking through town with gun belts and Winchester rifles, and barroom brawls erupt into shootings; perhaps a dozen men killed in the course of the movie. Movie is a bit “soft:” the outlaws always take the lawmen alive and tie them up; and then of course they escape. Film has a lot of humor – Dude trying to make good, Stumpy (Brennan) fussing and complaining to Chance, the Mexicans, and John Wayne’s easy-going, smiling nature. Hawks was disturbed by ‘High Noon’s’ picture of the sheriff as weak and begging for help from the townsfolk; here Wayne takes things in his own hands and does his duty. Focus, as usual in Hawks’ movies, is on the camaraderie of the men, how they remain loyal to one another and help each other out; all the men are dependable working together as a team. Excellent final shootout at the edge of town: Stumpy makes a surprise appearance to keep Wayne and Nelson from being outflanked; they explode dynamite to drive the hired guns out of their building. Shot somewhere in the desert. Rather sparse symphonic score by Dimitri Tiomkin, with Dean Martin crooning a couple of times.

Kind of “safe” western, an entertainment vehicle with humor, a little romance, where none of the good guys gets hurt. (2007)

**Riptide** 1934 Edmond Gouling (MGM: Thalberg) 2.5 Norma Shearer slim, elegant, sexy, independent, fun-loving, in form-fitting satin gowns; Herbert Marshall his usual charming sophisticated self as Norma’s suspicious, hyper sensitive, sarcastic, unforgiving, and impulsive husband; Robert Montgomery a superficial drunkard guy that Norma has a weakness for; Mrs. Patrick Campbell quite annoying as stuffy, nosy, know-it-all English cousin of Marshall. Norma Shearer vehicle about a British-American upper class couple that fall into marital doldrums when Norma flirts too much with Montgomery; when in a pique of anger Marshall and Shearer separate, she really does have the fling with Montgomery, which leads to a heartfelt display of remorse by Shearer and near divorce, from which however they are saved at the last minute by their obvious enduring affection for one another; the film ends with Shearer reuniting joyfully with her husband and the giving a celebratory bear hug to her little daughter! Domestic happiness restored. Film is long-winded and continued interest depends on one’s attachment to Shearer’s star persona (here returned to making films after a hiatus taking care of her ill husband). The setting is Anglo-American upper society, where everyone is constantly going out to lunch and cocktail parties and on vacation in St. Moritz, and where it isn’t terribly unusual for a married woman to be courted (platonically) by a man other than her husband. Shearer is a willful, independent woman feeling the stresses of her husband’s inattentiveness; although fun-loving, she is serious and conscience-stricken after she has the affair with Montgomery; she sometimes gets angry and makes snap decisions; at the end of the film she decides to lie about her affair in order to protect her husband, but her innate honesty makes it impossible to continue. Her famous statement: “No man is going to let me do something or not let me do something ever again.” The film probably made it under the early Code shield since, although Norma strays, she is enormously remorseful about it and her husband graciously takes her back. The film has shades of screwball comedy, especially in the first amusing sequence where Marshall and Shearer meet one another while dressed up outrageously as insects for a party in New York. (2014)

**Road House** 1948 Jean Negulesco 3.0 Ida Lupino looking a bit fragile (sometimes resembles Judy Garland) and singing a lot of songs as performer at the Road House; Cornel Wilde low key and very buff as the manager of the Road House who at first does not like Lupino; Richard Widmark as usual cackling and snorting as Lupino’s mentally unbalanced suitor; Celeste Holm in her usual role as the pretty, sweet Road House employee who loves Wilde but has to watch him pursue Lupino. 40s melodrama about jealousy and its effects: Lupino, Wilde and Widmark form a love triangle that takes off in the last third of the film, leading to the eventual shooting death of Widmark by Lupino. Last part of the film is often hard to follow psychologically: when Widmark finds out that Lupino and Wilde are in love, he frames Wilde for theft, and then pleads with the judge to release him into his custody so he can torture him (most impractical since it prevents him from marrying Lupino!); Widmark then departs to the Minnesota (?) woods with the other three principals in tow, where he torments them and finally gets his comeuppance. Widmark’s mad hatter act is often distracting and the pace of the film is sometimes slow, especially in the beginning. Perhaps the best part of the film is the careful art decoration: the whole film is done in the studio; all is carefully arranged to suggest a small hunting and fishing town in northern Minnesota (perhaps) only a few miles from the Canadian border; the Road House contains a bowling alley, plenty of antlered heads on the wall, and a piano bar; all interiors and exteriors are pleasing in their artful artificiality. While the film shares some characteristics of late 40s *film noir* (e.g., a sense of doom – you just know that the two men are going to have a falling out over the girl and somebody is going to die), its high-key cinematography, lack of a true *femme fatale*, and the absence of a loser male protagonist point rather to a gritty melodrama. Entertaining marginal ‘A’ film of the era. (2007)

**The Road to Bali** 1952 Bob Hope, Bing Crosby, Dorothy Lamour 2.0 The last in the series of eight road movies. Has the usual formula, which was pretty tired by 1952 – buddies wise-cracking their way through the movie (much of it improvised, the better jokes from Hope); some song, from all three principals, and one or two group dance sessions; a kind of adventure plot with near misses from giant squid, gorilla and tiger; Hope and Crosby in competition for the hand of Lamour (a friendly

competition), ending in the victory of Crosby going off with actually two women, Lamour and Jane Russell. Songs are rather unremarkable although listenable. A lot of references to contemporary celebrities – Humphrey Bogart pulling the African Queen, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, Jane Russell popping into the last scene, other inside jokes accessible only by film buffs and students of contemporary history, etc. The two leads sometimes stop and apostrophize the audience. Interesting only because of two lead male stars. (2005)

**The Road to Morocco** 1942 David Butler (Paramount) 3.0 Hope and Crosby wise-cracking their way through an absurdly imagined Morocco, both stars competing for the hand of Dorothy Lamour. Bing Crosby sports baritone voice, smooth manners in his verbal competition with Hope; Hope a nervous scaredy cat looking for girls and afraid that he is about to be arrested; Dorothy Lamour as the dark-haired local princess Shalmar who falls alternately for the stars; Anthony Quinn plays rough chieftain also seeking the hand of Lamour; Dona Drake as cute servant girl who eventually pairs with Hope when Crosby lands Lamour. Screenplay has Hope and Crosby shipwrecked landing on the coast of Morocco. The silly narrative affords opportunity for good-natured, although forgettable repartee between the two leads, slapstick escapes from danger, and Crosby crooning (and whistling), particularly “Moonlight Becomes You”, which becomes a hit reprised by several singers such as Rosemary Clooney and Frank Sinatra; no choral numbers nor displays of dancing girls. The cleverest dialogue bits satirize clichés in Hollywood movies; the stars sometimes break the fourth wall to talk about the movie. The Morocco imagined in the film is a silly compendium of Hollywood clichés – everyone dressed in bloomers, turbans, tight-fitting brassieres without the slightest effort at realism; women are pursued and forced to wed brutal men they have no feeling for; horsemen in flowing robes and dark headbands galloping through the city and across the desert; justice is cruel and tyrannical – witness the old courtroom that has displays of rows of nodding heads severed by previous executioners (have to admit the sight is amusing). The funniest sequence is the reprise of the “Moonlight” song, as the three principals alternate lip-syncing the lyrics to one another’s voices – funniest probably Lamour in Crosby’s voice, and one of the men in Lamour’s voice; memorable slapstick also included the talking camels wisecracking like Hope and alternately kissing the two guys. Basically vaudeville and the Crosby-Hope radio shows brought to the screen. (October 2017)

**The Road to Perdition** 2002 Sam Mendes 3.0 The kindly everyman Tom Hanks miscast as the vicious killer/hit man Michael Sullivan, who is also a doting father; Tyler Hoechlin very beautiful 12-year-old as his adoring son; Paul Newman intense and effective as brutal Midwest crime boss, who loves Michael and raised him as a son; Daniel Craig as loose-cannon son of Newman – his off-the-wall murders set the narrative in motion; Jude Law as quirky crime photographer (he photographs victims of violent crime and finishes them off if they are still alive), who is also a relentless hit man in dogged pursuit of Hanks. Beautifully photographed, extremely violent, often compelling, sometimes slow-moving crime drama set in the Chicago area in the early 1930s. The story is set in motion when little Michael witnesses the execution of one of Newman's sons (Ciarán Hinds) when the boy’s father is present. The narrative is part revenge drama – Hanks (uncharacteristically!) wreaks complete revenge on anyone remotely connected to the killing of his wife and younger son; he shoots down Newman and Craig, he machine guns all of Newman’s bodyguards (in silent slow motion), he does all he can to undermine the financial solvency of the Newman organization by robbing the banks where their funds are deposited; in the final scene in the picturesque (water lapping on the beach and behind it the sand dunes) Lake Michigan resort town of Perdition, he is shot in the back by Law, but before dying he then manages to kill him when he is threatening little Michael. Hanks' presence in the film is rather distracting, since he usually plays easy-going, kind paternal types of characters. An enormous amount of violence, blood and killing in a film that also focuses on Hanks' determination not to having his son turn out like himself; he tries hard to protect him from his own violent, criminal environment, and in the end of the film son Michael is taken in by a kindly elderly couple living in an unpainted ramshackle house on the prairie – father’s dream realized. It does however seem a strange way to teach the little guy this lesson by including him in the blood and mayhem of the father's extensive crime and killing spree. As always, Mendes' mise-en-scene and lighting is very calculated and formal: night time, cold, rain falling and draining off the men's fedoras

hats, glossy, reflective textures: all creating a sort of epic feel that doesn't always fit the story.  
Entertaining, well-made film. (2014)

**The Roaring Twenties** 1939 Raoul Walsh (Warners) 3.0 Jimmy Cagney in his more or less usual role, Humphrey Bogart in second fiddle role as unredeemable sleaze who dies like a coward, Priscilla Lane seems completely inadequate as the girlfriend that fascinates Cagney – she is ok as the teenager in the beginning, but shallow as a mature woman singing in a nightclub, the handsome Jeffrey Lynn as Cagney's lawyer friend and the man that gets Lane in the end, Gladys George as tough-talking nightclub performer who loves Cagney but in the end only gets to hold his corpse in her arms. Late gangster film that doesn't have the snarling realism of the earlier ones (before the PCA). Plays like a sort of dramatized newsreel with March of Time stentorian voice narrating main events of American history from World War through the 20s, Prohibition, the stock market crash, Roosevelt's reelection and the return of virtue in the 1930s. Film's tone is moralistic – Cagney became a bad man because he had no opportunity when he returned home from the war, Prohibition was a bad law (Republican) that provided irresistible temptation, Cagney and other gangsters have no place to go in the American society that has gone straight and found virtue in the late 1930s. Cagney is the best part of the film – not a bad guy but filled with tension his fists always half-cocked, a tiger ready to leap, sometimes trembling from the effort of self-control; he is insecure since he does not have an education and he wants to improve himself by making a lot of money; he has a good heart since he loves Lane and naively and blindly stands by her when she won't commit herself to him, and he holds hands with George when he is upset – she seems to serve as his mother; in the end he is quite convincing as good-hearted, apparently harmless drunk who has no place to go without her and without the power and money he enjoyed during Prohibition. Lane sings a lot of songs like 'Melancholy Baby', 'Wild About Harry', and 'It Had to be You' in the nightclub – her voice is acceptable but without much feeling. Film lacks perhaps the immediacy of the pre-1934 Warners gangster movies – fights seem staged, the gangsters aren't as vicious (either in the early 30s or beginning in the 70s), and there a frequent references to the new America that is leaving gangster viciousness behind. Ending is quite moving and tragic: after killing practically all of Bogart's gang, Cagney is shot in the snowy streets, he tries to climb the stairs of a church, but then falls to the bottom his arms outstretched in a crucifixion posture; George takes him in her arms, and when the policeman asks her questions, she replies she doesn't know what her relationship with him is, and the business he was in – well, he was a big shot. Shows impact of the Production Code on the gangster film. jThe film is perhaps too glossy for a crime picture. (2007)

**Roberta** 1935 William Seiter (RKO) 3.0 First film in which Astaire and Rogers are formally teamed although playing second-fiddle to Irene Dunne. Fred Astaire usual suave, wise-cracking, ironic, loose-limbed self as band leader looking for employment in Paris; Ginger Rogers as American singer disguising self as Polish countess with faked accent; Irene Dunne the real female lead perfectly and artificially done up as émigré Russian designer in Paris – she does not have a very good voice and does not look good in close-ups while singing; Randolph Scott very handsome but naïve American hayseed football player who falls inexplicably for Dunne; Claire Dodd as manipulative old girlfriend of Scott. One of the lesser Astaire-Rogers vehicles despite its huge budget; primarily because they have to share the spotlight with Dunne's singing and the lame romantic plot between Dunne and Scott, neither of which is a warm romantic partner; when they finally overcome the inevitable misunderstandings and get together at the end, any tear in the viewer's eye will be over the first-rate dancing and choreography of Astaire and Rogers. The film is a woman's vehicle, what with the emphasis on décor, costumes, over-the-top, perfectly groomed hair styles (never a single strand astray), and the glamour of the fashion show parades, which feature some beautiful women in exotic mid-1930s styles. Score has two or three good numbers, although it does not measure up to standards of the great Astaire-Rogers hits: "I'll be Hard to Handle" \*\*\* – Rogers starts with peppy song about herself; then Astaire and Rogers do a sprightly, mostly tap duet to hot big band sound – dance depicts a competitive conversation-relationship. "I won't dance" \*\*\* – Begins with Astaire singing to Rogers; then energetic non-thematic tap with a lot of turns and spins. "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" \*\* – Very soapy rendition by Dunne, who stands up in Russian émigré dinner and just sings the romantic song with emphasis on the high notes and exposing her teeth. "Lovely



to Look At” \*\*\*1/2 – AA nominated song well sung by Astaire in finale and followed by short romantic dance to “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes”. The viewer might be advised to skip all the talking and pseudo-romancing and just watch the musical numbers. The outstanding “Top Hat”, which was produced later in the year, ensured that 1935 was not a disappointing one for Astaire and Rogers. (2008)

**Robot and Frank** 2012 Jake Schreier 3.0 Frank Langella as Frank, lonely, elderly, ornery, negative ex-cat burglar who has been to prison (16 years) and whose memory is failing; Susan Sarandon as Jennifer, a librarian having to deal with new, high tech library; Liv Tyler as Langella’s anti-robot daughter, Madison – a do-gooder who cares about the people in Turkmenistan, but doesn’t think a robot should be controlling her dad’s life; James Marsden as his son Hunter, something of a busybody but genuinely concerned about his father’s well-being; Jeremy Strong as condescending yuppie scum do-gooder; Peter Sarsgaard as the voice of Frank’s robotic butler and medical support, Robot. Excellent, small-scale sentimental film about old age and friendship. Because Langella is losing his memory, his son brings him a (cute) robot to help keep his house straight and to supervise his medical routine. Although the robot is programmed only for practical functions, the two unexpectedly develop a friendship (how that can happen to a robot is never clearly explained). By acquiring a daily routine and resuming activities that he loves – cat-burglaring – Frank’s mental functioning improves. The climax combines thriller and personal melodrama: in order to escape being nabbed for a burglary he commits with the help of Robot, Frank must erase the memory of his robotic friend before the police arrive. He does it watching his friend “die”; he is then placed in a retirement home where he visits lovingly with his family, but he suffers from no longer being with his friend: the last scene has Langella staring disconsolately at two robots of the identical brand as his friend, but they don’t recognize him (they have been programmed differently) and walk indifferently by him. Film includes amusing and satisfying satire of yuppie do-gooder snobs (Strong), who treat Frank with condescension in their determination to turn the local library into an electronic hub; Frank takes his revenge on them by burglarizing their house with the aid of methodical Robot (really good at cracking combination locks on safes) and stealing what appear to be priceless diamonds (what happens to them is never clarified). Langella’s turning off his robot is a tender sentimental moment, as is his reunion with his family, and his moment of loss when he sees the other robots. The ending however reads a little false: What happened to the diamonds? After doing the necessary to erase Robot’s memory, why does he end up in a nursing home instead of living alone and pursuing his burglary career? Revelation that the librarian is actually Langella’s wife that he has forgotten about is never followed up. A lot of Mozart on the soundtrack. The film is carried – even saved – by the marvelously sensitive performance of Langella. (2013)

**Roman de gare** 2007 Claude Lelouch 3.0 Fanny Ardant charming and a bit ambiguous as best selling French novelist who depends upon her amanuensis to research and write her novels; Dominique Pinon in convincing performance as Ardant’s pug-faced, unshaven assistant who for reasons mysterious to the audience does most of the work without credit; Audrey Dana as young woman, who may be a hairdresser or perhaps a prostitute, who has a monstrous fight with her boyfriend on the autoroute and is picked up by Pinon. Very entertaining, twisty, “safe” thriller that perhaps tries a little too hard to keep the viewer off-balance; ‘roman de gare’ is the French expression for superficially entertaining thriller books sold in train stations and airports. Film focuses on Pinon: from the beginning we are not sure whether he is a serial killer who has escaped from prison (he performs magic tricks and lurks in the auto route service stop just like the killer); or perhaps the disappeared husband of a woman to whom we are introduced toward the beginning of the film (he turns out to be her brother); or perhaps Ardant’s amanuensis looking for a good story for her next book (but he speaks plot observations about murder into his Dictaphone that make us think that perhaps he is really the murderer). One third of the way through the film, the desperate Dana persuades him to pose as her fiancé in a visit to her parents, where they play an amusing charade of being lovers (she fakes loud orgasms during the night); but the film begins to break down when the real boyfriend shows up (after stealing her car!) and she chases him off with a shotgun firing it into the air twice. Excessive improbability stalks the rest of the film, as Pinon suddenly announces to Ardant that he is going to take the credit and the money for this novel; then he gets wind somehow of her intention to murder him, and he disappears off her boat into the Mediterranean

leaving everyone thinking he fell off in a drunken state and drowned. He later reappears to discredit Ardant in front of a televised audience where the interviewer is praising her most recent novel (which Pinon actually wrote) and in front of a police investigator (who is the lover of Pinon's sister!). The whole film is framed by celebrity-style television interviews which eventually lead to the unmasking of Ardant's subterfuge. The film is brightly shot rolling down the autoroute in the French countryside and on the sun-drenched Mediterranean; the actors are pleasant, competent and even charming; and it is fun to try to keep up with the twists and turns thrown out by the director. Sometimes the improbabilities and the audience manipulation just leave you scratching your head. (2009)

**Romeo and Juliet** 1968 Franco Zeffirelli 4.0 Olivia Hussey spectacularly beautiful star of the show that commands our gaze in her every scene; Leonard Whiting convincing, earnest, impulsively romantic as Romeo; Michael York as Tybalt, who also courts Juliet and is killed in a street duel by Romeo; Milo O'Shea as the over-indulgent and muddled Friar Laurence; Pat Heywood as the Juliet's nurse, very sympathetic and maternal, but who turns to the side of respectability in the end crisis. Surely the best film version of 'Romeo and Juliet'. The script is shortened to just over two hours; set in a picturesque Italian town, all scenes apparently being shot on location; very colorful period costumes that contrast dramatically with the stony walls of 'Verona'; the (sometimes puzzling) lines of Shakespeare pronounced in convincing theatrical fashion; a lot of swordplay and action between Montagues and Capulets in the streets of Verona; fetching supporting characters, such as Friar Laurence (so well meaning but so ineffective) and the Nurse, earthy and good humored. The success of the film depends on the wonderful performances of the principals, especially Hussey, who is spectacularly and memorably beautiful and delivers her lines with youthful passion. The utter innocence, cluelessness, and impetuosity of their immature passion carries the film through its many improbable events (the prince is way too easy-going; Friar Laurence's agreement to marry the young lovers; Friar Laurence's plan with the sleeping potion doesn't make a lot of sense; the importance of coincidence, etc.). The lovers have passionate intensity and commitment in their love that is completely oblivious of reality (the obvious opposition of their two families) and any complications (might something terrible happen to Juliet during the 42 hours that her family thinks she is dead). The balcony scene is the most moving of any I have seen: Hussey on the balcony, convincingly pronouncing the famous lines, rushing with impetuosity toward Romeo once she has overcome her maidenly modesty and warmed to him. The meeting and recognition scene in the Capulet ballroom with Romeo staring fixedly from behind his lupine mask and Juliet charmingly in her bright red dress and plaited pony tail and – for her age (she is supposed to be 14!) – maturely glancing back at her admirer, and then meeting him behind the scenes for a Shakespearean flirtation. The lovers rushing impetuously toward one another and embracing in desperate passion in the laboratory (?) of Friar Laurence when he marries them. The death scene (Romeo mistakenly thinks Juliet is dead; he kills himself with poison; and Juliet when she regains consciousness, in despair stabs herself with Romeo's dagger) is moving more for its mise-en-scene (the cadaver filled tomb) and lighting than its acting. Ultimate expression of love as a mysterious passion of undetermined origin – the two were hopelessly in love the moment their eyes met – and which leads inevitably to a tragic conclusion because of its conflict with society and conventional morality. Outstanding rendition of the play that convinces because of the credible youth of the lovers. (2007)

**La Ronde** 1950 Max Ophuls 3.5 Anton Walbrook smooth, elegant, smiling, tolerant as the master of ceremonies/narrator who leads us through the varied episodes; Simone Signoret as the prostitute who closes the circle (appears twice); Daniel Gélin as the amusing young man, who seduces...; Simone Simon, very cute maid with a roving eye back in France after playing in Lewton's 'Black Cat'; Jean-Louis Barrault in what appears to be a heavily cut role; Danièle Darrieux very fetching, impressively beautiful as the wife (first with Gélin and then lying in bed with her insufferable, philandering husband). Famous film that chronicles a chain of ten love affairs that make a full circle, the last count (insufferable prig) has sex with Signoret, who initiated the chain. Walbrook is the highlight of the film – he guides us through the vignettes, commenting on their significance, returns to the merry-go-round prop symbolizing the endless round of love, injecting humor (as when he feigns shock at a risqué scene and he takes a piece of film and clips it with scissors, or he has to repair the broken down merry-go-round when Gélin is

momentarily afflicted with impotence), and he often appears in the episodes usually as a domestic. Film is beautiful and charming: shot mostly in the bright light with clear definition (wonderfully restored version); Ophuls' trademark moving camera hardly ever stops, gliding through the park to peek at lovers sitting on benches, or along a corridor past blazing candelabras, posts, mirrors, etc., often moving in elegant, dizzying circles. The Viennese waltz repeated throughout the film is fetching and charming. Film suffers perhaps a bit from lack of dramatic tension. We move so rapidly through so many characters and different stories that we do not become attached to anyone; we don't really care what happens to any of them. The narrative has almost no shape: just one seduction after another, it speeds up toward the finish (apparently Ophuls cut much of the end of the film to avoid boredom and repetition), and it ends dramatically flat – just peters out. The film is about *amour* (mainly sex), but it is a bit difficult to detect any theme behind it. Walbrook smiles and teases all the way through suggesting that the exercise is harmless, but one does notice that despite all their couplings, the principals seem isolated, divided from one another. In their love affairs the characters are looking for something to add meaning to their lives – assurances that they are still young, avoiding any thought about death, some kind of evanescent connection, etc. Nevertheless, they all remain fundamentally alone. The author is just realistic, seemingly implying that a permanent love connection is unattainable (the one marriage in the film was a farce) and that we have to make do with the sliver of a bond that we can catch on the wing. (2006)

**Roseaux sauvages** 1994 André Téchiné 2.5 Élodie Bouchez as Maité, pretty little bourgeois girl who doesn't know what she wants to do in her life; Stéphane Rideau as peasant boarding student in a lycée; Gaël Morel as another, gentler and more naïve student who discovers that he is gay and falls in love with Rideau; Frédéric Gorny as older (21 years) student from Paris, who considers himself more sophisticated than the others; Michele Moretti as sad-faced literature teacher in the lycée torn apart by guilt for having failed to save a kid from death in the war. Sincere, but often annoying and slow-moving coming-of-age film about teenage Angst set in a small town near Toulouse against the backdrop of the end of the Algerian War, the continued importance of the Communist Party in France, confused sexuality, and anxiety about whether the students passed their bac. Much of the film follows the sexual travails of Morel, who thinks he has discovered he is gay, but of course doesn't know what to do with it; he spends a lot of time talking to his soul mate (but not lover) Maité. Meanwhile, his one-time lover Rideau is more interested in girls, but his interest in Maité is never reciprocated. When she is not spouting wisdom much beyond her age (e.g., insisting that she doesn't care whether Morel has had sex with a guy), Maité, who is the daughter of the lycée's Communist teacher, just seems to float until, most improbably, she falls in love with the right-wing Gorny after he has decided to leave the lycée. The film delves extensively into politics – the struggles caused by the Algerian War, the tensions between right-wingers and the Communists – but in the end it doesn't seem to matter: in the final scene by the beautiful watering hole, the four kids just seem to calm down (no passionate sex, no nudity), they accept that life is a journey and that they are only in the first phase, and they walk across a sylvan bridge into the future. Given the subject matter, one expects sex and nudity, but all the intimate moments are treated with discretion and reserve. The length of the film (almost two hours) and the lack of a compelling narrative line often tries the viewer's patience. The film is honest and sensitively photographed: beautiful close-up studies of the four principals in different situations. (2010)

**Rosemary's Baby** 1968 Roman Polanski 4.0 Mia Farrow pretty, cute, simple, straightforward, vulnerable as wife of Cassavetes, who moves into the Bramford Apartments on Central Park West and who wants desperately to have a baby, John Cassavetes as hyperkinetic actor wannabe who is so ambitious that he is willing to sell his wife to devil worshipers for some breaks in his career, Sidney Blackmer as suitably disquieting loud-dressing older neighbor who is head of the local Satan coven, Ruth Gordon as terminally batty, nosy also devotee of Satan with a very irritating squeaky voice, Charles Grodin as Rosemary's first obstetrician who disappoints us in the end when he turns over the panicky Rosemary back to her husband and her second obstetrician, Ralph Bellamy as Dr. Saperstein, Rosemary's obstetrician, who is also a part of the plot to have Rosemary have the devil's baby (Adrian!). Outstanding horror movie with a great setting (an old, more or less haunted apartment building on Central Park West), a terrific cast, and outstanding script that builds up the pressure, follows consistent themes,

and then after making us hope that Rosemary will be saved, pulls the rug from under our feet with a surprise ending (the coven is not trying to sacrifice the baby, but the baby is the son of the Devil!). Mia Farrow ropes us in with her vulnerability – the viewer wants to protect her from the evil around her, but of course there is nothing we can do! – her wide-open eyes, slight frame, cute pregnant figure, etc. Film follows through consistently with the theme of motherhood – Farrow is dying for a baby, she gets pregnant (but by the wrong father in a weird, disturbing scene!), follows through the pregnancy with unexplained belly aches and hungering for raw steak and raw liver, turns violently against her husband when she realizes that he has betrayed her, and then when after the birth she arrives in the baby's room with a big knife to defend him against perceived threats, she only then realizes that there is something wrong, and in the famous ending she looks into the black cradle and coos at her baby with the weird eyes thus consenting to raise him as her son. Fine script and direction build up the suspense step-by-step in expert fashion – from low-level suspicions in the beginning, to disquiet at the behavior of Gordon and Blackmer, to Rosemary's conviction that they are going to take her baby and sacrifice it to the devil (in this section she is learning more about witchcraft from reading books and her friend Hutch [Maurice Evans], who is murdered by the coven), her packing her bags and fleeing to what she thinks is the safety of Grodin, and then the ending, when she realizes that murdering the baby is the last thing the coven has in mind. Film is very creepy and scary with no investment in special effects – just good writing, good acting, and excellent pacing. (2006)

**Rounders** 1998 John Dahl 3.0 Matt Damon in early starring role as law student in New York with lots of charm, a smile a mile wide, a flair and an addiction for gambling, and a limitless loyalty to his childhood buddy Norton; Edward Norton unpredictable, low-life but also charming friend, who almost takes Damon down with him; Gretchen Mol beautiful and convincing in small role as Damon's girlfriend; John Malkovich chewing up the scenery with indecipherable Russian (?) accent as gambling entrepreneur KGB; Martin Landau forceful and moving as Damon's law school protector; Famke Janssen scrumptious as a gambling woman who takes a momentary keen interest in Damon. John Dahl's break into A level Hollywood movies with modest success. Film focuses on the career curve of Matt Damon: he loses his shirt to KGB in the first scene; quits gambling under the influence of Mol; returns under the influence of Norton, who is just released from prison; gets deeper into trouble since he agrees to back (financially) the completely irresponsible Norton, who doesn't even realize that you can't get away with cheating when you are playing gambling professionals; matters lead inexorably to a final confrontation with KGB, which Damon wins in tension- and suspense-filled scene (although the tension is reduced for the viewer not initiated to the secrets of high-stakes poker); and then the irrepressible Damon quits law school and takes his winnings to Las Vegas, where he hopes to become world champion and win a million bucks. Film shamelessly borrows from 'The Hustler', just replacing pool with poker; there are also shades of 'Mean Streets' with Norton playing the role of Johnny. The film is obviously calculated to be a 'Rocky'-like movie with triumph at the end and reluctant admiration for the cute, open-faced guy who can't, and probably shouldn't, quit. Some engaging humor, such as the scene where our two heroes play poker with cops in an Elks-style club in Binghamton, New York, and get their faces smashed up when they are caught cheating, or all the scenes that feature Malkovich. Probably the best feature of the film is the Scorsese-like variety of colorful underworld characters like KGB and Grama (Michael Rispoli), the sleazy joints where high-stakes poker is played in New York, the dark, stony colors of the cinematography, the obvious expertise of the participants in poker and the excitement generated by the poker games; it might have been a good idea to include a primer for the uninitiated. Entertaining film especially for poker enthusiasts and those addicted to the Hollywood story curve. (2009)

**The Royal Tenenbaums** 2001 Wes Anderson 3.5 Gene Hackman as nattily dressed Royal "two decades of failure and betrayal" Tenenbaum; Angelica Huston as somber-faced Etheline Tenenbaum; Ben Stiller as widowed basket case Chas Tenenbaum – he can't stand his father who stole money from him when he was a budding teenage entrepreneur; Gwyneth Paltrow as adopted daughter Margot who keeps her smoking habit secret; Bill Murray as low-key, bearded, bumbling older husband of Margot – he conducts weird psychological experiments with his son; Danny Glover as timid and retiring accountant who wants to marry Etheline; Luke Wilson as ex-tennis star Richie with a Bjorn Borg

headband, who is in love with his adopted sister; blond Owen Wilson as Eli (and co-writer), an unhinged neighbor across the street who is Margot's current boyfriend; Alec Baldwin as matter-of-fact narrator. Often amusing tale about a highly dysfunctional wealthy New York family, the failures of the father, Royal, and his attempts to make amends. Takes place in a rambling mansion in a sort of mythical New York, where taxi cabs hanging together by a thread prowl the streets and you keep dozens of old board games in your closet. The first half of the film is very amusing: the three children were child prodigies, but are all neurotic basket cases as young adults; everybody has a penchant for failure and depression: Richie was a tennis pro, who however suddenly disintegrated in a televised match at the age of 26 because – he says— he was in love with his sister, and he sleeps in a tent in the living room when he returns home; Chas despises his father and dresses his two nerd sons in red track suits that match his own; Margot was a budding playwright, but she becomes an aimless slut sleeping with large numbers of men. The film's *pièce de résistance* is Hackman, who is invariably bemused, outrageously self-justifying, and very amusing. Using a friend as a fake doctor, he fakes (hilariously) that he is dying of stomach cancer so he can return to the family home, get back in the good graces of his family, and keep his wife from remarrying. After being kicked out of his fancy residence hotel, he gets a job as an elevator operator. Thinking that his grandsons are too nerdy, he takes them on a hilarious learn-to-be-a-daredevil sequence – cross streets against the light, throw water balloons at cars, and bet on dog fights. He even becomes somewhat endearing in the second half of the film – “Can't a person be a shit their whole life and not try to be better?” A constant use of humorous flashbacks (e.g., quick run through of Margot's slutty affairs, Richie's decomposition on the tennis court) are entertaining. Popular music tuned to dramatic situations is intrusive and sometimes irritating. Sometimes off-putting is the inconsistent tone that oscillates between comical and heart-tugging in the bat of an eye. Nevertheless, quirky, imaginative, and entertaining film. (2011)

**Royal Wedding** 1951 Stanley Donen (MGM) 3.0 Fred Astaire looking very fit for 51, Jane Powell cute, fresh and youthful performing sister, Peter Lawford as English lord, her sophisticated suitor, Keenan Wynn as Irv, the duo's manager, and his twin brother in England, Sarah Churchill – not very pretty but decent dancer -- as Astaire's love interest. Albert Sharpe as irascible tippling Irishman, pub owner, father of Churchill. Producer Arthur Freed, lyrics by Alan Jan Lerner. Another Astaire backstage musical; he and his musical partner, sister Ellen, both are reluctant to marry; they take the Queen Mary (?) to England for a performance; at the same time the royal wedding is taking place. 1) The opening “King” number (\*\*1/2) with a jazzy song by Astaire, duo with Powell, then soldiers come on to stage. Astaire's solo number in ship's gym in which, to the accompaniment of big band jazzy score, he dances with various items of gym equipment, focusing on the coat rack, which he rolls across the floor as a kind of dance partner. (\*\*\*\*) “Open your eyes,” entertainment for ship passengers, corny croon by soprano Powell, then the two dance waltz fighting against the listing ship – cute but not very interesting (\*\*). 2) Wynn appears again as Irv's twin – “Frighteningly amusing tie, what?” Astaire pursues Churchill, while Ellen and Lawford consort; turns out Churchill is getting married to someone else; Ellen often late to rehearsals. 3) Nice split screen with American and Brit Wynn's speaking their accents -- amusing. Lawford and Powell love declaration to accompaniment of bagpipes. Ellen's soprano “I'll be standing by your side, my Love” (\*) which she really croons for Lawford. Then “How could ya' believe me when I said I loved ya'.” (\*\*\*\*) Cute rhythmic vaudeville-like stage number with street talking couple reproaching one another for being a liar, Ellen cracking her gum the whole time, some jazz dance and then loose-limbed, humorous tap. Lawford has nothing to do but be Ellen's true love. 4) Ellen croons corny “Too Late Now.” (\*) “You're all the World to me.” Astaire sings love song in absentia to Sarah to uninteresting melody, and then dances on walls and on ceiling to jazzy big band music (obvious that camera rotates with room with everything including the cameraman tightly attached). 5) Latin Caribbean number, “I Left my Hat in Haiti.” (\*\*\*\*) Big, long production number with all white dancers and colorful Caribbean sets; Astaire dances Latin style number with cute blond dancer. 6) Watching the royal wedding motivates the two siblings to get married to their beloveds, and glorious crane out to end. (2005)

**Ruby Sparks** 2012 Jonathan Dayton, Valerie Faris 2.75 Fantasy-style romantic comedy about writer's relationship with his dream girl, who is the creature of his imagination. Paul Dano as

lonely, though arrogant, young celebrity author, wondering about his future; Zoe Kazan (also screenwriter) as charming, pretty, spontaneous product of Dano's imagination; Chris Messina as Dano's brother, a macho-style guy who is a contrast with Dano; Annette Benning in small role as eternally smiling mother living in picturesque hippie comfort in *Big Sur*; Antonio Banderas rather miscast as Benning's hippie (!) husband; Steeve Coogan as Dano's literary agent – he makes a stupid play for Dano in one of her blissful moments; Elliott Gould in a couple of scenes as Dano's avuncular, supportive shrink. The lonely, writer-blocked Dano opens up in his relationship with the girl that he creates on his manual typewriter; to his surprise she appears as a real person living in his house; she is unaware of her imaginary (?) status, and she is seen by others and interacts with them. Not too much happens in their relationship. Dano finds again the will to write, this time about her; sometimes she acts spontaneously, sometimes her actions and emotions are dictated by Dano's writings – sometimes very clingy and dependent, at others independent, wanting to break out on her own, spending the night in her own apartment, flirting cluelessly with Coogan who persuades her to take off her clothes and go skinny-dipping in a swimming pool where they are attending a party! Dano, who is so happy to be broken out of his loneliness and in love, is fun to watch; Kazan's innocent spontaneity is even more compelling and amusing. The relationship finally breaks up when Dano demonstrates ruthlessly his power over Zoe when with his typewriter he forces her to swear that she adores his penis and then crawl and bark on the floor like a dog. The happy ending triumphs however, when Dano finishes his second book detailing the relationship – it is a smash success with the young set; and then when the two meet again in the park, they recognize one another and with worldly-wise smiles they agree to start over (and live happily ever after). Her metaphysical status is ambiguous – real or imagined? A true rom com ending. A romantic comedy based on an extension of the fantasy relationship that writers have with the characters they create. (March 2018)

**La rupture** 1970 Claude Chabrol 2.0 Stéphane Audran improbably as Hélène, an ex-go-go girl who has married a druggie in a wealthy provincial family, Michel Bouquet as malevolent grand bourgeois father who plots to take Helene's son when she is ready to divorce Bouquet's son, Jean-Pierre Cassel as unfeeling thug hired by Bouquet to get dirt on Helene, Michel Duchaussoy in small role as kindly lawyer who signs up to defend the glamorous Helene. Very baroque thriller/drama about Helene struggling to keep her son, who is in the hospital after an attack from druggie dad, and to maintain her sanity under great pressure. Opens with father throwing boy across room and Helene bopping him over the head with a heavy frying pan. Helene rents a room in petty bourgeois rooming house with an alcoholic husband, a retarded adolescent girl, and three old maids who remind one of 'Macbeth's' three witches. Bouquet, who abetted by his submissive wife is an extremely malevolent grand bourgeois who will go to any length to keep the boy from his mother, hires Cassel to dig up dirt on her; he skulks through the movie, charming the ladies and concocting ineffective schemes to incriminate Helene. Particularly lurid is kidnapping of retarded girl, showing her pornographic movies, and trying to make her believe that Helene is the one seducing her (it doesn't work). Confrontation is an aspect of the class struggle – dull worker bees of the popular classes against the big shots. Husband loses his cool and acts like a madman in revolting against his parents. Helene almost loses her sanity, and imagines that the balloon man (seriously out of focus) is God. But she recovers (the three witches are now on her side since they have to be "loyal to their sex!") and she walks off to visit her son. It appears that she has won. Chabrol departs from his usual cool observations, carefully plotted minimalist thrillers, and matter-of-fact style to descend into overblown pumped up melodrama. (2006)

**Rushmore** 1998 Wes Anderson (co-writer Owen Wilson) 2.5 Jason Schwartzman as Max, a precociously aggressive and achieving prep school student who gets such terrible grades that he is kicked out of school; Bill Murray as shy, socially incompetent, self-doubting millionaire business man who somehow becomes a friend of Schwartzman; Olivia Williams very pretty and rather British as love interest for both Bill Murray and Max; Seymour Cassel as Max's down-to-earth barber father. Often hard-to-swallow *comédie des mœurs* about a 15-year old prep school student who has enormous energy for extra-curricular activities (organizing numerous over-produced stage plays, the fencing team, the kite-flying club, and even building a marine biology tank on campus) but precious little time for his studies.

The plot revolves around his infatuation with the pretty first-grade teacher in the school (Williams who is probably twice his age) and his intense rivalry with Murray when he also falls in love with her (Max sabotages Murray's car, Murray destroys Max's bicycle, etc.); the sometimes sharp edge of the comedy however goes soft in the end, when Max appears to learn his lesson and begins to date a girl his own age (Sara Tanaka), while Murray appears destined to live happily ever after with Williams. The tone is quirky and unpredictable – you never quite know what the two principals have up their sleeves. The viewer is supposed to admire the pluck, originality, and non-conformity of Max (e.g., getting millions of dollars out of Murray for the fish tank that is supposed to please Williams and somehow in a public school having the resources to put on an elaborate, expensive-looking play about Vietnam); but instead he comes across as terminally annoying, manipulative, conniving (he can outsmart anyone!), vengeful, and convinced of his superiority over virtually every other character in the film including the school's headmaster (Brian Cox), who seems to defer to him. The film has some amusing moments – Max is slammed mercilessly to the ground when he begins a wrestling match, the headmaster recovers from his stroke and begins to talk when Max comes into his hospital room, and just when he is about to seduce Williams with a faked injury, she notices that he has fake blood – probably catsup – on his head. The film is visually disciplined. But it is hard to spend an hour and a half with an annoying whippersnapper, even if he is cute, inventive, and non-conformist. (2009)

**Russia House** 1990 Fred Schepisi 3.0 Sean Connery middle-aged with a mustache and goatee, droll with a twinkle in his eye and a fundamental affection for Russia in the Glasnost era; Michelle Pfeiffer as a much younger Russian woman with two children – she has a pretty good Russian accent (full words are generally restricted to 'Da'; James Fox a avuncular and worried British secret service operative; Roy Scheider as crease-faced, arrogant, foul-mouthed CIA operative; J.T. Walsh; John Mahoney; Ken Russell in colorful role as impulsive excitable British operative; Klaus Maria Brandauer as Russian scientist proposing to pass important secrets to the West. Low-key, although interesting and moving, film based on LeCarré book, dealing with spying and political/cultural currents in the age of Glasnost. Connery is a British Russophile publisher to whom it is proposed to publish Brandauer's book, which would paint the Russian missile establishment as incompetent and thus not a credible deterrent. The implications are presented as huge – it would, for example, end the arms race, thus severely cutting into the profits of arms manufacturers on all sides. In somewhat incredible development, the pacifist-oriented Connery agrees to work with British and American spies to get more information from Brandauer before publishing the book. The script however transforms the proceedings: the Glasnost-oriented statements by Russians and Connery that one should be prepared to betray one's country in order to save their countries is transformed into something more down-to-earth – in a long series of complicated maneuvers, Connery realizes that he is in love with Pfeiffer and he decides to sell the secrets of the Western side to the Russian authorities in exchange for safe conduct of Pfeiffer's family to the West. In a moving happy finale, Pfeiffer, her children and her uncle run down the gangplank of a boat in sunny Lisbon happy to meet Connery on the wharf. A very European point – personal happiness is far more important than politics and international competition. On-location photography – Lisbon, London, a Vancouver lake, and especially Moscow and St. Petersburg – is stunningly beautiful and real. Interesting narrative structure: most of the film seems to be taken up with dialogue between Connery and Pfeiffer, but since he is wired (never discovered), the operatives back in London are listening in and commenting with voice-overs. Film moves a little slow, but interesting Glasnost spy thriller, where the suspense is about whether the lovers will find a place to live together in peace and happiness. (2007)

**Russian Ark** 2002 Aleksandr Sukarov 2.5 Sergei Dontsov as the rather anti-Russian slumped and mumbling French marquis with frizzy hair who wanders with the camera through the halls of the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg; his interlocutor, the voice of Sukarov, which is identical with the camera. Rather endless and, to most of us, undramatic and uneventful film that guides the viewer through several rooms of the Hermitage Museum. The wow factor in the film is the director's decision to film the entire 90-minute film in one steadycam shot (it is possible because it is recorded in high-definition video); we spend a lot of time admiring the audacity of the conceit and wondering how in the world it could be done – what if the cameraman had tripped toward the end or if one of the actors flubbed his lines, etc.

The camera spends a lot of times wandering the halls, drawing up close to (pretty boring) paintings on the walls, recording the banal comments of the characters, and witnessing some informally staged historical events. The latter included Peter the Great beating up one of his generals, Catherine the Great watching a rehearsal of a palace spectacle but then rushing off because she has to pee (and she has a hard time getting out of the room since the doors seem to be locked), a state occasion (very long and boring) in which the Persian ambassador formally presents the shah's apologies for the murder of some Russian diplomats. The pièce de résistance is near the end when the camera suddenly glides into a large, brightly lit ballroom where brilliantly uniformed and bejeweled courtiers are dancing a complex mazurka to the music of Glinka played by a full orchestra; it turns out that this is a representation of the last ball in the palace held by Nicholas II in 1914 just before the outbreak of the fateful first world war. The film becomes melancholy toward the end: the camera visits a cold, snow-filled workshop, the second appearance of the Catherine the Great presents her as infirm and stumbling blindly through the snow outside the palace, and the final shot of the mist (?) outside the palace is accompanied by melancholy comments. Aside from its aesthetic characteristics, the film is difficult to interpret. No reference is made to the horrible experience of Russia under the Soviets in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; the effect of the depiction of all the brilliant finery, especially the last ballroom scene, is nostalgia for the glory lost of traditional Russia. A difficult film to appreciate because of its muddling camera work (sorry!) and its obscure historical references. Would anybody have paid attention without the one-shot trick? (2011)

**Ruthless** 1948 Edgar G. Ulmer 3.0 Anti-capitalist biopic of a fictional ruthless Wall Street investor; original screenplay (uncredited) by Communist Party member Alvah Bessie. Zachary Scott in hard-hitting portrayal of a provincial guy, Horace Vendig, who cares only about making money and scrambling his way to the top; Louis Hayward narrative counterweight as gentle childhood friend Vic; Diana Lynn ('Miracle of Morgan Creek') doubling as Scott's first wife and then Hayward's wife at the end of the film; Sydney Greenstreet as another fat cat, ruthless entrepreneur who is undone by Scott; Lucille Bremer, Martha Vickers ('The Big Sleep'), and Raymond Burr (fifth credited movie). The film is told mostly in flashback. First scenes show Hayward and Lynn visiting the hyper-wealthy Vendig in his showy mansion, as he donates his money and seaside estate to a peace institute. The flashbacks then take us through most of his life. Originally a nice kid and Vic's bosom buddy who saved Lynn from drowning when their canoe tips over, he unaccountably turns to unbridled ambition, marries Vic's girlfriend and cons her father into bankrolling his four years at Harvard (he is interested in only the social cachet it confers). He then processes through two more wives, cuts aggressive financial deals, and betrays his friends and business partners to get to the top; the exception is Hayward, whom he tries to keep as a friend until the end. Back to the present in the ending, the remorseful Vendig seeks forgiveness for his unbridled greed by giving away his wealth. He also – apparently unconsciously – makes a play for innocence by pursuing Vic's wife (played by the same actress that played Vendig's first wife), although his manner is as imperious and unfeeling as ever. Lynn's feigned hesitation adds to the suspense. The film ends with the bad guys – Greenstreet and Scott – wrestling viciously on Vendig's dock, then falling into the water, and going under to their deaths as they continue to struggle. Lynn's comment is the last word – "He was more a way of life than a personality." The film is well made, although much more mainstream Hollywood than Ulmer's 'Detour'. The most extraordinary thing about it is its radical indictment of the capitalist spirit: the system engenders greed and arrogance and ultimately destroys its perpetrators. (2017)