

GSC Films: S-Z

Saboteur 1942 Alfred Hitchcock 3.0 Robert Cummings, Patricia Lane as not so charismatic love interest, Otto Kruger as rather dull villain (although something of prefigure of James Mason's very suave villain in 'NNW'), Norman Lloyd who makes impression as rather melancholy saboteur, especially when he is hanging by his sleeve in Statue of Liberty sequence. One of lesser Hitchcock products, done on loan out from Selznick for Universal. Suffers from lackluster cast (Cummings does not have acting weight to make us care for his character or to make us believe that he is going to all that trouble to find the real saboteur), and an often inconsistent story line that provides opportunity for interesting set pieces – the circus freaks, the high society fund-raising dance; and of course the final famous Statue of Liberty sequence (vertigo impression with the two characters perched high on the finger of the statue, the suspense generated by the slow tearing of the sleeve seam, and the scary fall when the sleeve tears off – Lloyd rotating slowly and screaming as he recedes from Cummings' view). Many scenes are obviously done on the cheap – anything with the trucks, the home of Kruger, riding a taxi through New York. Some of the scenes are very flat – the kindly blind hermit (riff on the hermit in 'Frankenstein?'), Kruger's affection for his grandchild around the swimming pool in his Highway 395 ranch home, the meeting with the bad guys in the Soda City scene next to Hoover Dam. The encounter with the circus freaks (Siamese twins who don't get along, the bearded lady whose beard is in curlers, the militaristic midget who wants to turn the couple in, etc.) is amusing and piquant (perhaps the scene was written by Dorothy Parker?), but it doesn't seem to relate to anything. Plot line takes us from LA sabotage up Highway 395, then over the Hoover Dam (in reality 395 doesn't go to Hoover Dam), and suddenly to New York. The characters are often sappy and incomprehensible, such as the kind blind hermit who believes firmly in Cummings' innocence (real Americans know who is good and who bad?); also hard to chart the thought processes and movements of Lane, who changes her mind a lot and tries to turn Cummings in, and who turns up in New York rather inexplicably. The bad guys, who are supposed to be ruthless saboteurs, are easy going and allow our principals to remain impeccably coiffed and never personally harmed. Obviously a bit of wartime propaganda with one good patriotic anti-Nazi and pro-democratic speech by Cummings at the dance party. Debts to previous films abound – the handcuffs and the antagonistic connection with attractive young woman, being trapped and in danger at a high society party, the cross country journey to find the real culprit (all '39 Steps'), the villain seen against back-projected movie on screen ('Sabotage'), etc. Movie is picaresque and fun. (2006)

Sabrina 1954 Billy Wilder 2.5 Audrey Hepburn beautiful, radiant, charming, compelling as chauffeur's daughter who moves up the social ladder; William Holden with blondish hair and a not-very-rakish straw hat as playboy member of wealthy Larrabee family whom Hepburn falls for; Humphrey Bogart rather badly miscast as older brother with no love life and obsessed with managing the Larrabee businesses; John Williams perfect and dignified as Hepburn's father, who sends her to Paris for two years in order to improve her station in life; Joan Vohs as vapid blond that Bogart wants Holden to marry in order to further the business interests of the family. Weak romantic comedy about a modern-day Cinderella; it has a vapid script and cookie-cutter characters and is redeemed only by its all-star cast and the radiant Hepburn at the center. Her adolescent love for Holden is not returned; her father sends her to cooking school and she returns as the beautiful, classic Hepburn turning everyone's head; Holden, whose head is turned more than anyone else's, abandons the proposed marriage to Vohs for her; Bogart, though, campaigns to wean Hepburn from her affection for Holden by various devious maneuvers, but ends up falling in love with Hepburn himself; feeling noble, Bogart relents and arranges for Hepburn and Holden to sail off to France together (unmarried!); but Holden has the last laugh, confronts Bogart in the Larrabee boardroom, punches out his brother (one supposes in retaliation for the earlier scene where Holden punches out Bogart), and then sends him on a tugboat to join Hepburn on the French ship 'La Liberté', which just happens to be passing in front of the picture window; the film ends with Bogart and Hepburn falling into a tepid embrace on board. Wilder seems to be gazing constantly at Hepburn, who charms immeasurably with her pixie-like hairdo, her broad, innocent smile, her muscled lithe body (seen especially in the scene where she wears short shorts), her show-stopping fashions, her ability to swoon

romantically when dancing cheek-to-cheek with her men at various (boring) parties. Bogart should not have been cast as the older brother: he does ok as a businessman, but he looks way too old, tired and creased to be the man with whom the ardent Hepburn decides to spend the rest of her life. The class division subtext is played way down: true, John Williams warns Sabrina that “there is a front seat and a back seat with glass in between” and that she should not aim so high, but all the characters are too smitten with Hepburn’s grace and beauty to make serious objections to her proposed union with the Larrabee family. In this film Wilder trades his snarky critique of American social mores for a fluffy romantic fantasy. The long sequence in which Bogart pseudo-courts Hepburn is also sloppily written: several scenes are repetitive and the viewer is left in confusion and indifference as to what Bogart is up to. One has to give Wilder credit for some beautiful mise-en-scène; and the 50s black and white film is beautifully restored. Somewhat typical of Hepburn films: she is so beautiful and glamorous that her films turn out to be less interesting. (2011)

Sadie Thompson 1928 3.5 Raoul Walsh Based on Somerset Maugham’s ‘Rain’. Gloria Swanson cute, sprightly, gay, good-hearted (treats the simple soldiers well), seductive, tough and independent as the “brazen woman” with dark painted lips and a flashing smile who smokes, chews gum, jokes around and flirts with crowds of drunk marines; Lionel Barrymore as the fervent and powerful missionary reformer (apparently not an ordained minister) who is determined to clean up the morals of the island and who is of course outraged by Swanson’s behavior – clean-shaven he looks a little like Abe Lincoln; Walsh as Marine sergeant who becomes Sadie’s good-humored suitor and who carries her piggy back when it rains (it never stops). Takes place on rainy South Seas island garrisoned by Marines who are bored stiff and yearn for “white women”; Sadie, a former prostitute from San Francisco, stops by on the way to a neighboring island where she plans to start a new life. Film takes a dim view of religious reformers, who don’t know how to smile, who intimidate politicians, complain about the locals having no sense of sin, and threaten “sinners” with destruction and retaliation, insist that Sadie return to San Francisco instead of going to Sydney even though it means returning to prison (she claims she is innocent of the crime of which she is accused); “three tortured days of loneliness – repentance – *redemption*”. When Sadie turns down Barrymore’s offer of salvation, he has the governor order her to leave the island; she is furious, and with flashing eyes denounces him violently; then she implores him pitifully; and then she is wide-eyed and insane when she faces returning to prison. Donnybrook confrontations between Barrymore and Swanson work well on silent screen – light on the title cards and heavy on mime, facial expressions, etc. The scene in which Barrymore makes her kneel and pray is heart-wrenching. In another dramatic scene Walsh tries to force Swanson to leave on a fishing boat, but she resists saying that her salvation is the only thing that counts and she wants to go to prison; by this time Sadie has been thoroughly programmed. Barrymore then becomes obsessed with Sadie and apparently rapes her (or just has sex?) – we don’t know since last reel of film is missing. The next morning his body is found in the ocean by a fisherman – an apparent suicide. Film ends happily with Sadie set to go to Sydney to wait for her sergeant. Although film is not well restored (grainy with passages marred by serious damage to the negative and the end missing) one can see that cinematography (Academy Award) is very effective, especially in lighting faces during the dramatic confrontations. Effective use of environmental symbols – the heavy rain, the wind blowing outside the window. A daring movie before the full Hayes Code; quite arty showing the sophistication of editing and cinematography in the late silent era. (2009)

Safety Last 1923 Fred Newmeyer, etc. 4.0 Harold Lloyd, Mildred Davis (Lloyd marries her shortly after the completion of the film in summer 1922). Stunning 20s comedy with almost incredible invention. Lloyd as naïve, somewhat shy, enthusiastic, earnest, serious, extremely energetic, fast movement (not as acrobatic as Keaton?); resourceful, inventive; very amusing rodent walk; great upper body strength. Movie satirizes middle class values: the shopping women in the department store who attack the sales clerks (the women are later referred to as “women of culture and refinement”), much disrespecting of police. Advertising need causes HL to scale the 12-story building at the end to make an impression on the buying public. General plot is that MD puts extreme pressure on HL to be a success in the city; he feels the pressure and has to resort to all sorts of pretenses to keep the wool over her eyes. Obvious satire on the Horatio Alger myth – rags to riches; even the climbing of the building is a

commentary on upward social mobility! Great long gags – transportation gag as HL has to return to his job asap – he fakes a street injury to get the ambulance to take him back; long office gag when he has to pretend that he is the boss of the department store to perpetuate for his girlfriend the myth that he has a management position and is not just a sales clerk; and of course the advertising gag climbing up the building (c. 25 minutes!), which is an obvious satire on upward social mobility and the difficulties associated with it. The film is filled with fascinating glimpses into Los Angeles life in the early 1920s – the dense traffic in the street, the culture of the department store, relations with the police, etc. The climbing sequence has eight or nine different parts with Lloyd's progress impeded by pigeons, an attack dog, a tennis net, a clock, and mainly the policeman who is chasing the real Human Fly who is supposed to do the climbing for Lloyd; with its dizzying views into the street, really a nightmare for those with vertigo! The sequence, which took about two months to shoot, has several components – a set at Hal Roach studio in Culver City representing the street level of the building; the Human Fly himself climbing a taller building in downtown Los Angeles in a long shot from the outside (he was attached to the building by piano wire); and principally medium shots of Lloyd climbing on a 18-foot façade that is set on the roof of a four-story building also in Los Angeles (the set is at the edge of the roof so that if Lloyd were to fall straight down he would fall on to mattresses); when Harold gets to about sixth floor, he changes the shooting to another taller building in a different part of downtown LA with a similar façade on top; and then for the finale (where he swings on the big ledge) another taller building in another part of downtown. Inventive final sequence – Harold tottering on edge of cornice after being hit in head by weather vein, swinging on a rope over the street, “miraculous” reunion with Mildred lips to lips, Struthers still running from the cop over the rooftop and saying goodbye from a distance with tiny titles, the two lovers walk over the roof with Harold losing heedlessly both shoes and socks when he walks through wet tar. Very daring mise-en-scene showing real street traffic in the background with no special effects used; sequence shows Harold Lloyd's great invention, athletic prowess, and daredevil courage. (2005)

Salaam Bombay! 1988 Mira Nair 3.5 Shafiq Syed as 12-year-old boy with natural acting and soulful eyes; a large cast of seemingly professional Indian actors and many children and adults recruited from the slums of Bombay. Compelling and moving documentary-style story of boy apparently abandoned by his mother, living in the streets of Bombay, trying to save up 500 rupees so he can return to his native village, encountering many memorable characters and adventures. Almost all the actors are amateurs recruited from the slums; they show remarkable restraint and soul, avoiding the (apparently) Indian vice of overacting. Style is realistic semi-documentary -- all shot on location, episodic plot structure, nonprofessional actors, long takes (sometimes running too long), rather informal editing. Plot thread is Syed's attempt to save enough money to return to his family; encounters several subplots -- a prostitute's long-term love affair with the house pimp; the prostitute's passion for her only daughter; Syed's touching friendship with the little girl Manju, and his love for Sweet Sixteen, a girl who has recently been sold into prostitution; his friendship with Chillum, who sells drugs for the pimp, but who is fired and, deprived of his drugs, he dies from withdrawal (the kids conduct a traditional Indian funeral). Textures of the poverty-stricken neighborhood are convincing -- shabby building, chaotic situation in the streets and on the sidewalks, mostly sunny and hot with occasional cloudbursts, hot, small interior rooms; too bad we couldn't smell the odors. Film ends with apparent references to Truffaut's 'Four Hundred Blows': Syed escapes from the well-meaning but tyrannical reform school, goes to his hiding place to find that his money has been stolen, and then moves to a spot where he stares disconsolately into the distance, as the camera records his face with a very long shot that evokes the hopelessness of his situation -- things will never change; recalling of course Truffaut's famous shout (and then freeze frame) of Jean Paul Leaud on the beach. Script sometimes seems not to move forward; some scenes are held too long; but the sad plight of the children in the city slums and without hope gets under your skin. Leaves a permanent impression of Syed's expressive face. (2008)

Le salaire de la peur 1952 Henri-Georges Clouzot 4.0 Yves Montand tall, sexy and charismatic as more or less amoral drifter in somewhere near Venezuela, Vera Clouzot as his hapless, gypsy-like girlfriend who dances the waltz at the end when she hears that he has emerged unscathed from the delivery, Charles Vanel is pudgy, bourgeois-looking (contrast with Montand) as shady character who

turns out to be a coward, Peter Van Eyck and Falco Lulli as the two other truck drivers chosen to make the run. Unforgettable film set at the frontier in South America; begins with strong sense of place in a forgotten oil town in Venezuela where a lot of foreigners speaking a polyglot of languages are lounging around looking for jobs; a well fire 300 miles away finally offers highly dangerous job to four of them; the long sequence of driving the two trucks loaded with volatile nitroglycerine (intended to put out the well fires) to the wells over dangerous terrain; and the denouement. Montand is fetching as the charismatic male lead – lean, wiry, handsome, reckless, throws challenges to fate and the world. First section that sets up the situation and the characters is a little long, but the truck-driving sequences are Cracker Jack thriller suspense: the trucks, one of which is massive like fate itself, drive very slowly on the road (except when the ruts are so bad they have to drive fast to glide over them); at one point they have to drive out on a rickety wooden ramp to make a hairpin turn in the mountains (it collapses spectacularly just as the second truck emerges from it); at another they have to stop and blow up with some of the nitro a large boulder that has blocked the road; at another Montand has to drive painstakingly through a bog of crude oil since there is no other way to make it to the oil fields. Editing and pacing are expert as events slow to a crawl and we hold our breath waiting for disaster -- explosion of the nitro and complete obliteration of the truck and its occupants. Disaster finally happens in an eerie long shot of Montand and Vanel startled by a sudden explosion and looking off several miles in front of them at the huge explosion cloud where their two friends have been annihilated; when they later arrive at the explosion site, nothing is left of their friends except a cigarette holder. Film shares Clouzot's usual misanthropy and existential negativism: the film begins with a shot of cockroaches trapped/tied together by strings attached by little boys; the men are trapped in the town under the undying hot sun (cf. Camus' *L'étranger*), no work, nowhere to go (the roads out of town go nowhere and the airfare is too expensive), and relations with women are completely unsatisfactory; the lot of the drivers is hard, but they persist because that is their fate and they have no alternative (\$2000 awaits each of them at the end of the road); they do their duty and remain faithful to their fate and to the male bond/friendship that builds between the men, even between Montand and the pusillanimous and weak-nerved Vanel. At the end Montand is the only one of the four left; the film leads us to believe that he is returning joyfully to reunion with his girlfriend Clouzot, but his swerving of his big truck on the road in the mountains becomes extreme and he goes over the edge and to his death in the canyon below; it is apparent that he has committed suicide; it is shameful and disloyal to be the only one of the four men that survives; the consolation of returning to the arms of a woman is little compared to the loss of his male friends; death is where he belongs. Several elements relate the movie to *Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (1948) – male bonding, the existential condition, the power of fate; *Salaire* has perhaps less humor, and lacks the delicious irony of the end of the other movie. Some obvious critique of international (American) capitalism: the Americans control the economy, and don't hesitate to send men off to an almost certain death; the company boss O'Brien is a hard-bitten, business-only guy, although he does share some camaraderie with the other expatriates. A great nail-biting thriller with the existential bleakness of the postwar era, and a charismatic star lead to rivet our attention. (2006)

The Salesman 2016 Asghar Farhadi (Iran) 3.0 Meticulous revenge drama focusing on male pride and its impacts. Shahab Hosseini handsome, bearded, as Emad, a high school teacher and amateur actor, tightly wound emotionally just below the surface; Taraneh Aledoosti as his pretty, stay-at-home wife, Rana, who also plays in the theater with her husband; Farid Sajjadi Hosseini as weak old man with a heart condition, who turns out to be the perpetrator of the attack against Rana. The film is made in a simple realist style: taking place essentially in two roomy, although shabby apartments; recording everyday conversation between the main characters; the camera following a character from room to room; focusing entirely on the main story with little reference to the outside; the main narrative is paralleled in a highly elusive way by a performance of O'Neill's 'Death of a Salesman'. While Emad is absent, Rana is attacked in the shower and taken to the hospital for treatment (no serious injuries). When she returns home, the relationship between her and her husband deteriorates: she is emotional, demanding, and unpredictable – understandably. While showing some compassion for his wife, Emad displays anger and suspicion: he despises the attacker and wants to take revenge, but he also resents his wife, obviously suspecting that she was raped and not just beaten up. The viewer begins to suspect that his traditional

wounded male pride may have survived his apparently secularized, middle class status, turning his anger against his defensive wife and not just the attacker. Never seriously considering contacting the police, Emad decides to track down the perpetrator. By a series of curious coincidences he discovers that the attacker is an old man, who pleads with Emad not to reveal his transgressions to his old-fashioned traditionalist wife and children. Emad however proceeds in his determination to humiliate the old guy – classic revenge: eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth – despite the pleadings of Rana to let him go: he berates him, locks him in a closet, and when he feels ill, he neglects to call an ambulance. Unfortunately the old man has a heart attack and expires on the steps of the apartment building. The film ends with Rana and Emad looking past each other blankly as they are made up for another performance of ‘Death of a Salesman’ – they do not seem to have any future together. Emad is demoralized thinking that his cruelty has caused the death of a fellow human being; Rana surely realizes that what mattered to her husband throughout the affair was his own male pride – his wife has tarnished his reputation by being the victim of a rape – rather than love for his wife. Interesting play-like film about the devastating emotional impact of an act of violence. Several slow-moving passages, and a distracting parallel with the O’Neill play. (June 2017)

Salt 2010 Phillip Noyce 2.5 Angelina Jolie as stony-faced, deadly efficient CIA operative, who may or may not be a Russian mole; Liev Schreiber as her nerdy superior trying to protect Salt against...; Chiwetel Ejiofor as no-nonsense counter-intelligence guy determined to track Salt down. High-impact action film undergirded by a tricky, surprising script that doesn’t make sense in retrospect, but keeps the viewer guessing in the heat of the action. The film is a star vehicle for Angelina Jolie, who after preventing the worst mayhem plotted by (what appears to be) a team of ex-Soviet rogues trying to restore the power of the Soviet Union, disappears at the end of the film prepared for the sequel (which apparently never came). Jolie shows her action-hero bona fides taking on large numbers of security police who never know what hit them (she kills Russians but only beats the shit out of the Americans), leaping from one moving big rig to another, rappels down a huge elevator shaft without ropes, dives from a helicopter into the freezing Potomac (one thinks), etc. The viewer is constantly in the dark about what is happening: after the Russian Orlov sets the plot in motion by identifying Salt as a mole planted by the Russians, the viewer at first believes that Salt is a loyal agent running from the CIA only because she wants to save her arachnologist husband, but then she appears to assassinate the Russian president in a spectacular scene in a New York church (we later learn that he was only anesthetized by spider venom!), she appears to reconcile with her Russian guru Orlov (Daniel Olbrychski) and his cohorts even after they murder her husband in front of her (to test her loyalty!), but then turns on her Russian compatriots when they aren’t looking and kills them all; in a potential nuclear doomsday scene in the White House bunker, Salt shows that she is after all a good guy (inspired by outraged true love) and saves the world from destruction by (surprise!) Schreiber, who turns out to be another Russian agent planted in the CIA; she dispatches him by strangling him with her handcuffs chain. No doubt that the film is exciting, suspenseful, and taut (it is only 98 minutes long) with enough narrative surprises to keep the viewer on his toes. Hard not to notice, however, the lack of credible plotting and real character development. (2014)

Salvatore Giuliano 1961 Francesco Rosi 3.0 Semi documentary examination of the social and cultural reality of the bandit career of the famous Salvatore Giuliano in the immediate post-World-War-II years. Giuliano barely appears in the film. There are no characters fictionally presented so that the viewer can become attached, although we are occasionally impressed by something one of the characters does – e.g., the grief of Giuliani’s mother, the indignant confusion of a shepherd boy who has been captured by the police after he was forced (?) to join Giuliani. Almost all the actors were non-professionals from the region where the events took place; most of the scenes were shot on location in Montelepre and in the surrounding hills (only a few miles from Palermo). Sicily seems barren, desolate, poor, picturesque, very old-fashioned and undeveloped. The film is an obvious precursor of ‘Z’ and ‘The Battle of Algiers’, where a political scandal is gradually revealed. Giuliani and his band helped free Sicily of the Germans in 1943; then they were recruited by the local politicians to fight for Sicilian (semi-) independence; when that was granted in 1946, the partisans somehow did not get their amnesty and they continued operating in the hills – kidnapping, ransom, murder. The authorities seemed not to care much;

perhaps they were afraid their connection with the banditi would come out; the bandits had numerous complicated relationships with the mafia, the carabinieri (national police), and the local civil authorities. Film jumps rather confusingly from the time of the murder of Giuliano (1952 – many journalists were suspicious), back to the immediate postwar years and then to the trial of Giuliano's men, many of whom were acquitted, and others condemned to life in prison. With flashbacks at the trial it emerges that Giuliano was not killed honorably in a gun battle with the carabinieri, but that he was murdered treacherously by one of his lieutenants, who was cooperating with the authorities. The film rakes up an Italian political scandal that doesn't mean much to foreigners. It does fill us in on an historical event that no one outside Italy knows anything about; and it gives us a vivid picture of Sicily in the 1950s. (2007)

Le Samouraï 1967 Jean-Pierre Melville 3.5 Alain Delon as Jef Costello, the solitary, impassive, impossibly handsome hit man, Nathalie Delon (his quite beautiful wife at the time) as a woman in love with him (he does not reciprocate) who gives him an alibi, François Perier as the police commissaire (again shades of Maigret) who is determined to track down Delon. Understated, laconic crime picture focusing on a few days in the life of a hit man. Delon completely underplays his character with almost no emotion, only occasionally a telltale movement of the eye; he is tall, thin and handsome; he lives in a dilapidated apartment, but is compulsively neat and dapper in his neat suits, trench coat and fedora hat that he always adjusts carefully on his head before he steps out; "a beautiful destructive angel of the dark street." (David Thomson) The quotation in the beginning of the film suggests that he is following a code of honor, but he seems to be completely self-interested – he does his job with no hard feelings. Virtually his only "relationship" is with a single (solitary) caged bird in his apartment that chirps constantly when he is present; it is the bird's chirping that seems to tip off Delon that there is a listening device in his room (the bird is his unconscious or his intuition?); and the lamentable condition of the bird in Delon's last visit to his room presages Delon's end not long afterward. As the film progresses, however, he seems to develop a real feeling for the night club singer who witnessed his first killing; his unwillingness to kill her at the end (the chamber of his pistol has no bullets in it) indicates his willingness to die because he has "betrayed" his code. Arresting is the film style: it is in cool color (rather faded with lots of blues and grays); the shooting tends toward steady, long shots with clean, matter-of-fact editing (in an era where *cinema vérité* techniques and handheld camera were the rage); there is little dialogue – the film can roll up to ten minutes with no one saying anything: perhaps seven or eight minutes with the garage mechanic who changes license plates for him yields only a few words at the end of their second meeting. There are not many surprises and not that much suspense (exception is the gunmen breaking the glass right next to the camera when Jef characteristically goes to his wardrobe to hand up his suit coat). Melville develops long sequences in virtual silence: Jef's car theft and killing of the nightclub owner; the police putting a bug in his apartment (a very long sequence); an exciting police chase in the metro – despite Perier's intense organization, Jef leaps barriers, exits and enters metro cars, etc. to elude the police (a sequence that has had a lot of influence in Japanese and American movies, e.g., in DePalma's 'Dressed to Kill'). As mentioned, Jef does seem to change at the end – he seeks revenge against the mob and he has a feeling for the singer; the ending of the movie seems like a virtual suicide (he is shot down defenseless in the nightclub). Movie is obsessively focused on a single character in a restricted time frame, quite different from 'Cercle rouge' that has much more variety. The pace is slow, and one has the impression that the director was sometimes more interested in the technical challenges of recording a complex action on film than in the progression of the story or suspense. Nevertheless, a lot of fun to watch. (2008)

Samson and Delilah 2009 Warwick Thornton (Australia) 3.0 Rowan McNamara as 15-year-old Aborigine Samson, living in run-down Shantytown, idle, and usually high on sniffing gasoline that he steals from cars and motorcycles; Marissa Gibson as child-like, dutiful and kind Delilah, who at the beginning of the film lives with her grandmother tending to her lovingly. Extremely slow-moving, almost silent film set in the Australian outback probably somewhere near Alice Springs about the impossible living conditions of two Aboriginal teenagers that become attached to one another. The first part of the film deals with the life conditions of the two principals: Samson – unemployed like everyone else in the community – lives with his brothers, whom he has a violent falling out with because of their continual

playing of the same rock songs; and Delilah, sweet and dutiful taking care of her grandmother; when she dies, her relatives take it out on Delilah, beating her with thick sticks (occurs frequently in the film). The two kids gravitate together and migrate in a truck (stolen?) to the nearby city, where they sleep under a highway bridge in the company of an extremely annoying street person who talks and sings inane songs; they live largely by stealing from the local super market. When Delilah is kidnapped and raped (not clear?) by two Aboriginal kids and then hit by a car in a traffic accident, they migrate back to their village, where they are clearly not welcome (a woman trying to beat them with a thick stick!), they find an isolated abandoned house in the desert, where due to the methodical housekeeping skills of Delilah, they set up their ménage. The film ends ambiguously – Samson has sniffed so much gasoline that he seems damaged, but in the final shot the two look into one another's eyes: at least they have one another as a consolation for their miserable lives. The film tries one's patience with its slow pace and long held shots – perhaps to indicate the aimlessness and outward emptiness of the principals' lives, the director holds routine shots like walking across the village, walking down the aisles of the supermarket, sitting on their torn, dirty blankets under the bridge, Samson sniffing gasoline fumes from improvised containers, etc. for much longer than the standard filming style. He also chose to make an almost silent film with not a single word spoken between the two main characters; much like Chaplin in the 1930s, he tells the story with visuals (the arid landscape and the shantytown photographed beautifully) and sound effects (the maddingly repetitive rock songs of Samson's brother, the screeching of the tires of the car when Delilah is kidnapped). Despite the average viewer's resistance to the style and pace, the film builds a real sympathy for the plight of the star-crossed lovers – life has not given them a chance, and they have only each other (maybe) as a hint of salvation. (2013)

San Francisco 1936 W.S. Van Dyke (MGM:Thalberg) 3.0 Clark Gable as rakish and non-believing, but likable music hall impresario, Blackie Norton, in the disreputable San Francisco Barbary Coast; Jeannette MacDonald as toothy, demure, but gifted operatic-style singer from Colorado hired by Gable; Spencer Tracy doing his shtick as local Catholic priest standing up for morality; Jack Holt as rich San Franciscan that wants to marry MacDonald and find her a place in the local opera. Period drama that often reads as a musical with MacDonald performing rousing versions of the song 'San Francisco' (composed specifically for the film) and equally rousing versions of the 'Jewel Song' from Gounod's 'Faust'; the film ends with MacDonald belting out "Nearer My God to Thee" and 'The Battle Hymn of the Republic' with full, glorious MGM chorus. The film is melodramatic and clichéd. Much of it involves a struggle for the "soul" of MacDonald, who stands on the verge of corruption with Blackie, and on the steps of salvation and artistic fame with Holt; an old friend of Blackie, Tracy, is constantly confronting Blackie to keep the girl from falling into his clutches. The Christian subtext is quite intrusive – MacDonald loves the rascally Blackie, but how can she hitch her wagon to this non-believer that mocks religious faith and denies that she has an immortal soul? MacDonald lengthens the film with her indecision. The issue is decided by the 1906 earthquake, expertly and memorably depicted by the art directors and the editors – walls crumble, people run and are buried, the rapid-fire editing of faces of fear and toppling buildings recalls the Odessa Steps sequence from Eisenstein's 'Potemkin'. Fate (God?) clears the way for Blackie with the death of Holt in the rubble; only the fire does not look convincing. The ending is patriotic and religious. In his desperation to find the missing MacDonald, Gable falls on his knees and prays to God for the first time in his life. The sight banishes any further hesitations from MacDonald's heart, and the film ends with the cast standing on a hill singing religious songs and with the enthusiastic promise to rebuild the smoldering city – they seem almost happy that nature has given them this opportunity; subsequent shots show the rebuilt city in the 1930s, only thirty years later. The film illustrates perfectly the type of film produced by Louis Mayer's MGM after the death of Thalberg and popular after the creation of the Production Code Administration in 1934. It more than gets by with its star power, lovely music, and a fabulously edited disaster sequence. (2015)

The Sands of Iwo Jima 1949 Allan Dwan (Republic) 3.5 John Wayne as Sergeant Stryker, John Agar as Conway, the soldier with a chip on his shoulder, Forrest Tucker as Thomas who makes a careless mistake that cost one of his buddy his life, James Brown as Charlie Bass, the only man in the squad who is a friend of Sergeant Stryker. War movie about a squad of marines, who take Tarawa

and then Iwo Jima, being chosen to raise the flag on top of Mount Suribachi. Follows their exploits and experiences from original training in New Zealand to the top of the mountain; focuses almost exclusively on Stryker and his men with little reference to higher ups. Camaraderie is developed among the men, and a lot of mourning at the end when casualties are high on Iwo Jima (Stryker is among those killed).

Individual dramas and melodramas: Stryker is hard ass who learns from his men and his experiences how to be more flexible and to begin communicating with the son he left behind; Conway despises Stryker because of the latter's relationships with Conway's father, whom he had not got on well with; Conway meets a girl in New Zealand and leaves a baby behind. Stryker is hated by most of his men in the beginning, but by the end they admire him and appreciate that he was concerned for their safety. Wayne gives excellent performance – Stryker is tough, though bitter and in the beginning a drunk; he is solid and has a great bulk on the screen; by the end he has matured a bit and regrets his sins and imperfections (AA nomination). The strength of the movie is in the battle footage: individual stagy scenes featuring the Stryker squad are interspersed with excellent newsreel footage that gives the flavor of the battle. The bitterness of the fighting on Iwo Jima comes across pretty vividly; the defenders, who in general are dug in and don't come out to fight above ground, have to be flushed out with flamethrowers. One soldier: "That's war for you. They trade soldiers' lives for a little real estate." Minimum of name-calling and contempt for the Japanese defenders. (2007)

The Sapphires 2012 Wayne Blair (Australia) 2.5 Deborah Mailman as dominating, outspoken leader of the group of four Aboriginal singing girls; Jessica Mauboy as Julie, pretty actress that is hard to remember; Shari Sebbens as Kay, a light-skinned cousin who has been passing as white in Melbourne; Miranda Tapsell as youngest of the group with a son already and a dynamite voice; Chris O'Dowd as washed up alcoholic Irish musician who takes the girls on and leads them to stardom. Over-the-top feel-good film about four light-skinned Aboriginal girls with fabulous voices in the 1960s that are taught by O'Dowd how to sing US Soul music and then make a name for themselves as performers entertaining GIs in Vietnam; the debt the film owes to 'The Commitments' is unmistakable. Despite several references to racial discrimination (usually prim and proper Australian white women sneering at the "monkeys" and stealing light-skinned Aboriginals for integration into mainstream Australian society), the film is bathed in a positive, optimistic glow – wonderful families on the scenically beautiful Murray River mission, enthusiastic acceptance by their audiences, triumphant return home and intimations of bright futures in a land of opportunity; none of the anger and intensity of, for example, 'Rabbit-Proof Fence'. The highlight of the film is clearly the singing of the Soul songs, which are performed and danced expertly by the quartet. The unimpressive script tries to add interest and drama through references to 60s trends in social justice (television scenes following the assassination of Martin Luther King), some combat excitement in Vietnam when the kids are attacked in a military camp (US Army that incompetent?), and developing romantic entanglements: Cynthia pursues a relationship with an American GI (Tory Kittles trying to look like Denzel Washington); and Gail getting it on with former ne'er-do-well O'Dowd. None of the narrative ploys creates much viewer involvement and suspense: the romantic stories are uninteresting and not richly developed; the racial justice line seems inserted more or less at random and in any case does not sit well with such a good-humored story; and the Vietnam scenes don't seem realistic. The interaction among the girls is sometimes interesting – jealousy that the media pays so much attention to Julie, conflict between Gail and Kay about the latter's white existence for the last ten years of her life, etc. The saving grace of the film is the songs and the performances of the girls. (2013)

Saturday Night Fever 1979 John Badham 2.5 John Travolta in breakthrough role, Karen Lynn Gorney uninteresting and forced as his dance partner, Donna Pescow as small, cute lost soul who wants Tony to be her boyfriend, a bunch of deadend kids from the streets of Italian New York. Legendary dance movie, part dance musical, part uplifting social drama, that feeds on the cocky energy of Travolta: he has a lot of energy and pizzazz in his real life set against the background of his job in the paint store (he charms the socks off customers) and his family, most of whom are clueless second generation Italians who are traumatized when Tony's brother decides to give up the priesthood. The social background is vivid -- kind of 'Mean Streets' without the organized crime; the friends of Tony aren't really mean, just clueless and obviously going nowhere; the highlight of the week is going to the Odyssey 2001 Saturday

night to dance their shoes off. Sex is also important; they cruise around in an ancient huge Chevy and take turns using the back seat for quick sex while friends often watch casually through the window as they 'make it'. Several dance sequences shot in red light with a lot of camera movement and angles (very different from the classic camera work of Fred Astaire); the scenes in which Travolta dances with a partner are pretty dull and unexceptionable (Gorney who is not a strong dancer), but his solo performance about halfway through the movie is a showstopper with his cocky hip movements and prancings. You have to like the disco music of the Bee Gees to enjoy the dance sequences. Tony moves toward a sort of salvation, which is not however embodied in winning the dance contest at the end (he is honest enough to know that he should not have won and that the contest results were rigged to make sure the home boy came out on top), but in his rather hazy decision at the end to move out of his parents' home and to set out on his own, helped along by Gorney who is constantly dropping celebrity names somehow associated with her glamorous job. In the meantime he has to go through a personal catharsis of remorse after his abortive rape of Gorney and a realization of his deadend status after one of his friends falls from the Verrazano Straits Bridge. The main weak point of the movie is the casting of Gorney in such an important role -- she is not a good dancer, she is not attractive, and her acting usually seems false: we don't believe it when she plays dumb with a thick New York accent. Entertaining but less than "Strictly Ballroom" that plays it strictly for laughs and wows. (2006)

Saved! 2004 Brian Dannelly 2.0 Jena Malone, Mandy Moore, Macauley Culkin, Mary Louis Parker. Teenage movie with paper cutter characters, and rather objectionable idea that religious fundamentalism is ridiculous, anti-human, objectionable. Studies the impact of living in an environment where Jesus is on the top of everything, the force on everybody's mind all the time (instead of a mysterious presence lurking under epiphenomena). Movie does have energy, good music, attractive teenage actors, but the sympathetic kids are the ones who object to, refuse to give in to, make fun of the Christian fundamentalists. The Goth Jew and the paraplegic skeptic (Culkin) are the characters we sympathize with; we are led to sympathize with the gay kid, who is delighted that he has fathered a child with Jena, but who, after being sent to a fundamentalist deprogramming center, comes back with a homosexual life-long partner (not of course with a penchant for free gay sex). Most of the fundamentalists are intolerant, and it turns out that the leader of the 'Jewels' is a hypocrite, who actually spray painted anti-Christian slogans on school walls in order to frame the good, non-religious kids. Feel-good ending that appeals to teenagers. An acceptable teen movie. (2005)

Saving Mr. Banks 2013 John Lee Hancock 3.0 Emma Thompson as crusty, negative, P.L. Travers, English matron who has grave reservations about selling the rights to her 'Mary Poppins' to Disney for filming; Tom Hanks as obviously white-washed depiction of Walt Disney as neatly coiffed and dressed, sensitive, avuncular studio head determined to keep his promise to his daughters to make a film version of the book; Colin Farrell cute and handsome as Travers' affectionate, alcoholic father in the many flashbacks that interrupt the story at the Disney Studio; Paul Giamatti as Travers' smiling, positive chauffeur, the "only American she has ever liked"; Bradley Whitford as the scriptwriter often nonplussed by Travers' inexplicable obstructions -- e.g., she forbids them to use the color red in the production; B.J. Novak and Jason Schwartzman as the very gifted Disney in-house songwriters also dumbfounded by Travers. Feel-good, in-house Disney treatment of the story of Disney's 20-year-long effort -- ultimately successful -- to get Travers' permission to make the movie 'Mary Poppins' by melting her with music and sentiment. The strongest aspect of the film is the performance of Thompson, who plays the hyper-formal, cranky Travers to perfection; Hanks is also good as Disney, but one always feels that we are being presented a thoroughly scrubbed version of the creator of the Magic Kingdom. Thompson's reluctance is illuminated by sentimental, (overly) frequent flashbacks to her early life as a child in Australia, where she lived with her unhappy parents in the middle of scrubby country and had to witness helplessly the decline of her father from alcoholism and his early death (apparently from tuberculosis). The climax of the film comes when Travers discovers that Disney plans to use animation for the penguins in the dance sequence (something he had promised not to do) and she picks up stakes and returns to London. She is surprised when Disney himself turns up on her doorstep and persuades her through reference to his own childhood experiences that she needs to forgive her father (he didn't keep his promise to her that he would never

leave her) and herself (for, she thinks, contributing to his death by secretly providing him with alcohol). Watching the Sherman brothers develop the catchy songs while fitting them to the film's characters and narrative situation is delightful. Somewhat less engaging are instances of Disney sentiment, e.g., shots of Thompson hugging or sitting at her breakfast table with an enormous stuffed Mickey Mouse -- to show that she has been weaned to the Disney point of view. Still fun. (2014)

Saving Private Ryan 1998 Steven Spielberg 4.0 Tom Hanks as usual avuncular dependable self, although adversely affected by his combat experience; Tom Sizemore as his friend and reliable sergeant back-up; Matt Damon in smaller role at end as the soldier they are looking for; a half dozen young actors as the soldiers accompanying Hanks on his mission. Outstanding film about Normandy Invasion and war: Hanks is in charge of expedition into the Normandy hinterland to find James Ryan, last surviving of four sons, three of whom killed in action (General Marshall has an affecting scene where he order his reluctant subordinates to find Ryan and bring him back). The battle scenes are absolutely terrific: 1) first 30-minute segment – unbelievably brutal and bloody depiction of the Omaha Beach invasion from soldiers point of view with little rhyme or reason as to what is going on (cf. Waterloo scene in ‘Red and Black’); 2) others include the battle for the town in the pouring rain as the soldier dies because he tries to save the life of a child; the taking of the radar installation, which is seen from the point of view of the frightened non-combatant Upham (he is brought along because he speaks French and German); and the late defense of a key bridge, where battle is expertly choreographed to draw the German Tigers into a trap (What are tanks doing in a town with close-hand-to-hand combat?). Often exciting, as when a wall in the French town suddenly crumbles and Germans and Americans face one another, shouting in panic, and the Americans finally mowing down the numerically inferior Germans; and when Hanks’ advancing tank (he is shooting his pistol at it) is suddenly destroyed by a Mustang from the rear! (following up Spielberg’s memorable glorification of the P-51 in ‘Empire of the Sun’); the arrival of American forces then turns the tide, while Hanks dies from his wounds. Spielberg makes the effort for maximum realism – the confusion of battle, the men yelling at one another and barely making themselves heard, the devastating impact of bullets and explosives – limbs torn off, the sound of the bullets hitting chests and propelling the bodies backwards. Hanks is his usual affable self – sensitive, good soldier (experienced from North Africa and Italy), with fair amount of weariness and doubts about whether the achievement of military objectives is worth the lives expended, but he always does his duty. All six or seven soldiers are well delineated without becoming maudlin. The only sentimental scene is frame scene beginning and ending the film with older guy (Ryan 40 years later?) tearfully visiting graveyard in present day Normandy; he is obsessed with whether he has followed Hanks’ instruction when he dies – “Earn it.” – i.e. do good in payment for your survival. In part antiwar film: men are called on by General Marshall to find Ryan when the real issue is to defeat the Germans! Men gripe a lot but still do what they are told; the group departs from its mission by taking on Germans when they get the chance – e.g., radar installation and the defense of the bridge at the end. Beautiful tragic sense at the end – all these young men sacrificed including Tom Hanks who dies after the tank is destroyed and the Germans flee – such a waste, and yet they did a great thing. (2006; 2014)

Say Anything 1989 Cameron Crowe 3.5 John Cusack as unpredictable high school grad with no educational or professional plans who acts on impulse, i.e., he has to have Ione Skye, Ione Skye as valedictorian brain who has very close relationship with her father and who is unconsciously looking for a nice guy to help her escape despite receiving a scholarship to study in England, John Mahoney excellent as Skye’s divorced father -- he deeply loves his daughter and will sacrifice anything (say/do anything?) to further her happiness, Lily Taylor as quirky best friend of Cusack who advises him to go for it with Skye despite being obviously mismatched. Wonderful minor masterpiece about two unlikely kids hooking up in the most unlikely of circumstances (they seem completely unsuited for one another). All the actors are charming and yet real -- no Hollywood stereotyping or predictable outcomes (impossible to predict how the film will turn out). Excellent deep characters whom we become attached to and care about: Cusack is so pleasant, easy-going and malleable -- he will do (say?) anything to please the woman he is convinced is his match made in heaven; Mahoney turns out to have broken the law and stretched morality in order to please his daughter (he is pursued by the IRS and ends up in prison at the end of the film); Skye has to

work through many things -- her attachment to her father, her sense of betrayal by him when she learns that he has been cheating the old folks that he pretends to be helping, how much of herself she will give to a guy whose passion in life is kick-boxing. The film is terrifically optimistic: at the end on the plane they are taking together to London (Skye is afraid of flying and very nervous), Cusack tells her that as soon as the 'Fasten Seat Belts' sign goes on, then you know everything will be ok; and they wait and wait, and then 'ding!' and that is the end of the movie. We know that they will live happily ever after, however mismatched: they will live through the England experience, the father will be out of prison and rebuilding his life in a few months (Cusack has already had a heart-to-heart with Dad in the visiting yard), and somehow the three of them will work out the situation. Film has genuine low-key humor (while Skye is giving her gloomy valedictorian address, all Cusack can say is 'Look at those eyes!'). The viewer is totally involved in the film because the characters are so lovable and sympathetic. A great first film! (2006)

The Scapegoat 2012 Charles Sturridge 2.5 Matthew Rhys playing the double role of the arrogant, brutal Johnny Spence and the more gentle John, who is recruited by the former in a provincial public house to replace him; Eileen Atkins as the morphine-addicted Lady Spence; Alice Orr-Ewing as the submissive wife of Johnny; Andrew Scott as his brother Paul; Phoebe Nicholls As Charlotte, the servant woman who keeps the household together; Jodhi May as Johnny's bitter and angry sister. Highly morphed adaptation of the Daphne Du Maurier novel, removed from France to the provinces of Britain, where the Spence family runs an out-of-date foundry, and transformed toward the end to emphasize lurid melodrama rather than existential psychological poetry. The film was made for British TV and snapped up by Netflix in 2013. Rhys does an excellent job portraying his extremely different protagonists, although on many occasions the viewer wonders why John, immersed only for several weeks in his newfound family, takes it all so seriously; he comes across as a saint. Johnny is not just a cad, but a criminal, who returns to the manor house (big sprawling, 19th century neo-gothic pile) to murder his wife (he fails thanks to John), beat up his girlfriend, and then try to murder John (he fails, and his body is the one that ends up in the foundry furnace, never to be seen again). The film ends with a surprise – since Johnny is dead and his body safely disposed of, John decides to stay with his new family and minister to their ongoing happiness – Johnny's daughter Piglet is happy, his brother has found new happiness with his wife (Johnny had had an affair with her), and even angry sister seems to have forgiven John/Jonny. Whereas in the novel, John returns to England disillusioned with little idea about his future except to immerse himself in the austerities of a Trappist monastery, in this more optimistic adaptation John just assumes his new identity now that the original Johnny has been done away with. Nice Du Maurier touches, such as the dog realizing that John is not the same man as his master, and Johnny's mistress understanding that John is a different person because he makes love more tenderly than the original. Fairly good film ruined for this viewer by familiarity with the literary original (although admittedly 'The Scapegoat' was not the best Du Maurier work). (2013)

Le Scaphandre et le papillon 2007 Julian Schnabel 3.5 Mathieu Amalric plays Jean-Domnique Bauby, a 42-year old editor of *Elle*, who is completely paralyzed (except for movement in his left eye) after a stroke, while he maintains complete use of reasoning and imagination; Max von Sydow, a "rogue of the old school", who shows deep emotion as the elderly father of Jean-Do; Emmanuelle Seigner as his loyal and loving former partner (never married) and father of his three children; Marie-Josée Croze as the pretty and sensitive speech therapist who teaches Jean-Do how to communicate with his left eyelid; Anne Consigny as his amanuensis who helps him write his book. Very moving film about the short life of Jean-Do from his stroke until his death (seemingly less than a year later) from pneumonia. In the meantime, he writes the famous book upon which the film is based, showing enormous patience and determination. The film is shot entirely from Jean-Do's point of view: at the beginning and the end through his remaining functioning eye (objects slowly come into focus in the beginning, and slowly dissolve at the end as he dies); and the rest of the film through an objective camera that records his actions and experiences. Jean-Do's experiences are filled with emotion and imagination: he regrets the harm that he has done to his loved ones (especially Seigner), he tries valiantly to deal with the deep emotion of his elderly father, he is determined not to indulge in self-pity but to glory in what remains to him – his mind, his emotion, his memory, his imagination (which is visualized through metaphorical images of alpine

scenes, a glacier calving into the water, and flashbacks to his former life – the women he mistreated, his glamorous and powerful life as editor of *Elle*, the moment when he has the stroke in his sports car with his son; his predicament is often presented as a visual contrast between the diving suit [imprisoned, confined] and the butterfly [imagination, freedom]). The film is very moving: despite being 99% imprisoned inside a body that would not respond (so-called “locked-in syndrome”), he is determined to retain his “humanity”, to be creative and active, not to give in to self-pity and despair. Despite appearances, the film is not depressing, but is a moving tribute to a man’s courage and will. This is a film that leaves a permanent mark on the viewer. (2007)

Scarface 1932 Howard Hawks (prod. Howard Hughes) 4.0 Paul Muni, George Raft, Ann Dvorak, Boris Karloff. The original version remade by DePalma. Very hard-hitting with a lot of gang violence with cars roaring down the street and machine guns sputtering blowing out windows of restaurants and other automobiles. Set in Chicago where rival gangs (all Italians) are battling for control of the beer, etc. trade in the Depression. DePalma reproduces the plot pretty faithfully. George Raft is iconic in his fancy dress (always impeccable) and his continual flipping of a coin, sometimes by habit sometimes to show his bravado. Dvorak as Tony’s sister is a bit flat as an actress until she gets very upset. Muni is convincing (although less mannered than Pacino) as the Italian Tony – uneducated, not too smart, verbally challenged (he is no match for Poppy’s vocabulary), wants success and power, extremely ambitious, and basically over his head -- he thinks the answer to all issues is to blow away the opposition. Film works as drama because of focus on the tragic progress of Tony; he causes his own destruction and drags his family and all his friends into the abyss. (Hawks’ Tony is easier to relate to than the monster DePalma creates in his version.) Direction is good -- expressionist. A lot of deep shadows in quiet scenes, and inventive cutting, mise-en-scene, and camera movement in action scenes. The opening murder where only visual is shadows, and the murderer whistles a Verdi theme as he stalks his prey; calliope, Poppy, Raft scene with coin flip and cutting; murder of Boris Karloff, where he is shot while he is bowling the ball, then camera cuts to pins, with one spinning and then finally falling; Johnny threatening, then killing Johnny Lovo after he punches out the glass door; the final shootout with the police (much less violent and apocalyptic than DePalma’s version). Movie sometimes adopts a propaganda theme: we know we are showing you terrible things; we want you the citizens to do something about organized crime; the only solution is action by the federal government. Nice visual metaphor in neon sign: “The World is Yours: Cook’s Tours” repeated several times. Really an elegant movie – the key scenes, the way it is put together. (2006)

Scarface 1982 Brian DePalma 3.5 Al Pacino, Bauer, Michelle Pfeiffer, Murray Abraham, Robert Loggia, Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio. Very bloody and garish remake of 1931 Howard Hawks classic, set this time in Miami at time of Cuban criminal “invasion.” Pacino as small-time crook, who by utter obsessive ruthlessness rises to the top of Cuban organized crime pyramid, becoming king of the cocaine trade in South Florida. Pacino plays long movie in Cuban accent. Tony Montana seems almost insane from the beginning; a man who cares about nothing but success and money, who never has any fun, or lets his hair down; his only friend is Manolo (Bauer), whom he murders brutally in a rage when he learns that he has married his sister, whom he has been trying to “protect” (dominate) from the beginning of his success; Tony’s early affection for Elvira (Pfeiffer) soon degenerates into indifference and contempt. Tony has gutter language; barely a sentence that does not have “fuck.” Completely ruthless drive for power that can result only in destruction; the ultimate “crime doesn’t pay” moral. Pacino spirals downhill violently; seems paranoid; has terrible bad temper; gets into trouble with his Bolivian partner; goes over the edge in last half hour when he is snorting large amounts of cocaine (last scene he has large piles of it in front of him on the desk and it is smeared on his nose every time he takes a big scoop into his nostril). Miami has ‘Miami Vice’ look with art deco buildings, and fluorescent neon colors; earlier crime boss Lopez (Loggia) has a little taste, but Pacino with his massive red walls, baroque statuary, and black draped, massive office, is baroque grandiloquence beyond any Italian opera. Final scene is an incredible burst of terminal violence, with heavy weapons and many deaths, as Tony with his heavy artillery fights to the end with heroism and cocaine-induced fanaticism; seems almost inhuman and indestructible. A certain pathos for Pacino, since he is incapable of stopping halfway or restraining himself, but he must

follow his star to utter destruction. Film has trademark DePalma operatic sense: big gestures, grand sets, many deaths, and impressive music score – often symphonic but also pop – by Giorgio Moroder. Movie is a monument to excess and at times drives away the viewer, but it holds your attention and generates wonder and even some pathos. (2005)

Scarfies 1999 Robert Sarkies 3.0 Willa O'Neill as sensible, attractive, freckle-faced Emma, a student just arriving at Otago University in Dunedin; Neill Rea as also mostly sensible student who is the first inhabitant of the broken-down rooming house the five students inhabit in Dunedin; Ashleigh Seagar as blond, rich-girl bitch, who gets it on noisily with empty-headed Taika Waititi in the beginning of the film; Charlie Bleakley as wide-eyed, innocent virgin Graham, who however turns out to be a bit on sadistic side; Jon Brazier as the violent, unattractive guy that is the rightful owner of the marijuana plants the kids find in the basement of their run-down house. Entertaining, well directed, sometimes scattered and poorly finished little thriller about five Otago University students who room in a scary-looking house overlooking the Otago Peninsula; when they find a resplendent marijuana garden in the basement, they decide to harvest and sell it; when the rightful owner returns and objects strenuously to the “theft”, they knock him unconscious, tie him to a chair in the basement, and, amidst all their personality conflicts, try to figure out what to do; although they never come up with a satisfactory solution, the script bails them out allowing Brazier to be arrested by the police (obligingly they make no mention of the marijuana sale), and O'Neill, who began the film engagingly with her arrival in Dunedin and her search for a place to stay, decides to give up, hitchhike out of town in a double-trailer big rig; the last scene has the truck grinding northward up the grade with damp, overcast Dunedin in the background. The film adequately although sparingly evokes the atmosphere of Dunedin – damp, overcast, picturesque, provincial, with a few pictures of the university (one short scene of Emma looking bored in a law class is the only indication that anyone ever goes to school). Four of the five principals are engaging, especially O'Neill, whose cute, sensible personality provides the narrative focus of the film. The students are presented as immature and clueless – when confronted with a decision (what to do with the marijuana, what to do with Brazier) – they shout in panic, discuss aimlessly, and finally vote. The point of the film is sometimes the evil that is resident in all of us: the majority indulges in aimless torture of Brazier through electroshocks to his head; they also decide to murder him by a 3-2 vote, but they are unable to carry out their decision; the moral integrity of narrative is saved by Emma, who revolts against the murder verdict and leads the kids to a less objectionable moral solution – bullshit the police. The film is very well directed, including some eye-catching scenes: when the kids open the door to the marijuana culture room, they are inundated with bright light to the accompaniment of Handel's ‘Hallelujah’ chorus; another shot has the camera descending from a higher story to the basement, passing through the squeaky mattress where Seagar and Waititi are going at it, through the floorboards where a rat is running screen left, to the basement where the marijuana is luxuriating under the lights. Would like to see another film by the director. (2013)

The Scarlet Empress 1934 Josef von Sternberg (Paramount) 4.0 Marlene Dietrich as young innocent Sophia, who then learns the way of the Russian court, and who becomes ambitious when her unpredictable, loony husband becomes Emperor, Sam Jaffe as balmy, quirky Peter III who is locked in his own childlike (although cruel) world, Louise Dresser absolutely marvelous as Empress Elizabeth, who plays the role like a fussy, scolding, though canny Midwestern matron concerned mainly with her son producing an heir to the throne, John Lodge as officer and lover of both empresses, always hidden under his big fur hat and massive uniform and speaking through clenched teeth. Extraordinary excessive, baroque movie sprung from the febrile imagination of Sternberg. Follows the life and career of Catherine from her innocent childhood, whence she is shipped off to marry the future Emperor of Russia; arrived at the court, she is seduced by Lodge and takes lovers; the mésentente with Peter blossoms into hatred and her murder of him; the triumphant climax of the film is Catherine and her guard riding up the steps of the throne room on their horses to the exultant ringing of bells. Catherine is particularly good – sexy and riveting – as the innocent young Sophia; she tends to retire behind Sternberg's mise-en-scene in second half of movie. Close-ups of her are entrancing; she is often shot through gauze, veils, in shadows, etc. Russia is depicted as wild, barely civilized, always on the verge of anarchy, completely decadent (allowable since Russia was an adversary Communist country in 1934; one would never have treated

England that way). The art decoration of the palace is truly bizarre – characters are surrounded by images of gargoyles, twisted crucifixions, emaciated sickly old people, people being put to the torture, always in deep shadows, candles flickering, huge doors that take several people to close them, etc. Images inside the Orthodox churches are more realistic (minus the morbid baroque), but there as always the mise-en-scène is cluttered, rich, complex, where it makes trouble for Catherine. Beautiful sequence when Catherine throws her locket of Lodge out the window, and it laboriously but gracefully drops from one exquisite tree branch to another until it touches the ground. Makes much use of the music of Mendelssohn and especially Tchaikovsky. Sternberg makes over generous use of long montage sequences: the young Catherine imagines the cruelty of state power through a montage of torture scenes; at the end, a long sequence details the gathering of the anti-Peter military forces, their entry into the church where they receive the blessing of the priests, the ringing of Russian bells, and then on their horses into the palace and the throne room to take power for Catherine; meanwhile, Peter is strangled to death by one of Catherine's lover officers under a huge Orthodox cross. Such films are rarely seen in Hollywood. Mise-en-scène run amok. A good thing it came out in 1934, since it would have never been approved by the Breen Office after then. (2006)

The Scarlet Pimpernel 1934 Alexander Korda (Producer) 3.0 Trevor Howard makes his name as a star as an effete English baronet who doubles as a daring activist who rescues French aristocrats from 'Madame Guillotine' (1792); Merle Oberon high foreheaded beauty who is wife of baronet and wishes he were a real man like he used to be; Raymond Massie as low-key but persistent French ambassador with a sly smile who is commissioned by Robespierre to find and destroy the Pimpernel (a common red flower that Howard leaves on the scene after his rescues); Nigel Bruce as jolly, empty-headed Prince of Wales. Entertaining but often static 'swashbuckler' that specializes in dialogue (well written) rather than action or sword play. Scene is 1792 and heads are falling in France as the bloodthirsty Revolution – depicted by leering, cheering crowds on the site of the executions – decapitates hundreds of poor French aristocrats. The only action scenes are in the beginning of the film, when executions are depicted in the Place de Grève and the Pimpernel rescuers ride through the countryside to elude the furious French pursuers. Oberon does creditable job, as does Massie, but the show belongs to Howard, who plays the role of the court fop pungently with catty talk, limp wrists, and lace cuffs: he refrains from revealing his true identity when his wife expresses her displeasure in his wimpish behavior; he entertains groups of stylish ladies with his witticisms often at the expense of courtiers who don't get their fashions right; he teases a bamboozled Massie more than once about his awkward and unstylish way of tying his cravat. Behind the scenes he commands a group of commandos who are masters of disguise (an early scene has Howard convincingly disguised as an old hag) and ready to move into action at the drop of a hat. The parallel to Douglas Fairbanks' 'The Mask of Zorro' 1920 is unmistakable. Film is a bit confused from political point of view: the liberty-loving and idealistic English nation puts its best men on the line to save well-dressed French aristocrats, who – according to Massie – have been oppressing theirs serfs for centuries. Online print is very poor – fuzzy picture and crackling soundtrack. (2007)

The Scarlet Pimpernel 1934 Harold Young (Britain)(producer Alexander Korda) 2.5 Nigel Bruce amusing as the effete, foolish, clothes horse Prince of Wales; Leslie Howard as Sir Percy Blakeney, the Scarlet Pimpernel, smart and a master of disguise (a little like Sherlock Holmes) with a civilian identity as an effete, foppish, cynical, limp, and dandyish English aristocrat (like Don Diego in 'Zorro') that cares only about clothes; Raymond Massey as Chauvelin, charming but vicious French ambassador to England (still peacetime) and Robespierre's assistant to pursue the Pimpernel ("I am sick of this twaddle about the poor, persecuted aristocrats"); the extremely beautiful Merle Oberon – very pretty small-breasted décolletage – as Lady Blakeney, in an ambiguous situation because she is French – she doesn't realize that her effete husband is really the Pimpernel. An unimaginatively filmed costume drama with an effective performance from Massey, who overshadows the rather bloodless Howard. The narrative focuses on the mysterious Scarlet Pimpernel, who with the help of a team of British agents whisks aristocrats out of France in 1793 to help them escape from the guillotine. It follows the efforts of Chauvelin in England to discover the identity of the Pimpernel through Blakeney's wife; in the contest of wits, the elusive Blakeney comes out on top – in the library, where he escapes because Chauvelin cannot

imagine that the effete Blakeney could possibly be a hero; and in the final scene in an inn in Boulogne (pronounced by the English as “Burloin”), where Blakeney humiliates Chauvelin by masquerading his men as French soldiers and then locking him under a trap door in a cellar. The French revolutionaries are bloodthirsty, unkempt, unshaven with no manners; they cheer when the guillotine falls on somebody’s head. The English however are disciplined and sensible under the command of the Pimpernel; the film is clearly royalist, and quite patriotic with Howard quoting Shakespeare’s “happy breed” soliloquy at the end of the film as a ship brings Blakeney and his wife back to the land of the free. The sets and the 1790s costumes are first-rate, and Oberon is always a delight to behold especially in her low-cut gown. The film has no action sequences (the sword fights are from ‘Scaramouche’). The London-based intrigue that occupies most of the film is pretty dull, perhaps with the exception of the scene where Oberon realizes her husband is the Pimpernel when she sees a logo of that flower on the portrait of one of his ancestors. (2014)

Scarlet Street 1945 Fritz Lang (Wr. Dudley Nichols; prod. Walter Wanger) 4.0 Edward G. Robinson as respectable timid cashier who falls for the dangerous woman; Joan Bennett as beautiful femme fatale, gum-cracking, venal and low class, who has contempt and distaste for Robinson but takes up with him for the money; Dan Duryea as wiseacre, not-so-smart, low-life boyfriend. An obvious follow-up to 1944’s ‘Woman in the Window’ with the same production company, director, and cast. Engaging melodrama about mousey cashier in financial institution, who falls for femme fatale when he saves her from a beating by Duryea in the dark streets, and then progresses inevitably toward his destruction dragging the girlfriend’s boyfriend with him. Set in studio-created New York, usually night and dark either in the streets or in dark apartments. Joan Bennett good scene – she appears to be crying on bed, but when she turns toward Robinson, she is laughing hysterically, which drives EGR into rage and he murders her with an ice pick. Cast all excellent, including Duryea; Robinson is excellent in his portrayal of the nuances of the man caught in the erotic net. Marvelous filming: Lang uses roving camera tracking telltale objects; tracks in at key moments, shifts to include new persons in dialogue; high camera to show feeling of insignificance, shooting Robinson through the window of the cashier’s cage to show his isolation. A lot about art, since Chris (EGR) is an amateur artist, whose works begin to sell (in epilogue his portrait of Bennet goes for \$10,000), but Bennet gets credit for being the artist; his art is a kind of naïve, surrealist fantasy style that catches on in modernist-friendly New York (paintings have no perspective); the expressionist portrait of Bennet with the blank face and the outsized eyelashes that he paints toward the end is his masterpiece. The focus of the film is increasing corruption of Robinson: he begins to steal from wife and from his business (he is almost arrested toward the end) to support his girlfriend (he apparently has had no sex however); he entices wife’s ex-husband to burglarize her apartment; he murders Bennet; then he remains silent while Duryea goes to the electric chair; all of this because of being a sucker for a woman! Few films noir show such a devastating impact of the femme fatale. Production code is preserved at the end, since, although Robinson is not legally punished for the crime, he is attacked by conscience qualms that turn him into a street person; last scene is wandering down a New York street with the voices of his bad conscience whispering in his ear; Duryea and Bennett are speaking to one another in the afterlife. Music is mostly one version or another of ‘Melancholy Baby.’ Very effective tragic melodrama reflecting the fatalistic pessimism of Lang that extends even into Robinson’s conscience – he will never have any peace (not as fortunate as Martin Landau in ‘Crimes and Misdemeanors’, whose conscience lays his crime to rest). Few Hollywood films of the era are quite so pessimistic/realistic in showing the destruction of a good man. (2009) (2017)

School Daze 1988 Spike Lee 2.5 Spike Lee plays Half-Pint (shaved head, backwards cap, sports sweatshirt), a nerd determined to be a Gammite pledge; Giancarlo Espinoza as precise-talking head of the Gammas; Larry Fishburne as cousin of Half-Pint and rabble-rousing, anti-South Africa leader in Mission College (Morehouse College in Atlanta), “all Black image”; Tisha Campbell-Martin as head of the Wannabes and a good singer and dancer; Ossie Davis as football coach who pumps up his guys before the game by invoking the Bible; Bill Nunn as normal undergraduate; Samuel L. Jackson as provocative townie who mocks and denounces the college guys when they are eating in Kentucky Fried Chicken. Often slow-moving, highly political film critiquing disunity among young blacks, and ending in the

famous (and awkward) shout by Fishburne “Wake Up!”, later joined by his arch-enemy Espinoza. Film focuses on the rivalry – even hostility – between conformist kids who brag constantly about the number of women they have had, work within the system, and just want a good job when they graduate; and Fishburne, who wants Blacks to unite behind his “back to Africa” movement and force the university to divest of companies invested in South Africa. Much satire of Black fraternities that ape the antics of fraternities in mainstream American colleges chasing girls, conducting elaborate (and long-winded) initiation ceremonies (e.g., blindfolded squishing bananas in a public toilet), putting on a homecoming dance, going into town with friends to get some fried chicken, etc. The most amusing aspect of the film is the rivalry between the two groups of girls, the Gamma Rays, who are the light-skinned, Wanna-Be girls with styled, straightened hair, and the rival Jiggaboos, who have nappy hair, bigger butts, and overall a more African appearance: they have the face-off dance about hair styles between Jiggaboos and Wannabes in Madame Re-Re’s Beauty parlor – energetic jazz dancing to hot trumpets with a lot of bumping and grinding, leaping and running. Otherwise, a lot of musical interludes that have little to do with the film’s narrative line. Male-female relations are depicted as dysfunctional and exploitative: guys at least have to pretend they are chasing women; the girls are confused; Espinoza forces Campbell to have sex with Half-Pint so he can reproach her with infidelity and break up with her. The film has little plot worth following, but presents a series of romantic, political, and cultural conflicts among the Black kids, until Lee suddenly stops it all with Fishburne’s cry; the film ends with the whole cast looking at the audience challenging Black Americans to bury their differences in a common cause (which he leaves ambiguous). (2012)

The School of Rock 2003 Richard Linklater 2.5 Joan Cusack as well-played uptight principal (with unattractive darkened teeth, thin, nervous face, lines around her mouth) of an expensive private prep school – she affords lots of laughs when confronted with cool rockers. Sarah Silverman in small role as shrewish, bossy, martinet girlfriend of Joe Black’s friend (Mike White) – she completely dominates her hyper nerdy, weak-kneed boyfriend. One-character show – Jack Black – a slacker who needs money, takes a substitute teaching job at the prep school, and somehow gets away with teaching his kids (6th grade) how to play and perform rock music without uptight Cusack finding out (is she deaf or stupid?). Black is big, aggressive, hyper-active, very mobile facial features, scenery chewing almost all the time, mugging rock performance, over the top with energy, an accomplished bullshitter able to come up with the right story for every embarrassing occasion; but with a heart of gold, a natural affinity for the children whom he doesn’t intend to corrupt, and an uncanny ability to communicate with them and motivate them. All the children are very cute and gifted musicians and singers. The aim in this classic formulaic plot aimed at box office success is to get the kids into a rock contest, “the Battle of the Bands”. Cusack is quite funny about her insecurities as principal when Black manages to get a beer in her, and when confronted by a near naked rocker at the end. Rather cleans up rock and roll – rockers who get high aren’t really musicians; anger is an important part of it; you need to challenge authority and “stick it to the man”; and it makes a lot of musical demands. The music, which is almost all at the end, is classic rock and entertaining. Parents are classic upper middle class people shrilly and bitchily ambitious for their children – focus on the nerdy Chinese guy and the lawyer-looking white guy. First climax is discovery of Black’s imposture; but then kids organize the “field trip” themselves without the parents or the principal knowing about it. Before concert the prayer, “God of Rock, thank you for this chance to kick ass.” The concert has parents and principal in attendance, and of course they are won over in wild enthusiasm when the little girl backup singers shout “Kick some ass”! The kids don’t win, but everyone in the audience is furious, and the kids know they are great. A Rocky-style feel-good film that has little to offer in plot, characters, and theme. The viewer’s reaction depends on how much Jack Black you can take. (2007)

The Sea Hawk 1940 Michael Curtiz (Warners) 3.0 Errol Flynn dashing, handsome but a bit slight and effeminate (wavy, permed hair) as English pirate captain harassing the hapless Spaniards with the tacit support of Queen Elizabeth; Brenda Marshall rather wooden and matronly as his love interest; Claude Rains also somewhat effeminate (outrageous peaked hairdo) as the special ambassador of King Philip to the court of Elizabeth; Flora Robson stands out as the savvy, decisive, yet feminine queen (she flirts shamelessly with Flynn hiding her indulgent smile behind her fan); Henry Daniell effective as

member of Elizabeth's cabinet who is cooperating with the Spanish. Beautifully produced, somewhat too typical studio swashbuckler about English privateers preying on Spanish gold in the years before the dispatch of the Spanish Armada. Starts off with a bang – scene in Philip's council room to fill in the situation ca. 1580 followed by slam-bang action sequence in which Flynn and his crew board the Albatross attack, capture, and sink the Spanish ship taking Rains and Marshall to England. Flynn's encounter with Marshall initiates a tepid romance that never gets beyond the weeping stage. More interesting is Flynn's semi-flirtatious interaction with Robson (the queen), who officially disapproves of her favorite's Spanish bashing in order to maintain a superficial peace with Spain, whose government is known to be preparing the Armada against their English cousins; but she gives him behind-the-scenes support – "The Queen disapproves, but Elizabeth is forever grateful." Flynn's failed attempt to capture the Spanish gold on the Isthmus of Panama is dull and obviously filmed on studio locations trying to imitate tropical vegetation. The film ends with the machinations of the Spaniards and their agents foiled, and the English joyfully and patriotically summoning their fleet together to defend themselves against the Armada. In an obvious reference to the hapless situation of Britain in 1940, Robson gives a rousing speech pledging her undying efforts to defend a free people against threats from foreign tyrants, etc. The film has strong points within the context of the Hollywood style: a compelling star; a lively, entertaining performance by Robson, well-written dialogue in key sections of the film; excellent costumes and sets depicting life aboard ship and at court and excellent special effects in the combat scenes between ships; a good musical score by Korngold in particularly the fighting and court scenes; exciting swordplay by Flynn, who seems genuinely good at it. An entertainment vehicle capitalizing on the popularity of Errol Flynn. (2013)

Seabiscuit 2003 Gary Ross 2.5 Jeff Bridges, Tobey Maguire. Underdog triumph sports movie. Rather typical Hollywood movie about three humans and a horse with problems (too small). All of the above overcome their obstacles through character and hard work and then triumph in the end. Heavily imbedded in the 1930s with out of luck working men rooting for their horse to overcome adversity just like they want to. Seabiscuit has been mistreated by his owners who give him demeaning jobs. Seabiscuit is the common man's horse; War Admiral is the establishment horse. Everything has attractive, ideal Hollywood gloss. Almost all the feelings are feel-good. Must admit that the races are exciting and involving; you really do root for Seabiscuit, even if he is often represented by an artificial head. Best character is Chris Cooper as the horse trainer. (2006)

The Searchers 1956 John Ford 4.0 John Wayne is Ethan – mysterious, noble, commanding, monumental; Henry Brandon outstanding as the Indian chief Scar, Ward Bond as the preacher warrior, Natalie Wood in her beauty provides ample reason for Ethan to be so obsessed about finding her, Jeffrey Hunter as Natalie Woods' part Indian brother who provides some of the comic relief. Powerful, beautiful, elemental western, one of the best of the last. Full of interesting characters: Bond as the boisterous preacher/lawman, who wears a stovepipe hat and alternates between his contradictory jobs (an echo of the mythic warrior priest of medieval times); Jeffrey Hunter as older adopted (?) brother of Natalie Wood, excitable, not conscious of the amatory overtures of his girlfriend, desperately loves his sister and determined to defend her against the racist rage of Ethan (Wayne). Another film in which brave white settlers promote the progress of civilization against evil elements, this time the Comanche tribe; their renegade chief Scar attacks and murders settlers in revenge for the death of his own children at the hands of the Americans. Emotional center of film is Ethan, who returns home late after the end of the Civil War, a man free, with no ties or home; there are hints that he is wanted by the law, and he has not made peace with the Confederacy's loss of the war. He is a skilled frontiersman, who knows the language and customs of the Comanche, but he despises them, presumably because they killed his mother (tombstone); cf. scene when he shoots out the eyes of a dead Indian brave, since he doesn't want the Indian to find peace in the afterlife. When Debbie is kidnapped, Ethan and Martin set off to find them; long bitter pursuit with "big shoulders" Ethan as force bigger than any society, somewhat like the craggy Monument Valley mesas in the background. Has lighter moments, for example, saying several times, "That'll be the day." Monument Valley magnificently shot in its red grandeur, again giving epic quality to the film. When the searchers finally catch up with Scar and Debbie, there is a dramatic moment of conflict between

Martin and Ethan about whether latter will kill Debbie (she has been irremediably defiled by living as one of Scar's wives), but when he catches up with her and she cowers in fear, he takes her in his arms and says "Let's go home, Debbie." Ethan hasn't been changed, but his humanity has been drawn out. Quite a bit of comic relief, some of it good (the Preacher), and some of it pretty hokey; but it works well as relief from the intensity of the chase. Film technique very skilled, e.g., presumably for variety Ford changes narrative to voice-over through device of Laurie reading the letter she has received from Martin, who recounts what he and Ethan have been doing. Film beautifully framed: the first scene begins with the door to the homestead swinging open from the inside to reveal the brilliant panorama of Monument Valley, and Ethan soon arrives riding slowly out of the horizon; and it ends with all surviving characters domesticated and returned to civilization, except Ethan who stands alone outside the door (for reasons we only imperfectly understand, he cannot put down roots in one place), and turns and walks slowly away as the door closes – "The End." The film stands out in Ford's *oeuvre* for the intensity of its emotion and its deeply dramatic character. (2004)

Second Honeymoon 1937 Walter Lang (20cFox) 2.0 Tyrone Power as Loretta Young's divorced fun-loving husband (looking young and thin with slicked-back hair); Loretta Young glamorous, cool and satisfied on the outside, but emotionally yearning for Power inside; Claire Trevor in colorless minor part – no sultriness, just someone for Young to talk to; Lyle Talbot as Young's hammy, predictable second husband, who tries his best to be zany; Marjorie Weaver as pretty, spontaneous, talkative, naïve, young woman with pretty teeth – "You dance swell!"; Stuart Erwin as dull, lugubrious valet – the screenplay has him marrying Weaver, although he has no idea what to do with her. Typical tepid 30s romantic comedy that owes much to MGM's 'Private Lives': Power and Young are divorced, but still in love; although Young is remarried to lug businessman Talbot, the (re)romance with Power develops, and the two end up on a flying boat to Havana to celebrate their honeymoon (as soon as they get married). The film is set in semi-tropical Miami with sappy artificial-looking Miami sets and soft focus on the glamorous principals. It tries to be a screwball comedy, but it lacks spontaneity and zaniness: wealthy people wearing evening clothes; they go fish-gigging in the bay, they have a raccoon crawling up a lady's arm on an airplane (a nice DC-3), Power and Talbot yell a lot at one another, get into a fist fight toward the end, and are thrown in jail (not so hilarious in the same cell with a bunch of drunks). A tepid copy of 'Private Lives', since the featured couple seems to get along pretty well, fighting is half-hearted, and the viewer never figures out why they were divorced in the first place. The pretty, fresh-faced, energetic Marjorie Weaver is the unwitting focus of the film. Somewhat subversive of Hays Code standards: true, the two lovers reject sex before remarriage, but the viewer cheers when Young finally tells off her husband, and the two take off together for Havana before the divorce with Talbot is even started. (2015)

Un secret 2007 Claude Miller (France) 3.5 Patrick Bruel as Maxine, handsome, athletic (he is especially fond of gymnastics) father in 1950s France; Cecile de France beautiful with short blond hair and perfect skin, classic smile, statuesque, athletic body (she is a graceful diver), the wife of Maxine; Julie Depardieu (daughter of Gérard) as friend of family who is always there and who reveals the 'secret' to the teenage son François; Ludivine Sagnier pretty and lively as the first wife of Maxine. Complex, honest, searching, moving film about discovered memory of atrocious things and its impact on a family. Film anchored in 1950s and 1960s (identified as such on screen), when non-athletic boy François is fascinated by the physical beauty and athleticism of his parents (his mother is smashing). He is rather maladjusted – his father is constantly disappointed by his non-athleticism; he has an imaginary brother who plays with him; not knowing anything about his parents' background, he imagines their courtship as romantic and beautiful. He discovers a stuffed bear in the attic, which eventually leads to Depardieu's telling him the story of his family. Complex flashbacks credibly recreate the past: Maxine marries Sagnier in the 1930s; they are a happy Jewish couple in a large fairly well-off family, and they have a son Simon, who is excellent at gymnastics and the apple of his father's eye; the wedding leads to an erotic connection between Maxine and Tania (Cécile) that won't go away; the war leads to family arguments about whether the family should declare their Jewishness and wear the yellow star (Maxine is completely against it); by her own choice (why...?), Sagnier and her Simon are arrested by the police and shipped off to death camps when they try to rejoin the rest of the family in unoccupied territory. Under the strain

of their passion and anguish, Maxine and Tania then join their bodies in credible and moving paroxysms of erotic love; their child is little François, who is born a runt and remains always an underachiever. Thus François discovers the secret(s) of his family background: not only does he have a brother, but he and his brother's mother were consumed by the fire of Nazi hatred. The film ends in a kind of flash forward, where François comforts his anguished father; he however, cannot reconcile himself to his past, and when Cécile becomes paralyzed from a stroke, it appears they commit suicide together. Film's complex temporal structure makes it sometimes hard to follow. But with effort the film is always engaging and credible, and in the end satisfying. All the characters are real, well developed, as are their relationships. Cécile is so beautiful it is moving; her athletic movements are played in counterpoint to films of the 1936 Olympics, where 'Aryan' athletes cannot equal her statuesque grace. The film is filled with curiosity, searching for the truth, and a deep sadness. Lasting happiness is so hard to find and maintain. (2009)

Secret Agent 1936 Alfred Hitchcock 3.0 John Gielgud, Madeleine Carroll, Peter Lorre, Robert Young as the villain revealed in the end! One of the lesser Hitch 30s movies, but still fun for fans. Gielgud is World War I soldier whose death is faked so that he can go to Suisse to kill a German agent, who if he makes it to Turkey, will undermine Britain's war effort in that area. Carroll is his assigned "wife," and after initial flush of enthusiasm for the danger of the job, she spends great deal of time trying to dissuade Gielgud from killing anyone else. Lorre is overly picturesque assassin, the apparently Mexican "General," who works for the Brits: he is fast with the ladies, and spends a lot of time adding annoying color to dialogue. Good scenes: the cutting between the murder of the mistaken agent, Gielgud keeping his distance and watching through the telescope, and back in the fancy hotel, the victim's dog scratching and whining at the door; also Gielgud and Lorre enter country church to get information from the organist and are led by the held cacophonous notes they hear upon entering to the body of the organist slumped over his instrument. Ends in flurry of activity in a Swiss chocolate factory, where there is much scurrying around, and finally on the train, which has a spectacular crash (by studio standards) to end the movie with the accidental (I guess) death of Young. Characters and dialogue is fairly witty and sometimes engaging, especially in triangle interchange between Carroll and her two suitors, one of whom is posing as her husband and the other turns out – in a "who cares" non surprise – to be the German agent (with an American accent?). A rather important element of anti-war ideology in the movie – what with the continuous opposition of Carroll, and Gielgud finally acceding to her demand that he resign from the service (although after he rushes off to the factory to find the real agent). Ending is not satisfying – too pat. Film is perhaps harmed by having a protagonist who doesn't like what he is doing (and Gielgud as actor doesn't have perhaps enough sex appeal and charm to pull it off); also by the poor quality of the DVD, and by obvious studio origin of all the Swiss backdrops. Still fun to watch even the less successful of Hitchcock's 30s films. (2005)

The Secret Beyond the Door 1947 Fritz Lang (Universal) 3.0 Bizarre, unpredictable psychoanalytic thriller about a woman trapped by marrying a man she really doesn't know. A vulnerable Joan Bennett impulsively marries a mysterious, sexy man she meets at a resort in Mexico; Michael Redgrave not looking comfortable in his part as the reticent, somewhat disquieting husband; Anne Revere as Redgrave's genial sister, who welcomes Bennett to the palatial suburban New York house; Barbara O'Neil as the Mrs. Danvers act- and look-alike – her heart is filled with jealousy at not having Redgrave for herself; Natalie Schafer as Bennett's flighty, gabby, wise-cracking good friend; James Seay as lawyer who attempts to protect Bennett's interests. Thriller with an unsatisfactory screenplay but benefitting from memorable cinematography and art direction and imaginative direction by the German master. The film has obvious relationship with both 'Rebecca' 1940 and 'Gaslight' 1944: Bennett enters the disquieting home of a man she barely knows; his treatment of her is inconsistent and disturbing; there are several feminine ghosts and characters (including Redgrave's former wife who died under mysterious circumstances) that cause uneasiness; there is a mystery in the house – a room that no one is allowed to enter; and in the end the house goes up in flames, although Bennett and Redgrave are allowed to have a happy ending in each other's arms. A difference is the psychoanalytic narrative a la 'Spellbound'. Motivated by what he calls the incessant domination of women in his life, Redgrave decorates and reserves rooms in his mansion that recall historic murders and he terrorizes his wife and even comes close

to murdering her in the end. Only after an intense heart-to-heart with Bennett (apparently doubling as a therapist) does he break down, sob, and tell the truth about his hang-ups: a little psychoanalytic-style confession apparently gives hope for a bright future for the couple. The movie's screenplay is sometimes close to unintelligible, the characters are shallow and not developed (Revere is such a goody two shoes), but the film is brightened by arresting bits of mise-en-scene (lovely shots of the garden blurred by mist, memorable sharply contrasted shots of faces, rooms, etc.) and fabulous art direction (interior bric-a-brac, antique furniture, paintings, elegant interior design, etc.). Head-scratching screenplay counterbalanced by interesting direction. (2017)

The Secret of Roan Inish 1994 John Sayles (Ireland) 2.5 Jeni Courtney as pretty, flaxen-hair 10-year-old Fiona sent to the coast of Galway since his dad spends most of his time in the pub; Mick Lally as kindly, story-telling grandfather that takes Fiona under his wing and tells her about the family history on the mysterious island of Roan Inish; Eileen Coogan as the no-nonsense grandmother, who, it turns out, harbors the conviction that her little boy Jamie – apparently drowned about 10 years ago – is still alive in the sea; Susan Lynch as the pretty, dark-haired selkie (a kind of mermaid half seal, half human) ancestor of the Coneelly family. Appealing children's film based on the book by Rosalie Fry (adapted by Sayles). Feel-good all the way through, the narrative, which takes place in 1946 right after World War II, posits a tie between the family and the seals in the sea close by. Under the influence of her grandfather, Fiona becomes convinced that she has seen her disappeared little brother (he appears naked in a green field picking brightly colored flowers) and after she learns that one of their ancestors was a selkie, she believes that the seals have protected him. Sure enough, Jamie returns to his family (mother is dead and father is absent in the pub) pushed along by the seals, and after a joyful reunion they all live happily ever after, including grandfather, who is delighted that he gets to live again on the island. The story is simple and straightforward, naively heart-warming with beautiful images of the sea, the hills, the mostly blue skies and the currags (small boats) at sea. The magic and mystery are charming and harmless: the seals are constantly watching Fiona and watching over Jamie; the gulls are a bit mischievous, but they do no real harm; the weather occasionally threatens to become stormy, but nothing destructive or scary. All the characters speak semi-poetically with a musical Irish accent. Most memorable perhaps is the cinematography and scenery. Would be memorable for pre-adolescent children. (2014)

The Secret World of Arrietty 2010 Hiromasa Yonebayashi (Hayao Miyazaki) Japan 3.5 Bridgit Mendler as the voice of Arrietty, a “borrower” (very small person) coming of age in the house of “human beans”; Will Arnett as the voice of her taciturn father, expertly equipped with backpack, flashlights, climbing ropes and hooks to navigate the heights and depths of the big person’s house his family lives in; Amy Poehler as the Arrietty’s somewhat hysterical mother who has a tendency to panic and faint; David Henrie as the big boy Shawn who has been sent by his (absent) parents to gain a little strength before a scheduled operation on his weak heart; Carol Burnett as the big person servant living in the house – she is the only (semi-) villain in the film. Charming, beautiful, and moving Studio Ghibli animated adaptation of Mary Norton’s “The Borrowers”. The film seems to be set in England rather than Japan. The little Borrower family lives on little things it “borrows” from the host family; the father is aware of the danger they always run, and is predisposed to move whenever they are discovered by the big people. The family’s cover is blown because of Arrietty’s adventurousness; venturing out from her little home, she becomes close friends with Shawn, who protects the little family, giving them the doll house kitchen from his house and persuading the marvelous and aggressive fat cat not to attack Arrietty. Pursued by the blindly vengeful Hara, the family flees in search of other Borrower families; in the final scene Arrietty and Shawn take a tearful leave of one another (we do find out however that Shawn survives his operation and Arrietty finds another place to live). Film is focused on environment and gentle emotions, whereby tears are elicited by the tender relationship between the big and little person, both of whom live isolated and lonely yearning for a loving human contact. The animation is just as wonderful as other Ghibli productions: bright colors; somewhat jerky motion (that doesn’t disturb at all); a very alive and lush natural environment – beautiful foliage, bright flowers, small animals crawling across the screen; wonderfully detailed interior scenes – particularly apparent in the initial set piece of the film in which

Arrietty and her father skillfully climb up furniture legs and cross yawning chasms with the equipment that the dad carries with him. Despite the little person device, the film is considerably more realistic than many other Ghibli animations, being set in a real setting with real human characters (although they differ radically in size) following a traditional narrative line. Tender, wistful, and beautiful. (2013)

The Secretary 2002 Stephen Shainberg 3.0 Maggie Gyllenhaal, James Spader. Spader his usual offbeat, pretty weird character. Romantic comedy (basically!) about a young woman who has been in mental hospital and mutilates self. ‘Cures’ herself by getting into s&m relationship with boss Spader. Depiction of s&m activities is fairly mild. They seem happy together, but then Spader gets cold feet about real relationship. Happy ending when they get back together. Interesting tone with light romantic comedy approach in a movie that could be depressing, or ridiculous! Maggie Gyllenhaal is charming and fetching. Very unfeminist since Maggie is able to overcome her self-mutilation issues by allowing self to be dominated by a man! On the other hand, movie is very cool, since true lovers don’t have to be heterosexual, although the two have to struggle to make it. (2005)

El Secreto de sus Ojos 2009 Juan José Campanella (Argentina) 4.0 Soledad Villamil in beautiful performance as an assistant to an investigating magistrate – her eyes are magnetic and eloquent when she is in love or thinking about justice; Ricardo Darín equally good as a sad-eyed and sensitive criminal investigator seized by a passion for justice and love for a beautiful woman; Carla Quevedo as the beautiful young woman murdered in the beginning of the film; Javier Godino witty and convincing as intelligent, witty, and alcoholic assistant to Darin – his interaction with Darin is humorous and very devoted; Mario Alarcón amusing as foolish and fatuous magistrate; Pablo Rago as the young husband heads over heels in love with Quevedo before and after her death. Astonishingly moving and riveting, although quite complex, film about love and justice. Darin is retired and trying to write a novel about the murder of Quevedo that happened 25 years ago; his frustrating efforts take him to renew his friendship/courtship of Villamil. The film alternates between the present and lengthy flashbacks detailing the original murder and the frustrating investigation that followed. The investigation was marked by political interference (1974-75 when illegal paramilitary groups began operating under Isabel Perón), bureaucratic rivalries among different courts and instances (the film is filled with detailed, often satirical renditions of the operation of the offices of investigating judges, books and files piled almost to the ceiling on desks, shouting confrontations in the corridors of the justice building, etc.), and even after Darin had defeated an attempt to pin the murder on two innocent workers, the case was nevertheless dismissed since the Argentine secret service was protecting the guilty man from prosecution. Next to the investigation assisted by the clever although unreliable Godino, the love connection between Darin and Villamil sputters; despite their obvious attraction for one another, Villamil marries an engineer and raises a family of children “whom she adores”, and Darin spends the rest of his career running from one meaningless affair to another and regretting his failure to bring the guilty man to justice. The flashback scene in which Darin leaves on a train for Jujuy and Villamil runs down the platform after him pressing her hand against his through the window glass is moving. Meanwhile, the devastated husband of Quevedo is on the lookout for the murderer and he has vowed to punish him if he ever finds him. The themes of justice and love are brought together in the beginning when a horrified Darin for the first time gazes at the bloody and mutilated body of the murdered Quevedo; it’s as if his horror at the violation of something so beautiful and feminine arouses the romantic within him, and when he meets Villamil for the first time in the judge’s office, he falls in love with her. The film has a double dénouement in the present time. When Darin visits Rago, he discovers – despite the latter’s prevarications – that he has kidnapped the perpetrator and imprisoned him in a cell in his basement – he is going to live out his days slowly and in silence to maximize his suffering. Then Darin enters Villamil’s office, and it is obvious from their eyes that they will not let this opportunity pass them by, even if it is going to be difficult, as she says. The film does wonderful work with the central image, the eyes: Darin discovers the identity of the killer first by noticing the way that he looks at his victim in several school photographs (double flashback); the eyes of the two principals are eloquent in expressing their attachment to one another, and in communicating their passion for justice. A bravura camera sequence invites attention: the camera zooms from the heavens into a soccer stadium, follows several characters, and then tracks a chase through the stadium’s corridors – all

in one eye-grabbing shot. A McGuffin appearing on several occasions is Darin's typewriter, whose A does not work; at the end of the film, Daris changes the word 'Temo' to 'Te amo' by adding the missing A, thus indicating that he is healed. The film is often complicated and perhaps a bit confusing in its tracking of the dual theme and switching back and forth between present and past, but its theme and the powerful and eloquent performances of the main actors generates great emotion in the viewer. A film to remember. (2010)

Selma 2014 Ava DuVernay 3.5 David Oyelowo as forceful, charismatic Martin Luther King, focused on prioritizing voting rights by confrontation in Selma; Carmen Ejogo as passionate Coretta worried about the preservation of her marriage and her children; Oprah Winfrey as Annie Lee Cooper, denied the right to register to vote – eloquent as visual thread throughout the film; Tom Wilkinson as President Johnson as colorful-talking, pragmatic, reluctant civil rights advocate who wants to prioritize the war on poverty; Dylan Baker as disquieting J. Edgar Hoover (doesn't look a bit like him); Stan Houston as bigoted, violent Selma police chief (overweight with the usual Southern racist turkey neck); Tim Roth as bigoted firebrand Governor George Wallace, who calls Selma sheriff "backwoods white trash" but gives orders to demoralize the demonstrators; Nigel Thatch as unsettling Malcolm X, who in single scene decides to be the scary alternative to help King; André Holland as smooth-looking Andrew Young, who enforces the non-violent policy; Stephan James as very young John Lewis; Martin Sheen as federal judge that allows the final walk to Montgomery; Cuba Gooding Jr. as MLK lawyer. Excellent Hollywood biopic that, like Spielberg's Lincoln, conveys the significance of Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement through a focus on a single episode – the march on Selma, plotted by King and his assistants as a means of pressuring on Lyndon Johnson to present a voting rights Act to Congress. King is consistent throughout – tactics are to remain non-violent, invite the national press and television to cover their demonstrations, appeal to sympathetic white Americans as well as to Black ("Negro") supporters, and focus on the essential – secure voting rights for Blacks in the South (the difficulties of registering is demonstrated in the beginning of the film by Oprah's trip to the registrar's office, where her request to register is "DENIED" after she is unable to name all the superior court judges in Alabama). The film also focuses on internal conflict with the SNCC, who are frosted because of their long-standing community work in Selma, and on the ups and downs of King's relationship with Coretta, who is aware of King's many affairs with other women and is frightened by the violence surrounding their family; no direct depiction however of King's womanizing. The film generates strong sympathy for the African-Americans fighting for their dignity without hagiography (contrast 'Mississippi Burning'): decent, well spoken, well-dressed, and –coiffed middle class Americans who are just asking that their country live up to its commitments as defined in the 15th Amendment (which forbids abridging the right to vote on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude); and they are beat to a pulp in the first march at the Dutton Bridge. Entertaining to look at the depiction of well-known civil rights leaders, and local Alabama luminaries like the ignorant backwoods bully, Sheriff Clark, and the downhome Governor Wallace, particularly in his meeting with Johnson toward the end of the film. Lyndon Johnson is colorful, folksy, and ill-tempered about being pressured into action on Voting Rights. The emotional and dramatic center of the film however is Oyelowo's portrayal of the great civil right leader: looking like him, sounding like him, calm yet passionate, eloquent and measured in speech, the anchor of the movement. The film ends with a double Hollywood triumph: the President solemnly introduces his bill to light applause in Congress, and King intones his "I have a Dream" speech apparently standing in place of the Montgomery speech that would have been more appropriate narratively. Dramatic and inspiring. (2015)

A Separation 2011 Asghar Farhadi (Iran) 3.5 Peyman Moadi as Nader, good-looking, worried, oppressed middle class father of family in contemporary Tehran; Leila Hatami as Simin, very pretty, red-headed (you only get a glimpse of her hair), serious, determined, secular wife, who wants to leave Iran; Sareh Bayat as working-class, very devout woman with daughter who goes to work for Peyman; Sarina Farhadi as couple's daughter (also daughter of the director); Shahab Hosseini as Bayat's husband, poor, in trouble, and constantly angry. Interesting, often very emotional family drama that is shot in realistic, cinema vérité style and gives a lot of insight about life in contemporary Tehran. The film focuses on the relationship between Nader and Simin and the impact of their dysfunction on their

daughter. Since the couple separates at the beginning of the film, Nader is forced to hire the old-fashioned Bayat (she has to get permission over the telephone from her imam to change the old man's dirty underpants) to take care of his senile father; when Bayat suffers a miscarriage on the apartment steps after an angry Nader pushes her out of his apartment, the two families get embroiled in a series of legal disputes, which give the viewer a thorough introduction to the conditions and the procedures of Iranian courts. Much of the film is devoted to the charges and counter-charges between the two families; the film partially takes on the form of a whodunit as Nader investigates to try to find out whether he was responsible for Bayat's miscarriage (it turns out it was caused when Bayat was struck by a car when she was trying to retrieve the old man when he wandered out of the apartment). Nader's daughter perhaps suffers the most from the separation; she hopes against hope that her parents will get back together, but the stiff-necked stubbornness of both of them prevent that from happening; the last scene of the film has a judge telling the daughter that her parents are giving her the decision of who she wants to live with, but then the daughter not willing to say whom she has chosen when her parents are in the courtroom – the parents then stand outside the courtroom not even looking at one another Credits roll. The film's narrative is very complex, keeping the viewer questioning about which character's testimony is true and which is false, and how all the components of the script fit together. It is psychologically and sociologically acute showing the contrasts and divisions in Iranian society. Nader's family lives in a well-furnished middle-class apartment with two cars that they drive in the highly congested streets of Tehran, while Bayat's family lives in a poorer, uglier part of the city. Nader and Simin are obviously secular in nature, while Bayat and her husband are traditionally religious and live in the midst of a clan (most of whom are far more conciliatory than he is). While women wear chadors (Bayat) and head scarves (Simin), they do not seem unusually subservient to their husbands, especially in the case of the unbending Simin. Iranian justice seems populist (no intimidating robes and people milling about in the small courtrooms) and similar to aspects of European Roman procedures, except that blood money may be paid in place of public prosecution to settle the death of the fetus. An observant, interesting film about the concerns of ordinary Iranians, quite different from the vague, aesthetic fare that western audiences are used to from Iran. (2012)

A Serious Man 2009 Ethan and Joel Coen 3.5 Michael Stuhlbarg as Jewish middle class everyman physics professor who cannot catch a break; Sari Lennick as his unremarkable Jewish wife who decides to leave him early in the film; Fred Melamed in stand-out performance as Lennick's smarmy older boyfriend who hugs Stuhlbarg to tell him everything is fine; Richard Kind over-the-top as Stuhlbarg's leeching, gambling brother who has numerous physical and mental disorders; Ari Hoptman as Physics professor who drops into Stuhlbarg's office to tell him in always halting terms how his tenure application is going. Hybrid Coen Bros. film (is it comedy or is it tragedy?) about justice in this world – why do bad things happen to good people? Film begins with small skit in Polish shtetl in which (what appears to be) Stuhlbarg's ancestor makes a serious mistake in allowing a good man who may be a ghost into his house (the puzzled viewer meanwhile checks his DVD cover to make sure he has the right disc). Film then shifts to Minneapolis suburb in the 1960s – sterile single family homes, very little shrubbery, impeccably chosen 60s cars cruising down the street, brightly colored interiors of questionable taste, the neighborhood inhabited almost entirely by Jewish middle class families. The social environment is removed from the upheavals of the 60s, although there is reference to marijuana and to the Jefferson Airplane. Although Stuhlbarg is an unremarkable, just man, everything goes wrong for him – his wife decides to leave him, it seems that he may not get tenure, he has a hilarious confrontation with a Korean student who has failed his class and who tries simultaneously to bribe and blackmail him, Melamed is killed in an auto accident, his legal bills pile up, etc. Stuhlbarg keeps his stiff upper lip, but he is tortured by the injustice of his predicament: he goes to see three rabbis to find out what has happened, is God responsible for it, is God punishing him for something (the inspiration from Job in the Old Testament is unmistakable), and he receives no answers. Stuhlbarg writes an enormous blackboard full of formulas to illustrate the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle (he tells his students that they may not understand it, but they are still responsible for it on the midterm); he is pleased that the mathematical proof is certain, but uncertainty and confusion reign in the emotional, everyday part of his life. The Coens' sardonic, low-key humor keeps the film enjoyable throughout: the kids listen to music on their transistor radios during

Hebrew class, the Korean student incident, the constant phone calls from the salesman from the Columbia Record Club, the revered elderly rabbi mentioning to Stuhlbarg's son on his bar mitzvah the names of all the players of the Jefferson Airplane, the general cluelessness and irrelevance of all the rabbis. There are hints at the end that things might be getting better – the son's bar mitzvah is a triumph (although performed under the influence of marijuana) and Stuhlbarg does receive tenure. One senses throughout that the Coens are gently and respectfully mocking the culture they were raised in; it provides no answers to the big issues in life, but everyone is decent, well-meaning, and unconsciously funny. (2010)

Serpico 1973 Sidney Lumet 3.5 Al Pacino as new York cop who can't abide the existence of rampant petty corruption in the police force; Tony Roberts a bit too uptown as Pacino's partner in his campaign to uncover the corruption scandal; Biff McGuire as the straight-laced police captain that starts off encouraging Serpico, but turns against him when his allegations involve higher-ups; Allan Rich as the man-in-the-street style DA that supports Serpico. Gritty police drama set in New York in the early 1970s following the ultimately successful campaign by common cop Serpico to blow the lid off rampant minor police corruption in the city. The film has to be one of the grittiest, dirtiest ever filmed: dirty, littered, trash-filled streets, equally run-down apartments, men dressed in shabby clothing in only the humblest parts of the city – no Upper West Side or Upper East Side nor hardly a man dressed in a suit and tie; from viewing just the film, the Man From Mars would conclude that the USA is a generalized slum coast-to-coast. The narrative begins with Serpico receiving his police badge as a patrolman, continues with his experience as a plainclothes detective, his frustrating interactions with the police brass who seem more interested in covering their asses than putting a stop to the sleaze, and finally his (mysterious?) assignment to a narcotics unit in Brooklyn, where he is shot and almost killed by a perp; the film leaves open the question as to whether the shooting was a police setup arranged by officers furious at Serpico's efforts to bring a halt to the corruption. Beginning with a flash forward that shows Serpico being taken to the hospital after being wounded, the film is a linear narrative of Serpico's progress in his crusade. After he recovered from his wounds, Serpico resigned from the police force, lived abroad for almost 15 years before moving back to live in upstate New York. Pacino, ideally suited to the role with his characteristic tics and penetrating stare, provides an obsessive momentum to the story: although it is never interpreted in the film, he is fanatically devoted to honesty and stamping out corruption, even at the cost of ostracism by his fellow officers and rejection by his superiors. Dressed always in counter-culture garb slouched over with baggy pants and torn South American vests, he resembles a hippie version of Jesus storming into the temple to throw out the money changers. A romantic subplot with his girlfriend (Cornelia Sharpe) fails to hold the viewer's interest for long, although it does demonstrate his anti-social personality and inability to sustain a long-term relationship. The film fits well into the cynical and critical Hollywood films of the late 60s and early 70s such as 'Midnight Cowboy', 'The Parallax View', and 'The Conversation' that honestly present America's many flaws. As always, Lumet's direction is taut, honest, no-nonsense, and effective in telling his story and getting the point across. (2013)

Se7en 1995 David Fincher 2.5 Morgan Freeman as usual laconic, relaxed, but persistent and intellectual police detective on the verge of retirement; Brad Pitt as young, relatively inexperienced and impulsive junior detective working with Freeman; Gwyneth Paltrow underutilized but affecting young wife of Pitt – she is not happy living in the dangerous city (seems like a nightmare version of New York or Philadelphia); Kevin Spacey understated, insinuating, and head shaven as the master serial murderer; R. Lee Ermey as no-nonsense, hard-hitting police captain. Highly pumped up, Hollywood style police thriller that has Freeman and Pitt on the trail of a serial killer who fashions each of – eventually – seven murders after the seven deadly sins of medieval fame: the first is gluttony with a grotesquely fat victim who, representing gluttony (hardly a recognized modern sin), is shackled to a table and evidently stuffed until his stomach burst; then a lawyer who charged enormous sums to get criminals off scot-free of serious crimes – he has the word "greed" written in blood next to his body on the carpet of his plush office; lust is represented by a prostitute who is fucked by a nasty, knife-pointed phallus (of course blood and gore all over the bed); sloth is a guy tied to a bed for about a year – he is extremely emaciated and appears dead but scares the bejesus out of everybody when he moves and cough. Virtually all of the murder scenes are dark and misty so that flashlights make light trails through the atmosphere and the two

detectives seem always to be walking through a downpour of rain. Freeman, who is on the verge of retirement, is committed to solving the mystery, and he has Pitt and himself hanging around in libraries and reading the likes of Dante and Thomas Aquinas; Pitt is ill-tempered and resentful and does not understand why Freeman is rooting around in all this arty stuff – he even buys the Cliffs Notes version of the classics he is supposed to study. Film has nice use of clues, and the police are finally led to Spacey by an analysis of his checkout records at the public library (would a serial killer really use a public library?). The conclusion is heavy, portentous, dependent on heavy music: Spacey inexplicably spares Pitt's life when he could have executed him and then surrenders himself all bloody to Freeman. The finale plays itself out in the open (how far is this desert from Philadelphia!) underneath a plethora of high-tension transmission wires; Spacey's plot is to make Pitt lose his temper (wrath!) by showing him the severed head of his wife Paltrow! Spacey complies by shooting Spacey several times (he identifies himself as envy), and this leaves Pitt to be sacrificed as the representative of wrath. The film has strengths, but it is overloaded with distracting stars and a pretentious melodramatic style. (2010)

Seven Chances 1925 Buster Keaton 3.5 Buster Keaton as his usual nimble and well-intentioned, but befuddled and awkward character; Snitz Edwards as his dwarfish, unattractive lawyer; Ruth Dwyer as his patient, long-suffering girlfriend; a young Jean Arthur has a bit part. Somewhat lesser-known Keaton vehicle, but still plenty inventive and funny. Keaton is told by the lawyer that he will inherit \$7,000,000 if he is married by 7:00 that evening; the first half of the film is filled with low-key but often amusing efforts to find a girl who will marry him followed by their various manners of rejecting him, e.g., the small pieces of his proposal letter fluttering to the ground after the object of his affection turns him down, or the woman who flashes him her engagement ring, or the hat check girl who keeps her hand on Keaton's hat until he releases his tip; the action picks up however when the women realize that he is a prospective millionaire; hundreds of them turn up at a church (many of them old and ugly, and some of them men in drag), after which ensues a long chase that ends with Keaton's finding Dwyer and marrying her in just the nick of time. The chase includes numerous gags: e.g., the women strip a brick wall of all its bricks; they storm through a cornfield trampling all the corn; the head-on shot of Keaton running down a main street with a horde of veiled golddiggers pursuing him; the women chase Keaton into a hill park, where the celebrated rolling boulder sequence takes place – Keaton first tries to run ahead of the bounding boulders (how did they do it?) and when they become too numerous, he darts back and forth eluding them – successfully. The environment is much more middle class than most of his films: much of the action toward the beginning takes place in a swish country club done up in colonial style with stylish young people luncheoning inside; and the shots of Keaton running through the streets has extensive shots of the recent modest single-family homes built in LA in the 1920s (and still lining the streets). There are several (to the contemporary viewer) tasteless gags about Jews (reading a newspaper that Keaton cannot understand) and Blacks (a big double-take when Keaton realizes that the person in front of him is black). The basic concept of the film seems to be somewhat misogynistic: women are essentially greedy souls; they play coy and hard-to-get when contemplating marriage, but all caution and reserve is jettisoned as soon as it is known that money is in the air; hence the hordes of women pursuing Keaton. (2011)

Seven Men From Now 1956 Budd Boetticher (Warners) 3.5 Randolph Scott taciturn, ruggedly square-jawed, sun-tanned, healthy, erect, svelte (blue pants fit him perfectly) and handsome, a picture of “rusting nobility”; Gail Russell pretty, brunette, quite expressive, looking very 50s, a little forlorn since her husband is not very male and falling in love despite herself with Scott; Walter Reed as tinhorn, motor-mouth husband of Russell; Lee Marvin sporting a green bandana as pendulous lipped, sneering guy who tags along with Scott and continuously leers at Russell and makes innuendoes about her – the bad guy who is interesting and not all bad. Straightforward revenge drama about Scott's hunting down the men who killed his wife in a hold-up in a town where he had been sheriff. He eventually gets them all, falls stoically in love with a pretty young wife, and has to deal with Marvin, who is interested primarily in the strongbox being carried by Reed in his wagon. Ending has rather noble feel: Marvin “helps” Scott by killing two of the men Scott has been hunting, but then the two face off fair and square over the money chest that Marvin is lustng after; Scott, who is obviously very fast, shoots Marvin dead

before he can even get a gun out of its holster; Marvin then performs his ballet of death as he falls on to the strongbox and grasps the lock with his hand. Film ends with the widow (Russell) and the widower bidding good-bye stoically, although with final hint that Russell will make a play for Scott. Picture of Scott is rather touching: wounded by guilt in the death of his wife, obviously lonely and comforted by his interaction with Russell, whom he calls "M'am" with great respect and deference in his voice. Men have a destiny and code of honor they cannot escape. This is an upper "B" film quality (probably intended as a second feature) with lengthy conversations, horsemen riding in and out of groups of boulders, fistfights, bad guys firing at Scott from cover and then pursuing him lengthily over the rocks, no-nonsense straightforward filming and editing, generally terse dialogue. Set in rugged desert country reminiscent of Death Valley, the film seems to return constantly to the same locations. Print well restored with some graininess in several scenes. (2008)

Seven Sinners (Doomed Cargo) 1937 Albert de Courville (Britain) 3.0 Tidy, entertaining, typical 30s British thriller bearing close resemblance to the 30s Hitchcock. Writers Gilliat and Launder. Edmund Lowe solid leading man as American private eye who happens to be in Europe; Constance Cummings pretty and spirited as insurance agent who can think of little else but getting to Scotland; Thomy Bourdelle as French inspector who – for mysterious reasons – joins Lowe and Cummings in their civilian investigation of a murder. Film is very entertaining for the same reasons as Hitchcock's 30s thrillers. The initial murder in Monte Carlo is striking because of the use of masked ball masks. Our couple pursues the investigation in the Nice Paris Express across France and then into the West Country of Britain. One clue leads to another until the final scene, where in the midst of great danger, it is revealed that the perpetrator of the original crime and of three deadly train wrecks (!) is none other than the French commissaire, who is a gun runner who has broken with the rest of the gang, camouflaged as a pacifist organization, the Pilgrims of Peace; Bourdelle is shot to death in a movie theater where he is standing in front of a screen showing one of his train wrecks. The plot is entertainingly (and sometimes absurdly) twisty, but the delight is in the Hitchcock-like details. The tone of the film is light and humorous despite the body count from the train wrecks. Lowe and Cummings trip from one scene to another with light banter reminiscent of both 'The 39 Steps' and 'The Lady Vanishes': e.g., he to her – "I'll be back in a minute, one to undress and one to dress again." She replies, "Better make that two." In another scene a county recorder tells our couple that he likes to record births, but not deaths; about marriages he is not so sure. Several scenes take place on trains, which location will play a huge role in 'Lady Vanishes', written by Gilliat and Launder two years later; the train exteriors are often portrayed by fake-looking models. The public meetings of the Pilgrims of Peace, in which leaders boringly intone about their pacifist mission, reminds one of the electoral meeting in 'The 39 Steps' and the pagan church of the sun in the original 'Man Who Knew Too Much'. Although Lowe and Cummings have shown no romantic interest in one another, they round off the caper by reappearing in the recorder's office to announce that they want to get married. (December 2017)

The Seven Year Itch 1955 Billy Wilder 3.5 Marilyn Monroe, Tom Ewell. Quite entertaining adapted play about New York executive, who sends his wife and children to Maine, stays home by self and then endures an hour and a half temptation from MM; he smokes, drinks, twitches, and talks to himself. (He is a little hard to take in some scenes.) Color. Marilyn is delicious, beautiful and sexy, and already her full-figured self compared to about 1951; plays herself (breathy, naïve, a bit ditzy, unconsciously seductive, and very good-hearted) and is quite convincing; has great screen presence; her breasts are very sharp, 50s style. Most famous scene is where Marilyn allows subway ventilation air to blow up her skirt. Ewell played the role on Broadway hundreds of times before the screen version. His desires are amusing; he is pretty neurotic, interested not just in sex with MM, but in his extreme guilt he (at times) imagines that he is a criminal; once you break one law -- infidelity -- the sky is the limit. Of course, we have the titillation of near infidelity, but MM is restrained and TE guilty enough so that nothing happens, and he awaits the return of his family at the end. Film self narrated by TE, who is constantly talking on screen to himself; you have to get used to it. When he has fantasies or guilt feelings or imagines that his wife is having an affair in Maine, Wilder cuts to sarcastic and grandiloquent scenelets to the accompaniment of Rachmaninov (2nd Piano Concerto), where TE for example is seducing Marilyn

or imagine that his wife is having steamy sex with a guy on a hayride. High culture references abound -- Rachmaninov, Oscar Wilde's 'Picture of Dorian Gray,' John Dunne's 'No Man is an Island,' etc. Quite a bit of satire about USA in 1950s – American advertising, ways of doing business, bullshit psychiatrists who charge you a lot, the fear of public opinion watching you and the prospect of being put to shame, Ewell hypocritically using psychoanalytic ideas to attempt to seduce Marilyn, Wilder's sarcastic look at heavy Hollywood romance in the fantasy scenes. Also snide sex jokes, e.g., Ewell squirts seltzer water into glass just as he intimates sex with Marilyn. The seltzer water scene is particularly effective since Ewell and Marilyn are on entirely difference wavelengths despite the seduction attempt, and yet they end up at the same point through entirely different thought patterns. Almost all the movie takes place in TE's apartment -- very stage bound, but doesn't seem stagy since Wilder opens up with funny fantasies. (2004)

Seven Years Bad Luck 1921 Max Linder 3.5 The classic American movie of Linder. Plot is hung on a number of adventures experienced as a result of a broken mirror and delays in returning to be married to his somewhat histrionic fiancée; Max is convinced he has bad luck. Gags include being threatened by cars and streetcars in the street (very nimble footed); insulting his fiancée's beloved dog whom he places in the water in a flower vase to get him out of the way; a very long one connected to the railroad – sneaking on to the platform despite the ticket takers (walking in tandem with a ticket holder so the ticket taker doesn't see him), evading the conductor on the train, and disguised (hilariously with nuts in his cheeks) as a stationmaster selling tickets, etc. A very funny routine when Max escapes Keystone Kops-style policemen (waving billy clubs in slapstick fashion) by entering a lion's cage, where the two of them wrestle and caress one another and where he is fairly safe since the cops are afraid to enter. The best is the (apparently) original mirror routine, where dapper Max performs his toilet in front of the broken mirror and one of his look-alike servants imitates his every move very expertly (the routine imitated by Harpo Marx in 'Duck Soup'). Linder is a kind of dapper Chaplin impeccably groomed with a neat thin mustache and dressed in formal clothes with spats (!), striped socks and a shiny top hat; he is small, has a mobile face, fairly relaxed but capable of sudden bursts of energy; and he gets laughs by disguising his elegant self as a working man. A lot of imagination and good gags, and the quality of the film (mise-en-scene, editing, etc.) is very high. The persona of the elegant man about town must have appealed more to French audiences than to Americans, used to the slant of Chaplin's films and character toward the poor. Lively musical performance by small, colorful ensemble. (2010)

Seventh Heaven 1927 Frank Borzage 3.5 Janet Gaynor as Diane, the best thing in the film – tiny, cute, waif, small, entirely given to love once she attaches; Charles Farrell as Chico, tall, handsome, shy, uncommitted, “atheist” street sweeper in Paris who agrees to take Diane in to protect her from her nasty sister (who comes after Diane with a whip!). Very sentimental, touching, genuine love story set in Paris on the eve of and during World War I. Once Diane is brought into Chico's seventh floor garret (their “seventh heaven”), it takes a while for Diane to warm up to him, but once she does, she is completely committed – hugging him tightly, wanting to be with him at all times, looking at him adoringly in the eyes, giving an impression of great fragility that could result in her destruction at any time. Chico is cute, although reserved – “I am a most remarkable fellow”—and optimistic – “I always look up and not down!” The test comes when Chico is called to the trenches during the First World War; the war is depicted with some good combat crowd scenes but also some absurdly unrealistic special effects created with plastic models of trucks. While absent the lovers adopt a sentimental, spiritual practice of communicating by prayer-message at 11:00 AM every day. Chico is apparently killed in the last days of the war, but to the surprise of everyone, he returns alive but blind (!) in the midst of the great victory celebration; heartfelt and joyous celebration all around, especially from the confused but entirely redeemed Diane. One supposes they will live happily ever after. By talkie standards the film moves very slowly with the camera lingering over every move of the principals, a lot of close-ups of tear-brimming eyes with a non-stop soundtrack in the background. The whip-wielding sister reminds one of the evil wrongdoers of the early days of film, and the lingering shots of Gaynor's pleading, tear-filled eyes are reminiscent of Lillian Gish's performance in Griffith's ‘Way Down East’. While very sentimental (the “spiritual” communication, the fragility of Gaynor, the rather artificial happy ending), the film convinces with its genuine emotion – the viewers root for the waif to be rescued by the strong man, they are

delighted when Chico, who is too shy to say “I love you” or ask Diane to marry her, brings her a beautiful wedding dress that she puts on to model just before her husband is called off to war, they are moved by the devotion of the lovers to one another during four (!) years of absence, and surprised and delighted (although a bit bemused – he really seemed dead!) when Chico returns alive. The enduring power of the film is part the tone set by the director, but even more the authentic innocence and frailty of the lovely Janet Gaynor. (2012)

The Seventh Veil 1945 Compton Bennett (Britain) 3.0 Well-acted, well-produced women’s movie that plays the psychiatry card, much like Hitchcock’s ‘Spellbound’. James Mason as imposing, brooding, domineering man of independent means living in a mansion – he walks with a cane; Ann Todd as quiet young, although conflicted woman who becomes Mason’s Ward when her parents die – she is a gifted concert pianist; Herbert Lom as psychiatrist that figures out a way to cure Todd of her mental illness; Hugh McDermott as rather featureless band leader with who Todd falls in love; Alfred Lieven as portrait painter who also falls in love with Todd. Film is framed in a psychiatric hospital where psychiatrist Lom (good performance) treats Todd confidently – because of an auto accident she is convinced that her hands are damaged beyond repair and that she will never play the piano again; she has also attempted suicide. She then tells her life story in flashbacks under the influence of a drug that makes her talk in a trance. In the flashbacks Mason is revealed as a control freak who dominates Todd, forces her to study to become a renowned concert pianist, and does all he can to scuttle her romances. McDermott richly merits dismissal, but Lieven, who is summoned by Mason to paint Todd’s portrait, is more devoted and protective. The ending is absurd British Hollywood psychiatry, whereby Lom, surrounded by a gaggle of dark-haired men in cravats, is able to get Todd to break through her psychological blocks by playing recordings of the classical piece she loves and to emerge – in a surprise to the viewer – playing herself the middle movement of Beethoven’s “Pathétique” Sonata. As the three men in her life wait in Mason’s foyer for her to come down the stairs, she surprises us again by rushing into the arms of – her cousin and guardian, Mason! End of film. It is enjoyable listening to Australian pianist play snippets from the Grieg, Schumann, and Rachmaninoff concertos (although Todd’s arm movements are awkward and unrealistic). This women’s film is of course hopelessly old-fashioned: Todd fashions a career but only under the direction of a man; she then yearns to escape from him – to the care of another man; and then she returns – rather masochistically – to the man who has dominated, even abused her in the past. Pretty enjoyable, even though rather absurd. (June 2017)

The Seventh Victim 1943 Mark Robson (producer Val Lewton) 3.5 Tom Conway as the usual mellow, smooth-talking rationalist psychiatrist; Kim Hunter pretty bland as former boarding school student who sets out to find her missing sister in New York; Jean Brooks death-obsessed and mysteriously beautiful in her Cleopatra-style dark hair; Erford Gage as dorky, eager-to-help poet friend of Hunter; Hugh Beaumont as bland, well-meaning husband of Brooks; Lou Lubin as earnest, well-meaning private detective who wants to help Hunter. Rather bizarre, inconsistent, morbid, and doom-filled thriller/horror film that finally leads Hunter and her friends to a strange, self-contradictory devil worship cult in Greenwich Village: dedicated to non-violence (!), they sit in a member’s living room, drink tea, and talk about how they are going to get Brooks to die without killing her; they end up setting a glass of poison in front of her and trying to persuade her to drink it. Characters are generally weak and bland and sometimes inconsistent: Erford’s rather aimless and ineffectual search for Brooks; the puzzling relationship of Conway and Beaumont to Brooks; Hunter’s clueless facial expressions. Film however stands out for its direction, its heavily shadowed B movie-style cinematography (all shot on the sound stage), and individual scenes. The first scene in which Hunter has an interview with the bizarre principal and her anxious assistant creates an eerie feeling (the sound track makes references to the curriculum on the stairs); as does the scene in which the owner of Dante’s restaurant opens Brooks’ room and we find only an empty stiff-backed chair sitting under an empty hangman’s noose. Impressive is also the scene inside the cosmetics factory in which Hunter persuades August to go past some heavily shadowed internal windows to inspect a room where she thinks her sister is hiding (he is soon stabbed to death and stumbles out to fall to the floor), and the one in which a member of the cult stands dimly outlined outside the shower curtain where Hunter is taking a shower and issues a warning. The viewer just has to tough it

through the intervening slack scenes where the characters talk about not too much and do a lot of walking in front of the camera. Most striking is Brooks' character: in a telling close-up she is beautiful, yet severe and disquieting; she is obsessed with death – she tells several people that she can go on living only since she knows that she can end her life at any time (hence the noose inside her room); and in the last scene we watch her go into her room and close the door, and a few seconds later the sickly (and dying) next-door lodger hears the sound of the chair being kicked over as she hangs herself – the viewer never sees it happen. Film conveys Lewton's fascination with and fear of death – it ends with a John Donne citation that depicts humanity's anxiety at the certainty of ultimate disappearance. Fascinating and haunting despite its obvious deficiencies. (2009)

Sex and the City 2008 Michael Patrick King 2.0 Sarah Jessica Parker playing her tv role; Cynthia Nixon ditto; Kristin Davis ditto; Kim Cattrall ditto; Chris Noth back as Mr. Big; Jennifer Hudson as black girl assistant to Parker – she is the affirmative action addition to the fashion and guys passion of the big four. A disheartening continuation of the television show; nothing new to add, just basically stretching the same tired material over an endless 2:20. Everybody obsessed with guys, shoes, and accessories; lots of luncheon post-mortem every time something romantic happens; Parker and the other three bouncing along a chic New York street in their high heels and eye-catching, outrageous costumes. The narrative is focused on the curve of Carrie's decision to marry Big: after a hesitant, rather ambiguous proposal, he stands her up at the "altar" (actually the New York Public Library), and three of the women (excluding the anti-nuptial Samantha) are outraged at Big's profanation of femaledom's most sacred ritual – unique wedding dress, limos, and the rest; but they of course are reunited at the end, and are married in quiet City Hall ceremony where they should have gone in the first place. Meanwhile, Charlotte gets pregnant and is on the receiving end of non-stop affection and devotion from her boring husband and her cute adopted daughter. Miranda breaks up with husband Steve because she has been denying him sex (job and taking care of the kid) and he had sex with another woman; but after much stiff-necked refusal to speak with him, she finally agrees to go to a couples' counselor, who has them think it over and then meet in the middle of the Brooklyn Bridge to restart their relationship. Meanwhile, Samantha is in a long-term relationship with a guy in LA ("Lost" Angeles), but she triumphantly exits since she is still tempted by the lanky thighs, tight butt and mouth-watering member of the guy next door and anyhow she needs to spend more time "taking care of herself". The film is usually irritating: the egotism and self-indulgence of the women when talking about shoes, buying clothes, or their men, or when oohing and ahing at an absurd fashion show; the unbending refusal of Miranda and Carrie to talk to their mates is maddening for anyone used to the idea of give-and-take in relationships. The women are charming as always, but the drama and humor of the tv series are missing. Hope there isn't a sequel. (2010)

Shadowlands 1993 Richard Attenborough. 4.0. Anthony Hopkins eloquent and moving as C.S. Lewis, quiet and serene don in Magdalen College whose life is disrupted by...; Debra Winger almost equally eloquent as direct, plain spoken American divorcee who is drawn to Oxford by Lewis's writings; Eric Hardwicke as Lewis's gentle and supportive roommate and brother; John Wood as amusing, sharp-tongued college colleague who loves to tease 'Jack'. 'Quality' British film about CS Lewis' conversion to earthly love in his old age. Lewis is presented as retiring religious guru and shy Oxford don in his native environment – the tradition-laden chapel and choir, the buildings and the grounds of Magdalen College in about 1950, a quiet, satisfying, and rather leisurely life of writing and discussion at the high table of the chapel. His professed faith in Jesus Christ as expressed through the Church of England brings him much approval from an adoring public of mostly older women and quite a bit of teasing from his more secular colleagues in the college (Wood), but he has no deep relationship with either man or woman. He lives in partial seclusion and retired self-satisfaction with his quiet, supportive, and perhaps alcoholic brother. The curious, outspoken Winger appears, and a strong friendship develops between them; paradoxically, it is only when she discovers that she has a fatal case of cancer that Lewis' cool friendship turns to abiding love; having always avoided challenges and suffering, he experiences deep grief as she goes through the process of dying (with a remission of a few months). The film is sensitive, genuine, and moving, dealing mainly with the paradox that a man who loves God does not focus the image of that love on a flesh and blood human being; the film seems to say that love of God on only the spiritual level is safe and

comfortable, but that the joy and the pain that accompanies human love is the real thing. Hopkins is extremely effective first as the reserved Oxford don, and then awakening to the life of the heart in his relationship with Winger; the moment in the hospital when he experiences his conversion is unforgettable, a tribute to superior acting. Winger is only slightly less poignant in her portrayal – in contrast to Lewis, she always evinces affection for him, and her transition to a lover's relationship is more subtle. This reviewer's positive reaction to the film is almost certainly affected by his experience as a student at Magdalen College in the 1960s, only a few years after the film's events – difficult not to cherish memories of the chapel and the choir, the quiet grounds, the strolls through the different quadrangles, conversations with fellow students and the professors. A superior film about love and spirituality. (2010)

A Shadow of a Doubt 1943 Alfred Hitchcock 4.0 Joseph Cotton, Teresa Wright, Patricia Collinge, Hume Cronyn, Henry Travers. Outstanding unusual Hitchcock movie that focuses on human drama and characters rather than "pure" suspense. Focus on realism and complexity of characterization. What makes Uncle Charley tick? What changed him from an affectionate and much loved little brother into a murderer who hates older women? To what extent is he aware of his bifurcated personality? Teresa Wright is positively beaming with role in which she starts as alienated teenager whose life is tremendously brightened by the infusion of her uncle viewed through an idealistic lens; then she turns dark as she realizes that Uncle Charley is probably the murderer that McDonald Carey is seeking; and then she is caught between desire to help detectives catch Uncle Charley and reluctance to help her mother. She commands the loyalty and concern of the viewer. Henry Travers very meek and mild, allows himself to be dominated by mom, and then allows Charley to take over the house. Hume Cronyn as milque toast friend of dad, who shares passion for detective fiction and how to murder one another. Pat Comminge as slightly dotty domestic mom, very loving, and completely taken by the memory of her little brother; she would never be able to believe that he has become a serial killer. The suspense is not as intense as in AH's 50s movies; our attention is elsewhere; the murder attempts are fairly lame, perhaps with the exception of the final train struggle. McGuffins don't work as well – the melody of the 'Merry Widow Waltz' and the emerald ring. Plot focus is invasion of innocent, small-town America by threatening external force, and the town defending itself – could be read as America threatened by World War enemies. Beautiful crisp photography of streets of small town America (Santa Rosa could be Midwest, etc.), most shot on location; lots of dappled shadows as Charley walks/runs/ through streets – everyone – policeman, librarian – knows her name. Editing runs toward long takes rather than sharp action editing. Pretty fabulous restoration of print. (2005)

Shadow of the Thin Man 1941 W. S. Van Dyke 3.0 Agreeable whodunit featuring the wit and charm of William Powell and Myrna Loy; the fourth in the 'Thin Man' series. William Powell, witty, ironic, sharply dressed with a win-'em-over smile as the reluctant private detective, Nick Charles, called in to bail out the hapless police (shades of Holmes and Scotland Yard); Myrna Loy, now the mother of Nick Jr., playing detective backup to her husband but his equal in martini consumption and exchange of ironic witticisms; Donna Reed in one of her first roles as young and wholesomely pretty; Sam Levene talking like a gangster as clueless police detective who relies on Powell for every insight; Stella Adler attractive and sexy as gangster moll; Hugh Marlowe look-alike Henry O'Neill as distinguished politician who turns out to be the guilty party. Entertaining, if a little tired, whodunit focused on the culture of racing and the gangster types that make money from it. Starts with a feint in that the first apparent murder turns out to be an accidental death, but the resourceful Nick uses a false explanation of it to trap the guilty party in the second murder. A lot of standard whodunit twists and turns ending with the obligatory confrontation in which Nick gathers the five or so suspects in Levene's office, then after some clever observation and deduction, drops the bombshell that the apparently upstanding O'Neill is a crooked politician resorting to murder to protect his income stream. No doubt that spirited star power -- including well-played comic turns from the little terrier, Asta -- is the main reason to watch the movie. Nick is famous and appreciated as a crime solver throughout San Francisco society; with no visible source of income, Nick and Nora maintain an upper class life style, drinking multiple martinis always dressed to the t when visiting local bars and night clubs (particularly notable are Nora's high fashion hats). The obvious

affection between the two principals is another winning characteristic. A bit of comedy added by giving the rather starchy Powell a child to deal with; neither parent seems much involved. The film follows the standard whodunit formula, perhaps a bit overused for a viewer who has seen many of the 1930s versions. (January 2018)

Shadow of the Vampire 2000 E. Elian Merhige 2.5 Lurid fictional account of Friedrich Wilhelm Murnau's making of 'Nosferatu' (1922), in which the lead actor he hires to play the vampire is a vampire himself. John Malkovich as Murnau obsessively devoted to the completion of his film, no matter what the cost; Willem Dafoe virtually unrecognizable as Max Schreck playing the repulsive practicing vampire who resembles the traditional Nosferatu – spindly body, great physical strength, beady eyes, overbite, long finger nails, bats' ears, bloody mouth, etc. (the color photography adds extra punch to the original black and white images). The film follows the making of the film from the beginning in Czechoslovakia to the extremely lurid ending in which a delighted Murnau films excitedly as Schreck murders not only his female victim promised to him by the director (a drug-addicted Catherine McCormack) but also several other cast members; Nosferatu then dies shrieking as the sun comes up (he of course despises light), while in the midst of the carnage Murnau licks his chops at a job well done. The viewer wonders which is the bigger monster – Nosferatu who leeringly awaits his chance to kill and drain the bodies of the cast members, or Murnau, who knowingly hires a real vampire to play the leading character with the promise of possessing the leading lady and then sacrificed virtually the whole cast to finish a realistic, exciting film. Both actors overact gloriously – Dafoe wielding his long-nailed fingers and sniffing in rodent-like gestures; or Malkovich staring, ranting fanatically, shouting to force his crew to push through for the sake of art. In the comparison the film suggests that the artist exploits and destroys his collaborators just as the vampire consumes his victims. Colorfully disturbing locations and art direction, performances that are difficult to forget, often revolting; a difficult film to connect with. (October 2017)

Shaft 1971 2.0 Richard Roundtree, Moses Gunn. Urban private detective thriller (?) about macho, swaggering, but not vicious, black private detective, hired by black Harlem gangster to find and rescue his daughter kidnapped by the (white) mafia. Shaft is a kind of urban James Bond with an oppressed black man's attitude: "I've made two mistakes: I was born black, and I was born poor." RR doesn't have much to say, and his acting is generally routine and inexpressive. Has good girlfriend, but still farts around with slutty white women; has white friend lieutenant in the police department (much like Rockford) who helps him out in his investigation. Shaft enlists Black Power activists to help him find the girl. Moses Gunn as gangster boss who dotes on his daughter; perhaps only semi-interesting character. Soundtrack ok, music won academy award, but otherwise it often sounds like TV's 'Mission Impossible.' Pace of movie is glacial; seems as if they had enough well edited footage for about an hour, but to get it up to feature length they let it run and run.... (2006)

Shall We Dance 1937 Mark Sandrich (choreography Fred Astaire) 4.0 Fred Astaire; Ginger Rogers; Edward Everett Horton as his usual defeated, clueless, double-taking self; Eric Blore's arch antics are very amusing. Kind of back stage musical since both Astaire and Rogers are performers (he ballet and she jazz) before they meet one another and start singing and dancing. Usual throwaway plot a la romantic comedy of boy meets and pursues girl; girl dislikes and rejects him; boy persists; finally united at end; the locale begins in Paris. Continues on a trans-Atlantic crossing, and ends in New York. Has the usual high-end Art Deco sets in front of which the upper-class characters carry on their business. Excellent extensive score by George Gershwin, including a couple of hit songs. 1) "Zoom, Zoom" set in a sanitized engine room of an ocean liner; jazzy African-American rhythm; "happy" group of Black singers and musicians, but soon Astaire takes over signing title song, and then dancing frenetically, athletically on and off the sets as engine pistons churn in the background. 2) Walking dogs on deck. Swingy clarinet tune that enables Astaire to get a little friendlier with Rogers. 3) "They all laughed at Christopher Columbus when he said the world was round....They all laughed when I said I wanted you. But ho, ho, ho, who's got the last laugh now!" Astaire then joins her to dance; they step hesitantly together, he in (mock?) ballet, she in jazz; and then enthusiastically together dancing to jazz tap;

impression – they are emotionally closer now that they have put their inhibitions behind them. “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off”. Set in studio version of what appears to be Central Park. They start by singing alternately, and then spend more time dancing on skates; both seem to be good skaters; they move together gracefully, do some convincing tap dancing with skates on, and then after skating in circles a few times, they end the number by crashing onto the grass. Astaire continues to court Rogers (it’s in the press that they are married, although they aren’t); it doesn’t make a lot of sense that Rogers as well is willing to give up alternate pronunciation for Astaire. 5) “They Can’t Take It Away From Me”. Astaire croons tender things to Rogers, who now looks coy and sometimes sad and moved (since they are proposing to end their “marriage”); includes soft-focus close-up of Rogers. No dance. Brief. 6) Elaborate end production number reprising #5 and #3. Begins with elaborate ballet (with a couple of choruses of dancing girls) starring Astaire and a ballerina, who does some impressive back-bending stunts. Then Astaire sings jazzy “Shall We Dance” with female chorus dancing behind him with Rogers-like masks; they both are overjoyed when he finds the real Ginger, and they dance a brief finale. Seems one of the top two or three Astaire-Rogers films. (2012)

Shall We Dance 1996 Masayuki Suo (Japan) 2.5 Koji Yakusho as handsome, morose corporate accountant yearning for something more exciting and meaningful; Tamayo Kusakari as beautiful ballerina-seeming dance instructor that Koji falls in love with and becomes his instructor; Naoto Takenaka as Koji co-worker crazy, obsessed with dancing – the most amusing thing in the film. Long, mildly entertaining kind-of romantic comedy set in the lap of ballroom dancing competition; the relationship with Australia’s more ecstatic ‘Strictly Ballroom’ 1992 in not coincidental. From the Tokyo metro Koji longs after the serenely beautiful Tamayo standing in the window of a dance studio. Not telling his wife what he is doing, he starts dance lessons, and eventually fulfills his dream of partnering with his teacher to enter competitions. Knowing nothing about the arrangement, his wife suspects that Koji is having an affair, and hires a private detective to look into it. The ending is downbeat compared to an American treatment of the same theme – Koji cools his infatuation, steps back from whole-hearted commitment to the competition and returns to his wife, where he will live from now on without romantic excitement but in a more fulfilled domestic contentment. The Japaneseeness of the film is both its weakness and its strength. Koji is very reserved and constrained – no communication with his family, sitting glumly at his desk when working, shy about engaging in conversation, bowing constantly with typical Japanese excuses, saying “hai”. At the same time, it is apparent that his hesitations come from the conformist pressures of Japanese culture: the joy of dancing – combining precise movements with an expressive exuberance – just might be what the Japanese population needs to taste life more fully. The end is a kind of compromise – Koji remains imbedded in his culture, but he has perhaps made some room for romanticism and individualism. A moderate critique of Japanese cultural repression. (2015)

Shallow Grave 1994 Danny Boyle (Britain) 4.0 Ewan McGregor as Alex, manic, crazily over-the-top young Scot living in very cool Edinburgh apartment; Kerry Fox as Juliet, pretty, flirtatious flatmate; Chris Eccleston as David, buttoned up, highly organized accountant who shares the flat with the other two; Keith Allen as cool, mysterious boarder; Ken Stott as indirect, droll detective inspector à la ‘Mystery’. Visually stunning, narratively compelling, very cool, neo-noir thriller/horror film about three Scottish kids dealing with the consequences of breaking moral and civil codes – once you start the process, you have to pay the consequences. The three flat mates are introduced as hyper-cool, smart ass, not particularly likable kids looking for a fourth renter; they mercilessly mock several applicants until they decide Allen is cool enough for them; only he dies the first night from an overdose of heroin, leaving them a suitcase filled with a huge amount of money; after some hesitation they decide to keep the money and cut up and dispose of the body, only to be pursued by ruthless hoods and the police and to fall out among themselves. The film ends on a cynical and uncertain note: Alex stabs David to death right through the neck, Juliet pins Alex to the floor with a kitchen knife (to make sure he doesn’t move, she drives the knife in with a hammer), and when Juliet discovers that the money has been removed from the suitcase, she shrieks and goes to the airport anyway to make her (penniless) getaway to Brazil. After all the trouble and mayhem, no one gets the money. The film benefits from exact characterization; the reactions of the three main characters to their newfound riches proceeds from their personalities – Alex spending money

wildly and playing loudly, David uncertain at first but then turning paranoid and blocking himself in the attic with the money, Juliet switching her loyalties back and forth between the guys and finally ending up alone. Most of the film is shot inside the roomy, cool apartment painted in broad swaths of bright color. The mise-en-scene is aggressive, hip, constantly calling attention to itself: the film begins with the camera tracking at high speed over the payment, up the threshold, and then circling up the stairs to the apartment; the scenes of chopping up the bodies and burying them in the woods are shot impressionistically with bright reds and yellows; the numerous scenes of David lowering or raising the money suitcase out of a bin of water are shot from the bottom of the water; while in the attic David drills numerous hole in the apartment ceiling to keep an eye on his flatmates – the light shining through the holes has a phantasmagoric effect; the last shot of the film has the camera move from the image of Alex pinned to the floor past the floorboard to discover the stacks of money hidden not two feet from his face. The plot will be repeated in Sam Raimi's "A Simple Plan" (1998) in which several decent guys are exposed to mayhem and confusion when they keep drug money they find in a crashed airplane. Entertaining, cynical film released in the same year as 'Pulp Fiction'. (2013)

Shame 2010 Steve McQueen (Britain) 3.0 Michael Fassbender starkly cool as Brandon, tortured upscale New Yorker with a serious sex addiction; Carey Mulligan as his emotionally damaged sister, who upsets Brandon's pursuit of the continuous orgasm by appearing in his apartment; Nicole Beharie as woman working in Brandon's office for whom Brandon develops some feelings; James Badge Dale as Brandon's boss, who likes to step out with Brandon to pick up girls at local bars. Essentially one-character, highly intense portrait of the impact of sex addiction on an attractive, intelligent, and successful young New Yorker. Brandon's life is an unending search for the orgasm – perhaps a one-night stand with a married woman, masturbating with pornographic videos on-line, rushing headlong to the men's room at work to masturbate into the toilet, and if necessary use his apparently unlimited cash to hire a prostitute, either in his condo or at her apartment. He never seems to enjoy himself; hardly ever smiles; doesn't have much of a sense of humor; his progress toward orgasm either alone or with someone else is accompanied by grimaces and other signs of psychological pain; he rigorously avoids any long-term relationship with a woman. One of the best sequences in the film is his eye contact with a married woman in the subway at the beginning of the film; she seems at first to respond to his hungry look, but when she exits the car she flees up the stairs, leaving Brandon his usual frustrated self, although this time without the orgasm. Brandon seems fairly content with his constant search for sex until his needy sister crashes his apartment. Her dependency and neediness upset his equilibrium and put him back into contact with feelings originating from their previous lives together. He also starts to develop a kind of relationship with Beharie, a young woman from his office, but because he senses a real affection for her, he is unable to get an erection to have sex with her. The last part of the film is a furious quickening of the pace – he gets himself beat up by insulting a woman in a bar, he has sex with a man in a sleazy gay den, he then has sex with two women at the same time; in a paroxysm of disgust he also collects all his pornographic material and throws it into the garbage. The film ends in stasis: on the one hand Brandon takes a long run indicating perhaps impending change; on the other, Sissy tries once again unsuccessfully to commit suicide, and Brandon makes eye contact on the subway with the same woman that he pursued toward the beginning of the film; fade out, end of film. Film has characteristic style: very explicit sex scenes with full frontal male nudity (Fassbender is well endowed), lots of writhing and bumping bodies, a paucity of dialogue, long takes sometimes with dialogue (Brandon's mutual insults with Sissy or his long, obviously improvised dialogue with Beharie in a restaurant), sometimes without (Brandon's lengthy runs toward the end of the film). One of last scenes of film has Brandon having repetitive sex with two women, and the close-up shots of his face show only tension and suffering, and never pleasure or satisfaction. Film is fearless in depicting compulsive sexuality, courageous in not copping out to redemption at the end. It is however often slow-moving and repetitive, sometimes self-consciously arty in its compositions, trendy in its techniques, e.g., improvised dialogue. Comes across as a lesson rather than an enjoyable piece of cinematic art. (2012)

Shampoo 1975 Hal Ashby (wr. Robert Towne and Beatty) 3.0 Warren Beatty as promiscuous hairdresser in Los Angles; Julie Christie as his ex-girlfriend; Lee Grant as his current regular

flame; Goldie Hawn cute as a button as another girlfriend; Carrie Fisher cute and sexy as Hawn's daughter; Jack Warden as high-powered businessman with disquieting connections. Dated 1970s morality tale about a rootless, heartless ladies man, who progressively finds himself alone because of refusal to establish a stable relationship. The film is set in 1968 LA on the eve of Nixon's and Agnew's election, both of whom appear several times on TV. Jack Warden is rather sleazy businessman (he has muscle men), who appears to be a fan of Nixon. Beatty as much desired hairdresser, but by looks of hair of his women it seems his fame comes more from his performance in bed (he has sex with practically all the women in the movie's 24 hours). He is constantly on the move from house to house of all his women on his motorbike, non-stop aimless motion, with plenty of women but with no permanent connections – no male friends, no real mate. Focuses at first on married Lee Grant, who can't get enough of sex with him and who follows him like his nemesis. Dawning awareness he wants to get married; first thinks it is girlfriend Goldie Hawn, but soon gives up on her and asks ex-flame Julie Christy to marry him; but she turns him down to marry boyfriend Warden (does anyone think this is going to last?). At the end of the film Beatty is left alone in long shot on top of a hill. Very little explicit sex – only one time. Kind of merry-go-round feel, with dialogue that rarely goes deep to reveal the characters. The film also takes stabs at politics, depicting rich Republicans (Warden) as hypocritical, and critiquing anti-Nixon leftwingers for not doing more to defeat Nixon. The film is flat at times, since until the end plot doesn't seem to have a direction. Film ostensibly has critical attitude toward the sexual merry-go-round of the 70s, but often one wonders whether we are indulging it. (2006)

Shane 1953 George Stevens 3.5 Alan Ladd as the ex-gunner with a mysterious past who rides into Jackson Hole heading to nowhere in particular; Van Heflin as decent and rather stiff farmer ("sodbuster") with the will to resist efforts of ranchers to run the farmers out of the valley; Brandon DeWilde as Heflin's adorable son that develops a strong crush for Ladd; Jean Arthur still gravelly voiced in one of her later roles as long-suffering wife who can't help but develop tender feelings for the gentle stranger; Ben Johnson as one of the bad guys who has second thoughts; Emile Meyer a bit miscast as the rancher trying to run the farmers out of town – he calls in the gunfighter; John Dierkes as bad guy brother of Meyer; Jack Palance in classic early role as steely cold-blooded killer who doesn't say much. Hyper classic western about decency and standing up for what is right: Heflin argues constantly to keep the other farmers from running from the bully Meyer; when he decides to confront Meyer and Palance himself, Ladd has to beat him up and hit him on the head with the butt of his gun to stop him. Subplots involve DeWilde's attachment to Ladd and Arthur's strong attachment to Ladd (although she never says it out loud much less kiss him even on the cheek). Two very long fistfights that try our patience somewhat; Palance's cold-blooded murder of farmer Elisha Cook Jr.; and the final extended shootout between Palance et al. and Ladd, once he finally dons his equipment to stand up for the good guys. The whole film is set against the stunningly blue backdrop of the Grand Tetons that confer an epic quality on the film; a great deal of the movie seems to have been filmed on location. The film follows the basic pattern and myths of the western genre: mysterious outsider rides into town; he establishes a relationship with the good people (farmers) who are trying to build American civilization (Fourth of July celebration, fireworks, square dance, pitching in to cut down Van Heflin's stump and build back the farmer's house burned down by the ranchers, not carrying guns, raising good families, expecting the law to come to town to establish enduring order, etc.); he eventually meets his destiny and stands up to the bad guys following the rule of the honorable duel, and then rides off toward the mountains, unforgettably with the boy running after him – "My dad wants you to stay. My mom wants you to stay. Shane! Shane! Come back!" Not a dry eye in the house as he disappears into the mountains. Ladd is quiet, noble, dignified; implicit remorse that he has done wrong as a gunfighter; he stands alone and noble; he will never have close friends, a woman to love, a family; he must always ride on to an unknown destination; he helps create the civilization of our country, but he is sacrificed in the process. The viewer becomes impatient when the film moves slowly during the flat domestic scenes; Victor Young's music is evocative but unimaginative, right down the line of the Hollywood western film score. But there is a simple nobility to Shane's quiet courage and his sensitive attachment to the boy and his mother (and to his restraint when dealing with her). The film somehow is more than its parts; it affects you emotionally and marks you for

a long time. Overtones of a cold War film – banding together to defend family and civilization against the vicious outsider (Russia?). (2007)

The Shape of Things 2003 Neil Labute 3.5 Rachel Weisz as sexy, manipulative art student at a small college probably somewhere on the West Coast; Paul Rudd as rather dorky, clueless-seeming English major at the same college; Gretchen Mol as the more proper student engaged to be married to Weller and who used to have a crush on Rudd; Frederick Weller as the tall, blond, obnoxious guy that Mol is engaged to. Labute's third entry (after 'In the Company of Men' and 'Your Friends and Neighbors') in his string of films about the natural, ineluctable enmity between men and women, in fact among all individuals. The film plays as a kind of thriller: the delectable Weisz entraps Rudd in her feminine web; as the film progresses, the viewer becomes aware that she is giving him a girlfriend make-over – he gets an acceptable haircut, loses weight, wears more hip clothes (out with that old corduroy jacket), gets a small nose job (can it really be healed with a small band-aid?); she uses her (considerable) sexual charms to keep him hooked. The film climaxes with the presentation to a student-filled auditorium of her art project, which – to the accompaniment of photographs – she explains was her successful campaign to seduce and remold a man into exactly what she wants. Rudd looks on in speechless horror at the violation of his humanity, and when he confronts her later in her project room, she reacts with indifference and distraction. Her project comes across less as an art project and more of a social science one in which the author displays the ability to transform the personality and appearance of a subject of the opposite sex when provided with the proper stimulus (sex and the belief that he is in love). Direction is straightforward, perhaps betraying the film's origin as a theatrical play. The actors, whom one often suspects of being marionettes manipulated by the author, is competent and usually believable. The dialogue is particularly arresting: precise, clipped discussion and questions and answers that probe the strengths and weaknesses of the characters and that betray an expert writer. The reactions of the characters don't always seem to grow naturally out of their personalities: Isn't Rudd a bit too blind at what is happening to him? Was there really a need for Weisz and Weller to go at each other with such violence (including her pushing him over)? And the wrestling match of Rudd and Weller on the school grounds seems completely out of proportion to the cause. But the viewer doesn't really care, since he is enjoying so much the dialogue and the development of the theme. The soundtrack consists of a selection of catchy songs by Elvis Costello that are played during the transitions among the major scenes. The film appears to include a put-down of modern art, since Weisz's project seems designed to humiliate a fellow human being and in any case it bears only a distant relationship with true art. The main thrust of the film is a brutal misanthropy with a particular emphasis on the vicious things women do to men. Rather disturbing, but, oh! So entertaining! (2012)

Shaun of the Dead 2004 Edgar Wright (co-writer) (Britain) 3.5 Simon Pegg (co-writer) as London slacker who can't give up his no-good-for-nothing buddy even for the sake of his girlfriend; Nick Frost priceless as even bigger slacker who doesn't do anything but play video games; Kate Ashfield as pretty, blond one-time girlfriend of Pegg, who tries to inject an element of sensibleness into the proceedings; Dylan Moran as snobby, clueless friend who gets his deserts when he is eaten alive by a gang of zombies. Funny, well-constructed spook of zombie films in general and of the remake of 'Dawn of the Dead' in particular. Pegg and Frost, who live in a flat with a third roommate, spend most of the time hanging out in local pub, The Winchester, a practice that Ashfield denounces as a complete waste of time; they are so busy drinking beer and playing video games that they do not notice that a zombie attack is reported on the news and that they are lurching about in their own neighborhood; after Ashfield breaks up with Pegg, he decides to "rescue" her from her home and take her to a safe haven, the Winchester (why it is safe is a question not answered); after many adventures in which members of the party are bitten and thus turned into zombies themselves, they finally gain access to the deserted pub; they are attacked relentlessly by the undead until virtually everyone is torn to pieces. A very funny ending with a domestic scene in which Ashfield and Pegg are contented marrieds talking about the normal, empty plans for their day; Pegg excuses himself saying that he has something to do outside; he enters the garden shed, where...the thoroughly zombified Frost is waiting for him tied to a post with a chain around his neck; the two then start a video game ... end of film! Film can tire when it is focusing on escape and zombie gore

(an exception is the scene in which the priggish Moran is grabbed by a dozen or so zombies and is then torn to shreds as they compete over his intensely red intestines), but the satire is very funny. Film picks up where the US slacker comedies of the 2000s leave off: caring only about video games and beer, not paying attention to your girlfriend, living in a dirty and chaotic bachelor pad, the human protagonists often seem to be as much zombies as the real thing. Frost and Pegg are a great pair who know how to play off one another. Film goes far beyond just lampooning ‘Dawn of the Dead’; it understands that, even when serious, zombie movies are funny (zombie are so slow and lumbering, so stupid, so ugly), and it adds social satire into the mix. (2011)

The Shawshank Redemption 1994 Frank Darabont (Stephen King short story) 3.5 Tim Robbins as calm, quiet, modest middle class Maine man sent to prison for killing his wife (he didn't do it); Morgan Freeman as avuncular prison old timer who narrates the story – he controls the prison economy and takes a 20% cut; Bob Gunton as Warden – “Your soul belongs to Jesus, but your ass belongs to me” – he is a Christian who turns out to be the consummate hypocrite; James Whitmore as elderly inmate who takes care of a baby bird and a raven – when he leaves prison on parole, he is lonely and disoriented, and hangs himself; Clancy Brown as sadistic and foul-mouthed captain of the guards, who can beat inmates to death; William Sadler as good-natured inmate with a Southern accent. A classic-style Hollywood movie that rises above most and is moving. Vivid portrait of life in a Maine prison from the 1940s through the 60s. Prison is an ugly Victorian hulk; most inmates are white; prison seems well run and conditions pretty decent – plentiful food, men spend a lot of time together, they play ball in the yard, work in the laundry, play betting games, the prison has a lending library run by Whitmore; it has an internal life and its own economy – transactions are conducted in cigarettes; the inmates watch ‘Gilda’ whistling at Rita Hayworth; some of the inmates are homosexual (the “sisters”) – they are very brutal and enjoy raping young inmates. Great brutality and long stretches spent in solitary confinement stand out. The film is narrated by old timer Morgan Freeman, who speaks simply, nobly, and eloquently; he notices the arrival of Robbins and takes an immediate liking to him. The film is in large part the development of the two men's moving friendship and solidarity until the surprise ending reunites them in Mexico. Most of the film is focused on the lives of the inmates and Robbins' adaptation to prison life as observed by Freeman. Both give excellent performances. Freeman has been in prison so long that he can't imagine life outside. Robbins, whose inner thoughts and secret actions we – and no one else – know, has a placid, reflective, and submissive exterior; he is good at worming his way into the favor of the warden and the guards by providing them with financial and tax servies! The surprise twist is that he has been planning his escape and life after prison for 20 years: he gets a rock pick and slowly tunnels through the thick walls, hiding his work with huge pin-up posters (Rita Hayworth, Marilyn Monroe, and then Raquel Welch); he assists the prison warden in one of his scams, although it turns out that he has hidden the money in banks outside the walls where he can collect it after his escape; when Freeman is released, he then rejoins Robbins in Mexico. The escape is very satisfying, since not only do our two heroes go free and prosper, but the hated warden is incriminated – he commits suicide when the police come to arrest him. Heavy Hollywood redemption does not in this case spoil the film, although the music is positively Spielbergian (swelling violins) and our hearts are often in our throats. The film follows the Hollywood blueprint, but beautiful photography, excellent acting (especially Robbins, Freeman, and Gunton as the warden), credible picture of prison life, the satisfying surprise, and even the good feelings themselves make this a superior movie. (2010)

She Wore a Yellow Ribbon 1949 John Ford 4.0 Filmed in brilliant color and spectacular scenery in Monument Valley – wide open spaces and red buttes towering in background. Beautiful high definition restored color print. John Wayne looking rather svelte with hair silver dusted as cavalry captain on verge of forced retirement; gruff but good-natured, bickering in good humor with the comic relief McLaglen, who expects retirement two weeks after Wayne's, decisive commander who has been in the army since he was a kid and who knows what he is doing, much respected by his men, with the tagline “Never apologize, it's a sign of weakness.” Victor McLaglen as standard good-natured drunken Irish sergeant Quincannon. Barry Fitzgerald as the company doctor, another Irishman. Joanne Dru as token

and unnecessary genteel woman – niece of the fort commandant – living in the cavalry fort to find out more about the reality of the West (?), riding sidesaddle with the troop and flirting with all the young lieutenants. She wears her yellow ribbon as a sign that she is somebody's sweetheart. Just after the destruction of Custer's detachment, script declares major Indian uprising in 1876 that threatens all of American civilization in the West. Film occurs in five day period before Nathan's retirement; at his wife's grave (ch.5) Wayne discusses his (lack of) plans after his retirement. Ch. 8 – the cavalry marches out to the accompaniment of the theme song: 'when I asked her why she wore the yellow ribbon, she said "I wore it for my lover who is in the cavalry"'. The soundtrack also includes Irish songs with chuckling bassoon and merry jigs, patriotic Union songs from the Civil War, and the standard symphonic Indian music. The bulk of the film follows the journey of the detachment across the desert. Nathan's detachment is entirely in the open in the midst of desert grasslands with the monuments rising in the background: one terrific chase by Indians of the sergeant at full gallop. Many a sentimental touch connects the viewer to the cavalry troopers and to a few of the settlers, whom of course the cavalry is trying to save. When settlers are killed, the soldiers have a pious Christian burial service; one victim, who had been a general in the confederate army, is buried with an improvised Confederate flag on his coffin. Dual bad guys – the Indians who are cruel and treacherous and referred to be Nathan as "those devils"; and the gun merchants supplying the Indians with Winchester rifles (although this line is not emphasized). The viewer gets impatient waiting for the big fight to happen. First climax comes when Wayne returns to fort declaring that he has "failed" and that he will have to retire thinking that his last mission was a failure. The fort commander decides to send C Troop off under the command of the greenhorn lieutenant, and the goodbye ceremony in front of the troop (ch. 24) is a masterpiece of near tearful sentimentality (the engraving on the watch includes "lest we forget"). The barroom brawl at the end with Quincannon fighting off seven men who are supposed to be arresting him is very amusing (ch. 25); tough, good-hearted man is uncontrollable when under the influence of Irish whiskey; only the appearance of 'Old Ironpants', the wife of the fort commandant, persuades him to march off to the guardhouse. But reversal as Nathan visits the detachment in the field next to the Indian encampment with only "four hours to go", where he takes over with no questions asked. He makes a visit to the camp where he has amusing talk with his Christian Indian chief Pony that Walks, who says that he is against the war and would rather get drunk and shoot buffalo with Nathan. The Indian action is somewhat disappointing, since Nathan succeeds in running off the Indian ponies, and then giving orders that the Indians be escorted back to their reservation. As he rides off into the sunset (beautiful shot), he is overtaken by a sergeant who informs him that he has been promoted to Lieutenant Colonel as Chief of Scouts. Ends in heartfelt patriotic tribute to the U.S. cavalry: "Wherever they rode and whatever they fought for, that place became the United States." Wonderful Ford movie – commanding star, amusing supporting players, magnificent photography, moving postwar patriotism, every little piece in place. (2008)

The Sheik 1921 George Melford 3.0 Rudolph Valentino, Agnes Ayres, Adolphe Menjou! Interesting mainly for looking at screen persona of Valentino. After long introduction to the exotic pleasures of a North African city (Biskra), story begins as kidnap/rape, but Sheik ends up falling in love with his victim, and once we learn that he is not Arab, but a European, the presumption is that they will live happily ever after! RV is strutting, swaggering with a sexy magnetic look mixing passion and melancholy and usually displaying his straight teeth for our admiration; but he is sensitive, has remorse, prays to Allah, and falls in love, sacrificing himself for his beloved; he also looks pitiful as he lies unconscious on his sickbed. Setting is exotic ('beautiful Biskra' and then the sands of the Sahara), with minarets, big ornate tents and luscious dancing girls. Print is fair with lots of tinted stock (alternating between brown/orange and grey blue), shots through doorways; major cross editing at end as rescuers gallop to save AA from a fate worse than death! AA starts off as liberated woman who declares marriage to be "prison," but ends up falling in love, defending her honor like a cat woman, and then, once assured that her man is white, living happily ever after with one man. Arabs treated fairly: there are good ones and bad one (Omar the Bandit); religious beliefs/prayers to Allah are treated with respect. (2004)

Sherlock Holmes 2009 Guy Ritchie (Britain) 3.0 Wild update of the Holmes tradition with the hero cast as young, cool, and an action hero. Robert Downey Jr. remaking the image of Holmes with

his ready wit and smart martial arts moves; Jude Law as a more sensible, and much younger Watson, who wants to get married; Rachel McAdams fetching as Irene Adler, Holmes' only squeeze – she is not a shabby combatant herself; Eddie Marsan as a not too bright, traditionally subservient Inspector Lestrade; Mark Strong makes percussive impression as the evil necromancer Lord Blackwood. Entertaining amalgam of first-rate special effects, reimagining of the main characters, and a headlong plot that doesn't always add up. Downey is frankly fabulous as Holmes: a slob who suffers severe mental problems when he doesn't have a mortal challenge; as in the original possessing an encyclopedic knowledge of minutiae, especially in botany and chemistry; a master of deduction; impulsive and witty; and a mean fighter. The slam-bang beginning introduces us to Blackwood, who is caught by the police and then (apparently) executed; "risen" from the dead he continues his murderous ways – Holmes and Watson hot on his trail – ending up with a plot to murder MPs sitting in the House of Commons; once he has control of the British government, he will spread his power around the globe, making a particular point about reannexing the USA (!). Holmes unmasks him as a charlatan knowing no more about necromancy than the corner butcher. Ritchie is big on camera tricks (e.g., Holmes visually imagining his take-down of a muscle-bound goon before he actually does it in regular motion), and on mind-boggling special effects: perhaps a ten-minute battle in a ship building factory with hitmen who are clearly no match for the principals; multiple explosions in a dockside site where Blackwood tries to assassinate our heroes; and principally the endless final sequence atop the London Bridge still under construction, where after several false starts on the dizzying towers Blackwood finally plunges to his death in the Thames. Locations and interior decoration are colorful – from the women's colorful costumes to the grungy London dockside environs, the local workers with extremely bad teeth, the chemistry laboratories with the broken glass and the ubiquitous dust, and the heavy, awkward-seeming Victorian machinery. Holmes and Watson are combative, but essentially affectionate roommates, whose relationship is put under strain whenever a pretty woman enters the scene. Entertaining mix of the Holmes tradition, feigned sorcery, and aggressive butt-kicking that makes aficionados of the Doyle stories scratch their heads. (November 2017)

Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Silk Stocking 2004 Simon Cellan Jones (or Allan Cubitt) (Britain) 2.5 Mediocre Sherlock Holmes TV movie produced from an original script by BBC and WGBH Boston. Rupert Everett a dull and overly good-looking Homes without the edge of Jeremy Brett despite starting the show in an opium den; Ian Hart young and not very Victorian as Dr. Watson, who gets married at the end of the film; Helen McCrory with convincing American accent as Watson's psychoanalyst fiancée; Neil Dudgeon as a credible Inspector Lestrade; three cute teenage girls as victims of a serial sex killer; Michael Fassbender creepy as the serial killer – he has a twin brother that complicates the case for Holmes. Not very interesting attempt to update the Holmes franchise with sex murders (none that I know of in the original stories) with upper class debutante teenagers as the victims; the perpetrator however never has forced sex with his victims. At the urging of Lestrade Holmes comes out of semi-retirement and boredom to confront the murders; all three murdered girls have one of their silk stockings stuffed down their throats. The investigation is predictable Holmes, ending with his finally figuring out that the reason the chief suspect has an alibi is that he has a twin brother; the finale in which Holmes and Watson rush into a candlelit underground sex lair to save the last kidnapped girl seems endless with textbook editing. Some interesting and entertaining features: mise-en-scène and art direction colorful and convincing; nice depiction of the contrasting behavior of the snobby upper classes and the common folk; a scene in a graveyard that depicts the anguish of victims and relatives with shots of funereal statues of Victorian angels; at a debutante ball Holmes' outrageous, but effective disguise as an overweight, eccentric French gentleman. The director's fondness for cross-cutting becomes tiresome after a while; over-abundance of scenes engulfed in London fog. The film's main problem is the monotonous protagonist. (2016)

Sherlock Jr. 1924 Buster Keaton 4.0 Buster Keaton, Kathryn McGuire as his love interest, Joe Keaton. Amazingly inventive and imaginative movie, and also touching as we root for the underdog that he will get his girl. First 35% of movie is realist and slower (entertaining shtick on dollar bills in the movie trash!), as BK pursues his girl unsuccessfully and gets blamed for a theft. While projecting a mystery movie, he falls asleep, begins to dream, and then walks into movie, where he is Sherlock Jr., the

"world's smartest detective," called in to solve the theft of a pearl necklace (reminiscences of Woody Allen's 'Purple Rose of Cairo,' where however the main character walks *out* of the movie). Whole style of fantasy sequence is much more fantastic; whereas in first part of movie he is poor, not very competent and making little progress toward winning the girl, after he steps into the film he is very smart (World's Smartest Detective), very lucky (staying alive through all the gags) and achieves great things. Great movie gag at the beginning of the film sequence -- with his persistence on the screen, and then falling/endangered as the editing of film changes from garden to street, to desert, mountainside, jungle with lions, seashore, etc. (clever on film medium's manipulations of reality through editing!). Then about 10-15 minutes of stellar gags and looks at suburban LA in 1924! The exploding billiard ball, the billiard game where somehow he manages to miss the explosive ball! Walking through the safe to go outside and start the chase. The long chase: handle bars of the driverless motorcycle and his near misses (crossing the tracks just before the train barrels by! crossing the bridge whose hole is filled temporarily by passing moving vans, speeding though the big gap in a hay bailer (?), creating a sailboat out of a convertible top). Most inventive gags are his escape through window suddenly (almost magically) into the costume of old lady! and his disappearance through the middle of his assistant Gillette when he is being pursued by the bad guys. Happy ending when he gets the girl and learns how to woo her by watching the movie out of the corner of his eye! (But he is not so sure he wants to have all those kids!) Directed with care and logical succession of ideas – cf. the way he carefully prepares the sequence in which he breaks out of the crooks' hideout (placing the costume' and filming the breakout scene without an exterior wall). Keaton's facial expression is minimalist – the "Great Stoneface" stares disconsolately at the camera for a second or so when he discovers that he is the only person on the motorcycle; or in the final sequence in which he is imitating the ending of the movie he is projecting, his priceless eye movements show his cluelessness, his uncertainty, and even his disagreement with what is happening on screen. He has astounding acrobatic skill, evidenced by the stunt where he rides a railroad crossing arm down to land in the back seat of a car. Point of second part of film appears to be a reflection on the film medium: you have complete control over "reality" because of editing; things usually turn out better in movies than in reality; you can learn from movies (Keaton learning how to court his girlfriend by watching the characters on screen). If you want to learn how to treat the ladies, go to the movies and watch the stars. (2004)

The Shining 1980 Stanley Kubrick (Britain) 4.0 Jack Nicholson completely dominating the film as failed writer threatening his wife and son while wintering in the Timberline Lodge (Mt. Hood); Shelley Duvall gaunt, anxious and at the end hysterical as his threatened wife desperate to protect her son against his father; Danny Lloyd as the "possessed" son with an alter ego that has the gift of "shining"; Scatman Crothers as the hotel's head chef also with the gift of shining, who ends up the only victim of Nicholson's axe. Classic, impactful, often puzzling haunted house horror film about the threat posed by the increasingly mad and violent father to his wife and child isolated by snow storms in the hotel they are wintering in; in a very long chase climax Nicholson fails to kill either one of them, and dies himself frozen in the hotel's massive hedge maze. Many memorable scenes: the spectacular helicopter shots of Going to the Sun Highway as Nicholson drives his VW into the heart of the Rockies for his first meeting with the hotel director (Barry Nelson); the oft repeated image of blood gushing out of the elevator doors into the halls of the hotel; Danny building up the tension by letting his little Shining friend Tony (his finger) speak for him in a hoarse voice; the spectral flashback scenes in the ballroom with the bartender (Joe Turkel) and in the red and white men's room with the elegant waiter (Philip Stone) that suggest that Jack is no stranger here; the repeated scenes of Nicholson typing his book in the main hall of the hotel, which leads to the final crisis when Duvall discover that he has been typing the same phrase over and over again ("All work and no play make Jack a dull boy"): the dolly shots following Danny's trips through the hall on a tricycle, which lead to a confrontation with the murdered twins staring at him from the end of the hall and inviting him to play with them; Nicholson's puzzling, surrealistic visit to Room 237, where he encounters a beautiful nude woman rising out of a bathtub (shades of 'Les Diaboliques'?), who turns into a decaying hag when they embrace; the curiously ironic, humorous, but intense, disquieting, and even terrifying facial expressions of Nicholson, who leers, stares, and mugs at the camera and at his wife; the long, hysterical final sequence in which Nicholson is wounded by Duvall with a baseball bat, escapes from the food locker with the help of Grady, one of the hotel spooks, chops down

the bathroom door with a maniacal expression to get at Duvall (“Here’s Johnny!”), murders Crothers who returns in a Snow cat to rescue Duvall and Danny, and then chases his son through the maze, only to be outwitted by him and to die lost and frozen (Whew! A sort of happy ending!). The film moves quite slowly, perhaps more so than in the original theatrical version, since about 20 minutes of footage has been added to the print (all of it probably unnecessary). The crafting of the sense of isolation and the growing threat from Nicholson is done masterfully. The film’s theme is ambiguous and often confusing: it is clear that Nicholson has escalating mental problems and that the haunted hotel is pushing him toward more axe murders reminiscent of the ones committed by the waiter; but the Shining power shared by Danny and Crothers appears to be a separate thread that gives the victims premonitions of danger (“Redrum!”); and the final shot of a photograph of Nicholson attending a July 4 party at the hotel in 1921 (reinforced by Grady’s prior statement that Jack has “always been the caretaker of the hotel”) somehow suggests that he has had a relationship with the forces there for a long time (Indian burial ground, says the director in the first scenes). The director’s mise-en-scène, camera work (non-stop dolly shots along the floor of the hotel) and Nicholson’s performance make the film one of the most memorable. (2013)

The Shipping News 2001 Lasse Hallström 2.5 Kevin Spacey as Quoyle, departing from his sarcastic persona to play a guy who is beaten down like a dog but has to learn to become a human being; Judi Dench sporting a good American accent as his aunt, who like most of the Quoyles, harbors a secret; Julianne Moore as the earth mother-type of young woman (also harboring a secret) that coaxes Quoyle toward humanness; Cate Blanchett makes a big impression as Quoyle’s first wife, wayward sexual dynamite, killed early in a accident on the George Washington Bridge; Pete Postlethwaite as the editor of the newspaper that Quoyle works for in Newfoundland and his nemesis; Scott Glenn as the newspaper owner, decent guy who supports Quoyle; Rhys Ifans as kind, supportive member of the newspaper staff. Limp adaptation of the Annie Proulx novel whose main virtue is imaginative use of the hostile Newfoundland landscape – rocky, forbidding, fog-shrouded, cold (Quoyle’s daughter asks if summer ever comes to this part of the world), stormy to the point that the wind destroys Quoyle’s old family home that somebody had anchored to the ground with cables to prevent that from happening; the climate and physiognomy of the place is obviously meant as a symbol of the spikiness of existence. The story focuses on passive, doormat Quoyle, who put up with anything from the wild Petal, but who after her death is brought to Newfoundland, his ancestral home, by Dench; there he encounters supportive friends from the newspaper staff, a nurturing romantic relationship with Moore; and he is launched on a spooky voyage of discovery about the family skeletons in the closet – his ancestors were murdering pirates, he finds out that the house on the promontory had been dragged in the winter across the ice to its present location (presented in an eerie flashback sequence), his father had raped his sister (Dench), who had given birth to a daughter, etc. All of this somehow brings him to a realization that he needs to dive into life and move into the future; in the end he is poised to marry Moore, combine their two families, and put down roots in forbidding Newfoundland. The film has only limited success in evoking the edgy spookiness of Proulx’s novel – living in the virtually unrepainted old house on the rocky point, pursuing strangers who appear outside the house at night, dreaming frequently about being underwater and drowning, being rescued (improbably) from actual drowning by Glenn. One memorable, humorous scene has Glenn coming back to life at his wake – sputtering water to the horror of the women present – after he had supposedly drowned in a boating accident; another bizarre one has the local guys, who have come together to celebrate Ifans’ decision to leave Newfoundland, destroy his boat and trailer home in an extended drunken riot – perhaps an expression of rage against the hostile living conditions on the Atlantic coast of Canada? Spacey’s character is too passive and clueless, the film style is too relaxed and pretty, for the story. Proulx must not have been very happy with the result. (2013)

The Shootist (a P.C. term for ‘gunslinger’) 1976 Don Siegel; music Elmer Bernstein 3.5 John Wayne in his final performance looking old, thick, grizzled, and sick (moves with some difficulty), but good-humored as ex-gunfighter who has cancer; Ron Howard as callow, headstrong son of Bacall; Lauren Bacall starchy and svelte as widow who is a boarding house operator; Bill McKinney in rather undeveloped character of ill-tempered owner of the town creamery; James Stewart his older jowly self as a doctor, who tells Wayne that “I would not die a death as I just described, not if I had your courage”;

Richard Boone as a bitter eccentric former acquaintance of Wayne; John Carradine sepulchral as the undertaker (vide ‘The Last Tycoon’); Scatman Crothers with outrageous false teeth as enthusiastic, good-humored stableman who drinks too much; Richard Lenz as humorous foolish reporter looking for a story – he is thrown out of the house by Wayne; Harry Morgan as town marshal unpredictable and bizarre with a colorful way of talking; Hugh O’Brian as egotistical, ill-tempered gambler and gunslinger who wants to challenge Wayne; Sheree North as Wayne’s ex-girlfriend, who comes to take advantage of Wayne when she finds out about his condition. The film is set at the end of the frontier era, 1901 – already electric lines, telephones, streetcars, and an occasional automobile in Carson City, Nevada, but people still pack their six-shooters. Set in lovely area with snow-capped mountains in the background. Film charts the progress of Wayne’s incurable cancer: he visits Stewart twice, takes a lot of laudanum to dull the pain (no apparent mental side effects), and his outlook on life changes as he nears death – he is interested more in relationships, enjoying the beautiful natural surroundings, and working out a way to avoid the final sufferings of the disease. He develops a genuine platonic connection with the crusty Bacall, a paternal relationship with Howard, and a friendly, honest relationship with Doc Stewart. Film has a rather incredible conclusion, when Wayne summons O’Brian, Boone, and McKinney (one wonders why they all show up to fight him at the same time) to the (elaborate!) town bar, where they have a traditional shoot-out with all four dead at the end. Wayne thus solves his problem and goes out in style – “with his boots on”. The moral? Perhaps this is the end of the Old West, and all gunslingers will have to accept the end of their glorious role; Wayne can continue to be a man of superior morality, since all three of the men he killed were bad men. Some well-known quotations from Wayne: “I won’t be wrong, I won’t be insulted, and I won’t be laid a hand on. I don’t do these things to other people and I require the same thing from them.” “There’s more to being a man than having a gun.” “Every young man feels the need to let the badger loose now and again.” Interesting, well-orchestrated, low-key and dramatically appropriate musical score by Elmer Bernstein. The film is best as a showcase for several wonderful Hollywood actors, all past their prime. Wayne’s performance is convincing and moving, and it is a fine farewell to his brilliant career. (2008)

The Shop Around the Corner 1940 Ernst Lubitsch 3.5 James Stewart, Margaret Sullavan, Frank Morgan, Felix Bressart, Felix Schildkraut. Later Lubitsch, much more sentimental than films like “Trouble in Paradise” made before enforcement of the Hayes Code. Based on a Hungarian play, film takes place mostly within a gift shop in Budapest in the late 1930s (Lubitsch shows his European roots by not switching it to small-town America). A romantic comedy, a la Lubitsch. Has some of the bittersweet – life is so sweet but alas sorrow too and it must end -- Viennese aura one sees in Strauss, Stefan Zweig, Schnitzler and Ophüls. Stewart has romantic pen pal with Sullavan without realizing who she is when she starts working in the same shop where he works. A lot of mostly light romantic tension as Stewart and Sullavan painstakingly work their way toward one another, culminating of course in final romantic kiss at fade-out. Lubitsch reveals things to us slowly: e.g., the reason Morgan is so angry with Stewart and ends up firing him is that he is convinced that Stewart is having an affair with his wife (it turns out to be pop-in-jay, dandy clerk played by Joseph Schildkraut). But fate (?) intervenes, when Morgan decides he has to take it easy (he has tried to commit suicide) and appoints Stewart manager of the shop. Sullavan’s character is a bit annoying, since she is pretty materialistic, and very sharp-tongued in her denunciation of Stewart (it turns out that she had been so hard on him because she had found herself falling in love with him). Film impeccably produced. The indoor sets and the outdoor street scenes (still in studio) at Christmas are finely detailed and convincing. Acting is wonderfully controlled: even Morgan doesn’t overact; Bressart (part of Lubitsch’s company) is wonderful as the other clerk with the heart of gold; Stewart’s sincerity, determination, and lanky handsomeness work extremely well; only Sullavan strikes me as a little too sure of herself and whiny. Pace is quite measured; punctuated by some good lines, and some satisfying revelations, but it could have used some editing. Only one true ‘Lubitsch Touch,’ when the camera tracks into the rear area of the mailbox, and we see lovelorn Sullavan’s hand groping for the letter, and then her face on the other side of the box. The more leering, wisecracking and sexual innuendo Lubitsch of the 1920s and early 30s was more fun. (2008)

Show Me Love 1998 Lucas Moodysson (Sweden) 2.5 Alexandra Dahlstrom as young blond teenager caught in a provincial Swedish town – she is bored and yearning to bust out; Rebecca Liljeberg as much younger looking brunette who is depressed and pining away for initially undisclosed reasons. Low-key but honest little film about teenage Angst in a provincial Swedish town, where it is so quiet that by the time the kids hear about a trend, it is no longer a trend. Rebecca lies in bed looking miserable; she is impervious to the well-meaning encouragement of her father; she is furious when her mother insists on throwing a birthday party for her sixteenth birthday – of course no one shows up, except for a girl in a wheelchair, whom Rebecca insults. Alexandra is more colorful: she lives with her well-meaning mother and alternately fights with and pals around with her sister; showing an ample décolletage, she is extremely restless and bored, wanting to "fall in love" and have sex and to become a model. Rebecca reveals from the beginning that she is a lesbian, as she writes about her inclinations in her computer diary; she is teased and insulted constantly by the cruel kids at school. Alexandra thinks she is heterosexual, but, but after having sex with a guy for the first time (both girls admit in the first part of the film that they are sexually inexperienced), she discovers that boys are jerks and just as boring as the town they live in. Through a little bit of playful experimentation and an abortive attempt to run away, the girls discover (what appears to be) their love for one another. Once they defy their peers' opinion and walk through the school halls hand-in-hand, they finally smile and look happy; Rebecca thinks she has found her true love and Alexandra is no longer bored. Film appears to be filmed in low-key lighting with a lot of handheld-looking cinematography and editing. Perhaps a little hard to watch for adults who have been through the experience of raising teenage girls, but the film has the virtue of honesty and realism. (2009)

Shower 1999 Yang Zhang (China) 2.5 Jiayi Du; Wu Jiang; Ding Li. Heart-warming small scale Chinese comedy about generational differences set in an older part of Beijing . The owner is elderly and has two sons: one of them is a big, good-hearted retarded guy with an eternal smile on his face; the other is a serious, focused yuppie type from the city who returns to the paternal bath house for the first time in a long time when he receives a card from his brother with a picture of his father lying down (is he dying?). The father and the retarded son get along famously, exercising together in the streets and cooperating in running the bath house; the yuppie son is intense, hatching serious plans about the future of his relatives. The customers in the bath house are depicted lovingly -- all older, retired men, who spend most of their day in the bath house, hiding out from their wives (one is a real shrew), whiling away their time fighting crickets, singing a garbled version of the Italian song 'O sole mio', etc. The plot snaps when the father suddenly dies in one of the baths -- it is apparent that he has been having heart troubles for some time. The son tries to put his brother in a care home since he fears that his wife, whom he has not told about his brother, will not allow him to bring him home. The retarded fellow of course rebels, his brother relents, and swears to him that he will never leave him (unspoken is what will happen if the wife does not agree). The film ends with the whole block being razed for urban renewal, the retarded brother belting out 'O sole mio' in the emptied out bath house, and the two of them resolved to stay together. The film is gentle and well-intentioned, and it can be amusing. But it is slow-moving, predictable, and often very sentimental: the viewer is constantly urged to admire the inner goodness, generosity, and good sense of the challenged brother, of the old guys in the bath house, etc. The sympathies of the filmmaker clearly lie on the side of the old-fashioned lifestyle against progress, tearing down old buildings, sending mentally challenged siblings to institutions for care. The challenged brother hardly seemed retarded what with his administrative abilities and his people skills. (2010)

Shutter Island 2009 Martin Scorsese 2.5 Leonardo DiCaprio looking plump and usually unshaven as federal marshal sent to Massachusetts psychiatric penitentiary island to find an escapee; Mark Ruffalo solid as his sidekick; Ben Kingsley craggy, alternately reassuring and menacing as the head of the psychiatric penitentiary; Max von Sydow as a resident psychiatrist with good lines; Michelle Williams as the cute dead wife of DiCaprio – she keeps appearing in flashbacks; Ted Levine as menacing and colorful as the penitentiary warden; Patricia Clarkson; Emily Mortimer. Over-the-top psychological horror, thriller film based on B movie sensibilities. DiCaprio and Ruffalo arrive on the island just ahead of a violent storm – to the accompaniment of over-dramatic music that pounds us intermittently

throughout the film. The narrative begins as a detective story in a creepy setting – how did the female inmate escape; the screenplay throws all sorts of red herrings at the viewer, and the first 45 minutes is fairly enjoyable spent trying to figure out which way the narrative is heading. The film then settles into long sequences of DiCaprio searching for the truth in the different buildings of the prison, while a violent hurricane screams and pounds outside (broken limbs and trees all over the once neatly kept grounds) and the protagonist is subjected to flashbacks (of him as a soldier staring at lurid piles of dead bodies in concentration camps liberated by his unit in World War II) and of visions of his blood-covered wife (Williams) appearing in many places that he visits. After many blood-curdling scenes, film finally ends in “the lighthouse” where Kingsley and Ruffalo reveal to a temporarily lucid DiCaprio that he is not the marshal but a highly dangerous inmate whom they are desperately trying to bring back to reality; he had gone insane when he had discovered his children murdered by his wife and he had then shot her to death; the epilogue however has DiCaprio relapsed thinking he is the federal marshal, and the orderlies lead him off for his lobotomy. The film has a fiendishly complex narrative, and in the middle part of the film the viewer is bombarded with all sorts of ambiguous, confusing, information – flashbacks to the concentration camp (never happened), visions of his dead wife (induced by the drugs that the hospital is giving him to break out of his psychosis), confusing passages about the pyromaniac who supposedly killed his wife, violent encounters with inmates whose identity is difficult to determine, etc. In this part the film seems to make no progress, and the viewer may well conclude that it is depicting the landscape of DiCaprio’s mind, but he would have no idea what it all means. Certain elements make some sense – e.g., the woman and her daughter coming to life on the pile of concentration camp corpses; but a lot of them don’t, e.g., the film begins with DiCaprio and Ruffalo coming to the film on the ferry – something that never happened. The film is baroque, over-the-top, too much stuff going on: complicated and overly tricky plot, scary, expertly presented prison scenes, intrusive, bombastic music, throwing in Mahler’s relationship with the Nazis, all the flashbacks and vision scenes, Clarkson’s scene as the cave hermit, etc. The story might have made a good film – with simplicity and restraint, the secrets of many a superior B movie. (2010)

Sicario 2015 Denis Villeneuve 3.5 Emily Blunt as experienced female FBI agent chosen to participate in an inter-agency operation to take down higher ups of the Mexican Sonoran cartel; John Brolin laid back (wears flip-flops), shaggy, and humorous, as CIA operative apparently in charge of the operation; Benicia del Toro grimly charismatic as mysterious and ruthless Colombian participating in the mission. Gripping international-style thriller that follows the progress of an anti- Drug Cartel operation through the eyes of Blunt. The film is addictive and compelling. The shocking first scene sets the mood: leader of an FBI task force, Blunt discovers dozens of cadavers immured in the walls of a Cartel safe house near Phoenix and loses two officers to a booby trap. After joining the interagency CIA operation, Blunt journeys in a line of black SUVs into the heart of Ciudad Juarez to pick up a cartel member for interrogation; the shootout at the border crossing with two carloads of thugs is exciting and bloody (there is more danger in standing in a traffic jam than moving rapidly down a street). The climactic operation into Mexico keeps the viewer on the edge of his seat: ‘Zero Dark Thirty’-style night operations through a border tunnel with night vision goggles; del Toro bulling his way into the Cartel head’s mansion, and when he discovers the jefe seated at the dinner table with his wife and two children, shooting all of them down in cold blood. The screenplay is tantalizing, never giving the viewer all the information he wants, but plunging ahead with action and suspense and giving a cursory explanation later. The character drama derives from the observations of Blunt, through whose eyes we observe events: a straight-arrow FBI agent used to playing by the book and always building a legal case during her operations, she is continuously offended by the patent illegality (operating in Mexico without authorization of the government) and immorality (assassinations, mass killings) of the expedition. The character of the charismatic del Toro is riveting: presenting himself first as a Columbian prosecutor come to help the American operation, he eventually reveals himself as a former member of the Medellin drug cartel, whose wife and daughter were murdered and mutilated by the Sonoran cartel when the latter wrested control of the hard drug trade from the Columbians; his involvement in the operation was pure revenge. After the horror of the palace murders, the film ends with two quiet scenes implying resignation to the hopelessness of trying to “win” the war on drugs: del Toro intimates to Blunt that he will kill her if she reveals anything about his actions;

and the son of a dead Sonoran policeman (shot in the back by del Toro) stops to hear faraway gunshots as he plays soccer in Juarez. At one point del Toro explains that the operation is about preserving Order as best we can and not about Justice. Slowly moving shots of the forbidding Sonoran desert, often photographed from the air, add to the fascination of the film. (2016)

Side Effects 2013 Steven Soderbergh 4.0 Rooney Mara as nervous and apparently impulsive young woman whose husband just returned from a four-year stint in prison (for insider trading); Channing Tatum as friendly, teddy-bearish husband who doesn't get quite the welcome he expected; Jude Law as avuncular, well-meaning psychiatrist who takes Mara under his wing; Catherine Zeta-Jones with severe glasses and hair pulled back as Mara's shrink before her husband went to prison. Very interesting, very twisty thriller based on the issue of psychiatric medication and on the operations of the drug industry. Mara does a wonderful job projecting a severely depressed young woman, even to the point of trying to commit suicide by ramming her car into a concrete wall (with her seatbelt on!); so when she -- apparently sleepwalking in a kind of 'Psycho' moment -- coldly stabs her husband to death, we are horrified although not completely surprised. Pleading that she was not responsible for the crime because she was in a sleep state, Mara is then committed temporarily to psychiatric detention under the care of the ever-caring Law. The second big surprise comes when Jude Law administers a fake truth serum test to her, in which he discovers that she is faking her illness, apparently to manipulate the stock price of the anti-depressant she is taking -- Ablixa -- so she can profit financially. Subsequent scenes reveal that Mara is in cahoots with Zeta-Jones, who is also her lover -- the two of them hatched the plot during the time that hubby was in prison. Law gets her arrested for securities fraud by wearing a wire; and in the last twist, Law, who has been transformed from a soft-spoken concerned psychiatrist to a revenge-bent justiciar, uses his power as Mara's psychiatrist to have her recommitted indefinitely to the psychiatric prison, while he presumably will enjoy the fruits of the women's ill-gotten gains; the last scene has her being led protesting by police back to the hated place. Justice is done, although in a particularly hateful way. In its focus on the relation of psychology and thriller, and its masterful manipulation of detail through precise mise-en-scène and editing, the film often reminds the viewer of Hitchcock. The acting is all beautifully managed and integrated – from the hidden motivations of Mara, to the gradual transformation of Law into a steely-eyed character obsessed with greed and revenge, to the revelation of Zeta-Jones as a creature of lust and avarice. The film begins with the impression that it will detail the sins of the drug industry – the apparent murderous side-effects of the anti-depressant, the amicable cohabitation of drug representatives and physicians, the focus on the financial markets –, but it turns out that psychiatrist and patient are pulling the strings of the narrative at the expense of the capitalist players; like perhaps 'Psycho' the films plays on our theme expectations based on previous films of Soderbergh, like the recent 'Contagion'. Despite some narrative incongruities and a sense that things were being hurried at the end, a superior roller-coaster-style thriller with a contemporary thematic edge. (2013)

Side Street 1949 Anthony Mann 3.0 Farley Granger as recently demobilized GI with a low level job in New York and no money to support his pregnant wife; Kathy O'Donnell as his sweet-as-peaches wife who emotes whenever she sees her beloved; Jean Hagen in memorable cameo as alcoholic night club singer who is murdered by the bastard she is in love with; James Craig as criminal reacting viciously when he realizes someone has stolen his \$30,000. Film noir-style police melodrama set in the streets of New York about naïve young fellow – Granger – who gives into temptation once and then finds himself struggling against bad karma; film seems to be a kind of sequel to 'They Live by Night' with the young lovers now awaiting their first child together in the big city. Film has dual focus: Granger, who regrets that he has stolen the money, running around New York trying to find it so he can give it back; and the police conducting an investigation, closing in on Granger and Craig, and then in the exciting chase finale through the streets of lower Manhattan, they save Granger's life so he can be joyfully reunited with O'Donnell. Film's style is mixed: on the one hand, it follows the postwar realist trend with a portentous narration 'Night and the City' style combined with wonderfully precise and colorful shots of New York City by day; on the other hand, a 'noir' feel at night with deep shadows and some sharp contrasts and the sense of Granger and O'Donnell caught by some greater force (fate) and racing toward their destruction no matter what they do. There is however no femme fatale and in the end Granger is

saved and the viewer is reassured by the narrator that he is alright and that we (the police, the people of the city?) will help him despite his sins. The film is not as moving as ‘They Live By Night’ because there is much less emphasis on the innocent couple; since the viewer does not often see them together, there is not as much opportunity for empathy. Wonderfully produced by MGM – picturesque, precise cinematography, good script that serves up colorful minor characters (Craig’s taxi driver who has a family to worry about and tries to persuade Craig not to kill his prisoners; and the smart-talking, street-wise kid that tells Granger where to find the man he thinks has his money), and smooth, elegant editing. The moral of the story seems to be – don’t get too greedy fantasizing about the expensive things in life; it could get you into serious trouble. (2011)

Sideways 2004 Alexander Payne 3.5 Paul Giamatti, Virginia Madsen, Sandra Oh, Frank Hayden Church. Very entertaining, insightful, lightly satirical movie about “loser” Miles (PG), a wine fancier who goes with womanizing friend, Jack (FHC), on bachelor “fling” to the Santa Barbara County wine country to visit wineries and play golf. Church is very well cast as good-hearted friend who tries to support self-doubting Giamatti, but he is also unrepentant womanizer carrying on torrid affair with Oh and never telling her that he was to be married at the end of the week. Giamatti is classic loser with an unpublishable novel, a failed marriage that he can’t get beyond, and loads of self doubt; he does have a good sense of humor, an ability to laugh at himself, generosity that he shows by going back to Jack’s girlfriend’s husband’s house to retrieve Jack’s wallet, and a sensitive heart that he (apparently) decides to offer to Madsen at the end of the movie (but it stops when he knocks on her door). Tour through the SB wine country is very picturesque with lots of shots of beautiful vineyards, stylish wine-tasting interiors, and montages of entertaining wine country activities. Movie is quite funny with good laughs that do not annoy: much light satire on the snobbish gourmet vocabulary of wine-tasting; belly laugh from the battle between golfing parties on the course; big laugh from the eye-averting sex scene between the overweight waitress and her tow truck-driving husband (while news program about Bush plays on the TV) and the wiggly husband’s chasing Miles down the street as he makes his getaway with Jack’s wallet; Oh also gives Jack a good beating and breaks his nose with her purse when she discovers that he is soon to be married. Payne is particularly good at sexual humor, e.g., when risqué remark by Church at wine-tasting induces Oh to slap herself on butt to “punish” herself and to suggest that she will be an ardent lover. Some empty time featuring scenery and “cool” activities when the principals are cruising through the wine country. Alexander Payne always delivers! (2006)

Signs 2002 M. Night Shyamalan 3.0 Mel Gibson, Joaquin Phoenix. Effective horror movie posing as a Close Encounters. Will the aliens be friendly or hostile? No bloodshed; less is more in the tradition of Val Lewton; no special effects! Builds creepy, claustrophobic atmosphere effective, scene by scene; although I wonder why the family retreats into the cellar when they know the aliens are coming after them! Two children are effective in the tradition of E.T.; more engaging and gripping if seen through the eyes of children; we feel the threats more. Cornfield scenes evoke perhaps some sort of atavistic association; creepy. Gibson loss of faith plays forced. He finds out that all is a concatenation of meaning, even the words uttered by his wife when she died in a car accident: she predicts that Joaquin will have to wield his baseball bat to defeat the alien threat. There is no such thing as coincidence. (What does the coming of aliens have to do with God’s manifestation?) Director plays shamelessly to the religious and triumphal proclivities of American audiences. Still effective until it gets annoying toward the end. (2005)

Sightseers 2013 Ben Wheatley (Britain) 3.0 Eileen Davies as Tina’s ill-tempered, self-pitying mother; Alice Lowe as English wallflower Tina aching to get away from her mum and to have a little sex; Steve Oram as Chris, apparently innocent and clueless working class lout offering to show Tina a good time in his caravan. Very bizarre film combining a sort of camping travelogue in the North of England and a run of grisly serial murders. Scenery is paradoxically beautiful and austere (photographed low budget under constantly lowering skies) as the protagonists visit several tourist sites in the area, including a tram museum, a pencil factory, and of course some Yorkshire crags. What Chris does along the way is surprising. He has a loutish lower class resentment against anything pretentious or annoying: he backs

bloodily over a guy who litters a parking lot with food wrappers (Chris and Tina then coolly wash the blood off the hubcap); he paradoxically bashes the head in of a man who objects to Tina not picking up after her dog (the extra effort he makes to smash the man's head against a boulder is somehow funny); he murders a man who seems too self-contentedly happy and brags about working on his third book (hits Chris in a tender spot since he claims that he is working on a book although the extent of it is a few notes in his notebook); he also pushes a guy sleeping in a miniature caravan into a quarry (?) because Tina makes Chris think that the guy has been making sexual remarks to Tina. Tina is so happy that she has escaped from her mother that she doesn't at first notice what is going on, but she too then develops a taste for murder: she pushes a bride-to-be over a cliff into an abyss because she and her bachelorette buddies were making too much noise in a restaurant, and then she runs over a roadside jogger out of distraction. Because they are casual and more or less unmotivated, Tina's murders get on Chris' nerves, and the viewer can't help but fear that she will be next. However, the film has a surprise ending: Chris and Tina plan to commit suicide together jumping off a famous 19th century railroad viaduct in Yorkshire, but when holding hands Chris lets go, Tina yanks her hand away and listens as Chris' body lands with a thud on the ground below. Tina is condemned to a much worse fate than her partner, since she has to return to her appalling mother. Absurdist, unpredictable, extreme humor. A certain parallel with films like 'Shaun of the Dead'. (2013)

The Silence (Das letzte Schweigen) 2010 Baran bo Odar (Germany, but the director is Swiss)
3.5 Ulrich Thomsen as Peer Sommer, caretaker of a housing complex, who is a serious pedophile preying on prepubescent girls; Wotan Wilke Möhring as Timo, his younger friend who is also a pedophile; Katrin Sass as the obsessed mother of the first child murdered in 1986; Karoline Eichhorn and Roeland Wiesnekker as the yuppie-like parents of the second murdered girl 23 years later; Burghart Klaussner as the police inspector haunted by his failure to solve the first murder; Sébastien Blomberg as David, a disheveled, disjointed, and highly obsessive junior police detective suffering from the loss of his wife to cancer. Mysterious, gripping, unusually edited detective thriller about the extensive impact of murders of children on their families and the police investigators working on their cases. The film opens with a disturbing rape and murder of the first girl riding her bicycle down a country road. The film then shifts to the same community 23 years later, where a rebellious 11-year-old disappears and then is finally found murdered toward the end of the film; the second crime followed the exact pattern of the first one long before. The film's narrative and characters seem strongly influenced by the Swiss writer Friedrich Dürrenmatt, who in his famous detective novel 'Das Versprechen' examined obsessive personalities and delivered a searching critique of the predictability and mathematical precision of the traditional detective novel (one supposes Agatha Christie). In some ways the film is a traditional thriller: the viewer is puzzled by the identity of the perpetrator of the recent crime; the script and mise-en-scene lead us to think Timo is guilty; and we are surprised to find that Sommer committed the murder as a message sent to Timo, whom he had not seen since the previous murder (the film hints that he has a homosexual relationship with Timo). The ending of the film is however up in the air: after Timo commits suicide by driving his car into the lake, the police wrap up the case thinking that the second murder was committed by the deceased, much to the frustration of the original investigator and of David, who departs from his usual neurotic silence to deliver an impassioned speech to the chief inspector accusing Sommer for the second murder. The film ends with an obviously chagrined Sommer closing the door to his apartment; the viewer cannot be sure if he may commit suicide or he will continue living in the absence of his beloved (Timo). There are plenty of other ambiguous dead ends in the film: Who is the father of the baby of the pregnant policewoman that snuggles up to David? Will the first girl's mother continue separating herself from the memory of his daughter murdered so long ago? How will the loss of their child affect the relationship of the yuppie couple? etc. The style of the film is partly non-linear: many helicopter shots traveling across deserted, mostly forested landscapes; frequent return to a giant image of a clown in an amusement park where the second girl is waiting for her friends; very little dialogue until the end of the film; abrupt, sometimes confusing jump cuts among scenes involving the various characters; a music soundtrack that consists mainly of long-held notes (sounding almost electronic). A haunting film that suggests that even in prosperous and peaceful social democratic Europe, evil and violence is lurking just below the surface. (2010)

Silence 2016 Martin Scorsese 3.5 Intense religious themed drama about the failure of the 17th-century Jesuit mission in Japan and Scorsese's struggle to make sense of Christianity. Andrew Garfield thin, ascetic and spiritually intense as Portuguese Jesuit Fr. Rodriguez sent to Japan in 1630s to succor the Kyushu Christians and to find out what happened to Fr. Ferreira; Adam Driver emaciated and passionately spiritual as Fr. Garupe accompanying Rodriguez; Liam Neeson as the sensible, world-weary apostatized priest who makes a strong case to Rodriguez to abandon his faith and adapt Japanese ways; Yosuke Kubozuka as the Japanese Christian companion continuously and annoyingly calling for forgiveness after he betrays Rodriguez; Ciaran Hinds as authoritative Fr. Valignano; Issei Ogata as the mannered, (seemingly) comic Inquisitor, whose job it is to convert Rodriguez; Tadanobu Asano as the urbane, convincing assistant to the Inquisitor. The film seems historically accurate and well-produced: the first part in the seaside mountains and the small fishing villages of Kyushu (film was actually made in Taiwan), the second in an elegant prison confine in Nagasaki. The film is a bit long. The first part details for an hour the sufferings and intense spiritual anxiety of the Christian villagers, who are constantly asking the priests to hear their confessions (no reference to Holy Communion), while the last two-thirds entails the interrogation and eventual breaking down of Rodriguez. The authorities have decided not to execute the priests, but to force their conversion thereby discrediting Christianity in the local population. Scorsese is obsessed with the "silence" of God when confronted with the suffering of good people performing heroic deeds to stay faithful to the faith. The Inquisitor combines persuasion – Asano's learned arguments delivered with a smile – with terror when he executes Christians, crucifies them in face of the rising tide, burns them wrapped in straw or hangs them upside down over a pit. Exploiting the love that Rodriguez and Garupe have for their flock, he forces them to witness the sufferings and misery of their people, arguing in effect that if they don't take the necessary steps – renunciation and conversion – they are guilty, since their God will do nothing. Feeling abandoned by God, who no longer seems to exist, Rodriguez finally gives in to extract five Christians from the pit. The film has a confusing postscript that suggests that even as Buddhists, Ferreira and Rodriguez are still close to their religion by serving God's call to succor suffering humanity; but when after his death Rodriguez's body is undergoing cremation, a tracking-in camera reveals a Christian amulet in his hand – he still sees himself as a Christian? The film is long and grim, and one often wishes for a deft editing touch. It is saved however by picturesque cinematography, first-rate (if a bit intense) acting, and by the drama of this probably last questioning of the Christian world view. Even though he admires Christian courage and fidelity, the silence of God suggests that He does not exist and that Scorsese was right to leave the Church. His syncretic union of Christianity and Buddhism at the end is not convincing. One doubts that Scorsese will have more to say on the subject. (2017)

Silver Linings Playbook 2012 David O. Russell 3.0 Bradley Cooper as hilarious, completely manic guy that has just been extracted from a mental hospital by his mother; Jennifer Lawrence (AA for best actress!!) as almost equally neurotic young woman who became a sex addict when her policeman husband is killed; Robert De Niro also neurotic as sports- and gambling-obsessed dad of Cooper trying to raise money as a bookie so he can buy a restaurant; Jacki Weaver believable and caring as the mom in the midst of the family's craziness (but nowhere near her diabolical character in 'Animal Kingdom'); Chris Tucker as amusing fellow patient of Cooper; John Ortiz very funny as hen-pecked husband driven to the financial and emotional wall by his dominating wife (played by Julia Stiles). Romantic comedy that starts off in hilarious fashion with the off-the-wall ravings of the manic Cooper and his personality conflicts with romantic interest Lawrence, before tailing off into familiar territory of romantic comedy, in which after competing in a dance contest (stuck in the film to take advantage of the popularity of 'Dancing with the Stars'?), the two finally see they are destined for one another and are last seen snuggling together in the corner of Cooper's family home. The film manages to find humor in neurotic behavior without being offensive. It takes place in a lower middle class suburb of Philadelphia (recalling the environment of 'The Fighter'), where the people watch professional football games on television, bet on the games, and try to move up a little in life. The focus of the film is Cooper's zany family, where the mom tries to maintain a semblance of decency and order, while De Niro dreams of winning it big through gambling and Cooper goes over the top, gets angry, talks extremely fast, loses his temper, gets into fights, and

confronts everyone with “truths” that are better left unsaid; the addition of the mercurial, adversarial relationship between Cooper and Lawrence, who has a gift for angry, emotional lines, the existentialist predicament of Ortiz, and the performance of Cooper’s psychiatrist, who doles out helpful insights with an Indian accent all add to the atmosphere of hilarious truthiness. As soon as the leading couple decide to do the dance contest together, however, the film’s inventiveness goes south; the couple attains their goal (barely!) in the dance contest, several characters make fools of themselves performing politically correct service at an Eagles’ game (defending the Indian fans against local racists), Lawrence runs away when she thinks Cooper still loves his ex-wife (a very manipulative scene), but they are reunited, reconciled to live happily ever after; and Cooper has overcome his former psychological deficits to emerge as a normal, loving human being. Deus ex machina! Still enjoyable. (2013)

A Simple Plan 1998 Sam Raimi 3.5 Bill Paxton as nice-guy college educated family man who is caught up in a vortex of greed; Billy Bob Thornton as Paxton’s not-so-bright younger brother, who turns out to have a moving sense of moral probity; Brent Briscoe as Thornton’s worthless, white trash hunting and drinking buddy; Bridget Fonda as Paxton’s straight arrow wife, who turns out more disgusted with her nothing small town life and more ruthless than one expects. Low-key, domestic thriller expertly set in Midwestern winter (snow, cold-besieged houses, crunching tires all around) about greed leading three basically innocent guys to drastically violent consequences when they discover \$4.4 million in cash in a duffle bag in an airplane in the woods. Starts off quietly in the Wisconsin woods with a fox making off with a hen from a henhouse, and crows, who are feeding on the cadaver in a downed airplane, staring down at the three men as they trudge through the snow; finding the money, the three guys give into temptation to keep it rather than turn it over to the police (they think that since it is drug money, there will be no real search); but circumstances (the farmer in the snowmobile) and personalities (Thornton can’t keep his mouth shut and Briscoe is a wastrel) lead the trio from one disaster to another. A lot of violent confrontations and bloody death in the snow – six people die in the film. Much suspense as we wonder: Will one of the confederates spill the beans? What will Fonda, who shows a ruthless, amoral side of her personality, persuade Paxton to do next? Will she actually kill him to serve her baby? Is the supposed FBI agent in the police chief’s office really a ruthless murderer trying to get the money back? Much of the story flows from Paxton’s respectable, good-guy reputation in the community – he gets away with a couple of murders because no one believes that such a nice guy could be involved; in the last big scene, the villain hesitates since he doesn’t think Paxton is the ruthless type, but then Paxton shoots him square in the head! Thornton’s character is the most moving: he starts as a dim-witted Welfare drop-out, who acts impulsively (such as when he clubs the snowmobile farmer almost to death), but he has a deep moral sense based on his family values that objects to the web of deceit and murder that his supposedly respectable brother leads him into; and in the shoot-out scene, he begs his brother to shoot him, since he cannot live with the load of guilt that he must carry (Paxton of course complies). Ends with a voice-over of Paxton describing the rest of his life: he and his wife had to burn the money, and they live on free but immersed in guilt and unhappiness. Film suffers some from unlikely plot contrivances. Wonderful characters, excellent performances, twisty with scarcely a dull moment. (2008)

Sin City 2005 Robert Rodriguez 2.5 Bruce Willis as the one honest cop bent on saving an 11-year-old girl from rape and murder by a psychopathic pederast (eight years later he falls in love with her), Mickey Rourke as the monstrous looking guy bent on avenging his girlfriend Goldie’s death (his job much complicated by the fact that Goldie has a twin sister), Clive Owen as the guy who defends the prostitutes, Jamie King and Jessica Alba as two of the delicious young women, most of whom afford us good looks at their semi-naked bodies. Based on the graphic novels of Frank Miller (who is he?), the film is shot in black and white with assorted splotches of color (for blood, yellow faces, blue for the eyes) giving the film a comic book look; the debt to film noir – the hard-boiled characters and stories, the dark shadows, etc. – is apparent. There are three essentially unconnected stories, one for each of the main male characters; they are intertwined, and partly since everyone tends to look the same in the dark lighting, the viewer easily confuses them. There is an enormous amount of violence – women raped, constant beatings and shootings, violent feelings of hatred, etc. Death barely seems to exist, since even with all extremities removed, characters seem to get resurrected. The movie feels like an intense

nightmare of eroticism and violence. Since we move rapidly from character to character, everyone is either a perpetrator or victim of violent acts, and almost no one's life seems to be in danger, it is hard to get attached to the characters and thus hard to get involved in the movie. You end up admiring the innovative techniques and effects, but from the outside. Perhaps best viewed by fans of Frank Miller's comix. (2006)

Sin Nombre 2008 Cary Fukunaga (Mexico) 3.0 Edgar Flores as sensitive, tattooed gang member in Chiapas who is in love with local girl who draws him away from a vicious gang; Paulina Gaitan as girl from Honduras who accompanies her uncle and father on an odyssey to a destination in New Jersey; they travel perched precariously on top of a freight train rolling through Mexico. Gritty, realistic, yet Hollywood-like Indie feature about poverty, gangs, and the desire to go to the USA. One thread of the story is gang life in Chiapas. The gang is brutal and ugly – all young men and children tattooed all over their faces and bodies, thriving on blind, stupid violence and intimidation (shoot opposition gang members in cold blood and then feed them to the dogs!), connected to other gangs in Latin America and the USA; they are in brutal competition with another gang that they shoot at on sight; the brotherhood and solidarity among the gang members is indissoluble. When Flores kills the head of the gang in order to save Gaitan from rape, he has to flee on the train with the other immigrants and he bonds gradually with her. Gaitan's story is initially much less interesting; she and her older male relatives head toward the USA apparently to escape the grinding poverty in the Honduran slums. Once she is together with Flores on the train, the film becomes a kind of romantic thriller with the two heading perhaps for a better life with the vengeful gang members on Flores' heals. The story arc peaks when they reach the Rio Grande: Gaitan, who has lost both her relatives, crosses the river, but to her horror Flores is brutally gunned down by the thugs on the Mexican side – an eddy of water fills with blood; Gaitan crosses into Texas and smiles when she contacts her friend in New Jersey – it would seem that her future is bright. The film is undoubtedly gripping: the picture of the poverty, the filth, and the violence of living on the lower reaches of Mexican society is vivid and convincing; the Hollywood-like suspense about the escape is intense; the tragedy of the death of Flores is deep. Smaller independent film with all Latin American actors paints a convincing and moving picture of Mexican and Honduran poverty. (2009)

Since You Went Away 1944 John Cromwell (D.O. Selznick) 3.0 Claubert Colbert as beautiful, smiling, stiff-upper-lip wife Anne left to manage the home front when husband Tim (whom we never see) is sent to fight in the Pacific; radiant, beaming Jennifer Jones as her older daughter who is a little boy crazy and falls in love with an army serviceman; Shirley Temple as 16-year-old daughter who is impulsive and charming; Monty Wooley as crusty retired Army colonel who rents a room in Anne's house; Joseph Cotton a light-hearted, wise-cracking friend of the family who shows up two or three times and who still has a soft spot in his heart for Anne (but Colbert is pregnably virtuous); Hattie McDaniel as loyal black maid who mispronounces lots of words but with her good heart and strong character takes good care of the family while husband is away; Robert Walker as callow young soldier who falls in love with Jones and is then killed in action; Agnes Moorehead as catty, gossipy and unpatriotic town lady who incurs the displeasure of most everyone. Very sentimental, World War II patriotic film about essentially the women left behind to cope during the absence of their husbands. Setting is prosperous (apparently) Midwestern middle-class household that always gleams even if the family has no money (thanks to the famous production values of Selznick movies). Much talk about shortages that everyone has to deal with, and push for patriotic behavior – e.g., Jones desires to do something for the war and ends up taking care of severely wounded men in a local hospital, Colbert resists taking a war job for most of the movie arguing that the most important thing is to keep the normal moving ahead, but goes into training as a welder at the end. Movie is genuinely sad and evokes tears: Colbert is very lonely when her husband volunteers for overseas duty, truly anguished when he is reported missing, and overjoyed at the end when a cablegram reports that he is safe and on his way home; Jones is bravely sad when the word comes that Walker has been killed in action; lots of images of brave wounded soldiers suffering from burns, lost limbs, psychiatric problems, etc. Sentiment is laid on really thick: ill-tempered Wooley comes around improbably to admire the Navy and to be friends with the family dog (who along with the old armchair is a symbol of the absent paterfamilias); Lionel Barrymore repeats the last stanza of 'The Star Spangled

Banner' in a sermon in a sun-streaked church; an actress with a foreign accent talks about the attraction of America for the ever grateful immigrant and recites the Statue of Liberty poem for us. Most of movie is accompanied by ever present Hollywood symphonic score pumping up the sentiment. Movie is potentially hokey, but the sentiment seems to me acceptable given the circumstances of fighting the last noble war. Film is a bit long and the bit about loneliness and loss drags on. But the impression of high quality is inescapable – sets, costumes, actors, polished lines, sharp, atmospheric cinematography, etc. (2010)

Sink the Bismarck! 1960 Lewis Gilbert (Britain) 4.0 Kenneth More as straight-laced, stiff-upper-lip, rather acerbic British Director of Operations, "cold as a witch's heart" although he does worry about his son serving on an aircraft carrier in Gibraltar; Dana Wynter beautiful sole female player speaking in a British accent and seemingly destined to a tender relationship with More; Karel Stepanek as Nazi fleet commander of the Bismarck group (includes Prince Eugen), Gunther Lüntgens, brimming with aggressiveness, ambition, arrogance, and nationalism – his definition of happiness is to receive a personal birthday wish from the Führer; Edward R. Murrow playing himself as pompous American radio broadcaster (could have been left out). Tense and exciting docudrama about the attempted breakout of the German battleship Bismarck in May 1941(a low point of the war for Britain) and the dedicated British effort to track it down and destroy it before it can start sinking convoy ships. The film stays close to the facts of the case, cutting away to personal drama infrequently – More's unflappable command, his concern for the well-being of his son, and his growing respect for the equally unflappable (but attractive) Wynter, which culminates in his asking her out on a date at the end of the film. The film spends a lot of time in the command room in London watching Wynter move model ships around on the huge war map and observing More discussing tactics with his superiors; we also spend time on the bridges of both British and German ships (unfortunately the Germans speak slightly accented English) as they maneuver against one another like two masters in a chess game; most of the maneuvers and battles are depicted by realistic-looking models with convincing near-miss splashes in the water and devastating hits, such as the instantaneous destruction of Hood when hit early in the action by a well-aimed Bismarck broadside; historical newsreel footage is used occasionally, e.g., the German-language inauguration of the Bismarck at the beginning of the film and the fascinating stock footage of the loading of the 16-inch guns. Despite its documentary-like matter-of-factness, the film is consistently tense and exciting, as the British, despite their awareness that the Bismarck is a superior ship to anything they have and that their own gunnery is often inaccurate, doggedly track and pursue the German ship; the film is clear that the British were able to destroy Bismarck only because of a (presumably) lucky torpedo hit on the rudder that deprived it of most of its speed and maneuverability; even the last sequence in which two British battleships pound the Bismarck into rubble is exciting since the Germans are approaching from France with submarines and air cover. The British prevail partly because of their superior force (e.g., the Germans have no aircraft carrier and no air cover), partly because of their low-key, stiff-upper-lip efficiency; a British character in the film observes that the greatest weakness of the Germans is that they always feel they have to prove their superiority. Superior, gripping war film that might not appeal as much to non-fans of the genre. (2013)

Sirens 1994 John Duigan (Australia) 2.5 Sam Neill as curiously dispassionate and bored looking painter living in the Blue Mountains of New South Wales – he has an apparently tolerant wife and also apparently cavorts with his beautiful models; Hugh Grant as somewhat priggish Anglican churchmen who stops by to persuade Neill not to display his most impious pictures in a Sydney art show; Tara Fitzgerald as quite uptight wife of Grant – her erotic potential and curiosity are inexorably played upon by the stunning models; Elle MacPherson as one of the beauties who pose for Neill and attempt to educate all around them in the ways of the flesh. Set in glorious surroundings on a beflowered estate that seems much too fertile (matching the abundant female sexuality in the film) to be in the very blue Blue Mountains. The film focuses on the slow seduction of Estella (Fitzgerald), who goes swimming with the nymphs, looks dreamy and curious when she comes across something sexy, has a one-night stand in the barn with an erotically charged deaf-mute hunk; the central scene is her floating nude in the estate pond with the hands and then the lovely bodies of the women surfacing to caress her all over. The film focuses relentlessly on female bodies, female sexuality, relations among women, the supposed erotic payoff for

women who overcome their inhibitions. The payoff is modest -- instead of sexual inhibitions and unerotic humping in the bed at night, the clerical couple accepts the challenge to explore their sexuality with an open mind; and the final scene in the train has Fitzgerald putting her foot in Grant's crotch as the latter sputters with typically (for the actor) flustered embarrassment, although he is pleased. The film moves at a glacial pace, and has lot of little absurdities, e.g., what is the interest of the models to stay and just pose in the nude? Attention often flags to be revived by yet another look at the nude women, pubic hair and all. (2007)

Sisters 1973 Brian De Palma 3.5 Margot Kidder, Jennifer Salt, Olivia Dukakis, Barnard Hughes, Charles Durning. Out there slasher move based on Hitchcock. Plays with Siamese twins' relationship and sexual hang-ups – Dominique is insanely jealous of Daniele based on childhood sexual experiences, but we learn in actuality that Dominique died in the separation operation, and that Daniele is taking on the identity of the jealous, murderous sister when Daniele falls in love with/has sex with a guy. Two very bloody slasher scenes with knives. Performances are generally good, including Jennifer Salt as the Staten Island newspaper reporter who witnesses the murder through a window. Quirky light-hearted characters recall Hitchcock – e.g., the two ladies in the bakery, the querulous mother played by Dukakis, the faithful private detective played by Durning. Much Hitchcock apparent: *Psycho* contributes the knives, following the victim for a while before he is murdered, Daniele taking on a murderous alter ego; *Rear Window* contributes the ubiquitous theme of voyeurism (people are always looking through windows; when someone closes window shades, the camera shoots from outside; specific references to Grace Kelly watching events in a neighboring apartment, etc.). Atmosphere is lurid and shocking, and would not (does not) appeal to everyone. Ends somewhat cleverly although ambiguously: Grace has been hypnotized and now denies that she saw anything happen thus impeding the further investigation; Durning is still following the body into Canada, and ends up on a power pole watching voyeuristically to see who will come to get the body (won't it be no one?). (2005)

The Skeleton Twins 2014 Craig Johnson 3.0 Kristen Wiig convincing as alienated, confused Maggie living in a small town in New York; Bill Hader also confused as Milo, a failed LA actor that ends up in his twin sister's house when he tries to commit suicide; Luke Wilson as Lance, bluff, jokey, nice-guy husband of Maggie – although he recognizes she is flighty and unhappy, he loves her with simple devotion and doesn't pry into her secrets. Compelling study of the relationship between two alienated twins (they haven't talked in ten years) – both of their lives are damaged by the suicide of their father and their overbearing New Age healer of a mother (amusing cameo by Joanna Gleason); after a good start, the film becomes rather smarmy and confused itself about halfway through. While visiting, Milo becomes again attached to an old lover (a teacher that in some way abused him when he was in high school – Ty Burrell), lying repeatedly about his life's achievements. Maggie – the more interesting and endearing character – does not really love her husband; she has serial affairs with men she meets in enrichment classes (Boyd Holbrook as Australian scuba diving instructor) and takes birth control pills while she and Luke are supposedly trying to get pregnant. Both unhappy siblings become reattached, feeling safe and happy with one another – one scene with laughing gas in Maggie's dental office where the two reveal their "secrets", and another when they both lip sync and dance to the Jefferson Airplane's joyous "Nothing's Gonna Stop Us Now." The suspicion that they are still stuck in their childhood is reinforced by numerous flashbacks and their compulsion to talk about it and process it. Smarmy bonding is emphasized by both of them dressing up in Halloween costumes (Milo of course in flaming drag), partying in a sort of village festival fairyland, and even dancing together sweetly with Maggie's head on her brother's shoulder, making one wonder whether the two will ever bond with a non-fraternal mate. Sure 'nuf, Milo has to break up with his lover, who is still in the closet, and just to make sure his sister doesn't have a greater chance at stability than himself, he tells Luke about the birth control pills. Just as Maggie predicted, Luke's heart is broken and he disappears from the film; Maggie tries to commit suicide by drowning herself with barbells (?) in the swimming pool, and she is rescued at the last minute by Milo, who mysteriously divined what was going on. With both of their lives in shambles, the twins are left only with one another in a final two-shot. Will they ever get free of one another? Will they ever find mates?

Will Maggie ever forgive Milo for betraying her? Will Milo learn to tell the truth? Is the end of the film mired in confusion or is it just realism? (2015)

The Skin I Live In 2011 Pedro Almodovar (Spain) 3.0 Antonio Banderas as brilliant surgeon who is also a mad scientist playing with the lives of his patient; Elena Anaya as flawless beauty with prominent front teeth manufactured by Banderas; Marisa Paredas as Banderas' domestic helper – is she also his mother? Jan Cornet as pretty boy that Banderas transforms into the immaculate beauty of Anaya. Over-the-top amalgam of horror movie and emotional melodrama about a brilliant surgeon specializing in face reconstruction; he loses his wife in an automobile accident (she actually survives for a while before she commits suicide) and his psychotic daughter, who also kills herself; as a result, he kidnaps Cornet, whom he thinks raped his daughter, imprisons him in a dark, dank cellar, and then subjects him to numerous surgical interventions to produce Anaya; the latter alternately tries to commit suicide (a strong tendency in this film!) and to seduce Banderas; she is successful in the latter leading to a lot of sex and anxiety about expanding the size of Anaya's vagina to permit pleasurable penetration; the film ends with Anaya killing Banderas and Paredes (with a curious pop gun!) and then returning to the town of Toledo to initiate a tearful reunion with his mother, i.e., open ending inviting a sequel. The narrative is highly complex and confusing: it begins in the present, proceeds to several out-of-order flashbacks (e.g., the viewer finds out about the daughter's suicide before she is (semi-) raped by Cornet), and then returns to the present where the drama is played out. Banderas' character is bizarre and disquieting: drawing on Georges Franju's 'Eyes without a Face', he toys with the existence of his patient in part out of revenge for the death of his daughter, in part out of a desire to resurrect her, perhaps primarily out of a desire to dominate and manipulate the destiny of other human beings. The film has the trademark Almodovar style – striking, hip, dramatically colored and lighted décor (especially Banderas' house with its eye-catching Baroque paintings and walls painted in pastel colors such as light blue), inventive mise-en-scene (the camera shoots past a line of vaginal dilators as Banderas explains to Anaya how to expand and loosen her new vagina), swooping camera movement, very colorful musical score emphasizing the melodramatic moments in the narrative, etc. This entertaining potboiler is very focused on sexuality: male lust with Banderas and his brother (murdered by the former in the first part of the film); the ability to transfer a handsome, young male into an ethereally beautiful female that resembles him, although it is stressed often that her vagina is too tight for pleasurable intercourse; Banderas at first looks upon her as an interesting scientific experiment and the instrument of his revenge (?), but then falls violently in love-lust with her and gives Anaya the opportunity to murder him when he sends her out to fetch some lubricant so he can have anal sex with her, etc. Part melodramatic potboiler, part science fiction film that entertains even though it often does not make sense. (2012)

Skyfall 2012 Sam Mendes (Britain) 3.0 Daniel Craig less detached than the Connery Bond as somewhat craggy, introspective, emotional 007, scarred by losing his parents when a child but still in possession of his action bona fides; Judy Dench as M (when did M become a woman?), who is under attack from several different sides (a government minister wanting her dismissed, Fiennes apparently wanting her job, and the villain Bardem trying to kill and humiliate her) for her administration of MI6; Javier Bardem as baroque, over-the-top super-villain with terrifying rotted teeth, too clever for MI6 and using every means at his disposal, including attack helicopters, to get revenge on Dench for something she did to him in Macau; Ralph Fiennes as low-key spy bureaucrat whose support of Dench is questionable; Ben Whishaw as brilliant young whipper-snapper of a Q with a head of thick dark hair and remarkable electronic tricks at his fingertips; Naomie Harris as a decorative but professionally competent bond associate who gets it on with the master; a very hirsute Albert Finney playing an old Scottish gamekeeper that used to work for the Bond family. Good Bond show, updated and modified to make it interesting and a little original. The film retreats from the old detached Bond image – he beds only Harris, nary a mention of martinis, and he loses his mojo in the beginning of the film and is able to pass the MI6 fitness test only with the support of M. In this film Bond shifts his attention from young women to his old friend M; enjoying a loyal, somewhat crusty friendship with her, Bond supports her in her battle against the revenge-obsessed Bardem. The first part of the film has a somewhat counter-Bond redolence, but as soon as Bond and M head to Scotland for their final confrontation with the unconquerable Bardem,

tradition returns: the two of them reconnect with old Bond gadgets such as the fabulous old Aston-Martin waiting for them in a garage and the ejection seat that M teasingly suggests that Bond use to get rid of her. The action sequences are exciting and compelling, especially the long pre-title sequence in Istanbul that has Bond and his nemesis riding motorcycles along the rooftops of the bazaar, the chase through underground London (tracked by the ubiquitous electronic eye of Q) where Bond narrowly escapes being crushed by a train in the Tube, the wild shootout in the room where the parliamentary hearing is taking place, the long Armageddon-style confrontation with Bardem on the desolate Scottish moors, that does however last too long and features too many fiery explosions. Good fun and just enough changes to make it interesting. (2012)

Slacker 1991 Richard Linklater 3.5 Plotless snapshot of the dropout culture in scruffy neighborhoods in Austin, Texas about 1990. Film begins with Linklater himself spouting his personal theory about parallel realities to an inattentive cabbie; it then follows with a hit-and-run accident, in which the driver (who is arrested at the end of the sequence) is the son of the woman he has hit (killed?); no one that gathers around the body seems to care. Afterwards the film segues – Robert Altman style – through usually short sequences, whose connection is only the physical encounter of the previous actor with the new one. Some of the encounters are just everyday activities of the local fringe culture – discussing stuff over beers, getting coffee at a local shop, running around taking chaotic pictures with a Super 8 camera, going to rock concerts, picking up a girl on the street corner, partying all night, watching TV in the early morning, sleeping a lot, playing (abominable) music on the street, preteen kids robbing Coke machines and selling them in the street to passersby. Little sex, no drugs, no one seems drunk. The pieces de resistances are obsessive monologues about paranoid personal theories – no one listens and the speaker doesn't seem to care: they guy who rattles on about the moonwalks being a conspiracy between the US and the Soviet Union (we've been on the moon since the 50s); alternative-looking girl recounting the suicidal caper of a guy on the freeway and then trying to sell a cringe-inducing bottle that she says is Madonna's pap smear; three guys throwing a tent assembly and an electric typewriter over a worn picket fence, because “the bitch fucked me over”; discussion between two guys in a bar theorizing on the repressive functions of Scooby Doo (teach kids the virtues of violence) and the Smurfs (inculcate conformity); a guy bashing George Bush, the new governor of Texas; the guy with the TV strapped to his back that is obsessed with television technology; an older guy foils a (amateurish) burglary and then recounts to the would-be burglar his exploits in the Lincoln Brigade (Spanish Civil War) – turns out it is all invention. Amusing, bizarre incidents include a mentally disturbed employee in a coffee shop repeating “never traumatize a woman with sexual intercourse”; and a guy who says he loves it in Austin “except for the fucking ants” that ate clear through the plastic wrapper to get at his ramen soup. Often very amusing look at one population of a college town. One wonders whether one of the film’s proverbs – “Withdrawing in disgust is not the same thing as apathy.” – might be Linklater’s main point. More likely it is a critique of a self-centered youth culture, where no one listens while you spout your pet ideas; as one girl says to her boyfriend: “You haven’t thought it out for yourself.... It’s like you just pasted together these bits and pieces from your authoritative sources. I don’t know. I’m beginning to suspect[pointing to his heart] there’s nothing in there.” Sometimes hard to stay attentive, but original, usually amusing, often insightful. (2015)

Slap Shot 1977 George Roy Hill 3.0 Paul Newman credible and strong as somewhat over-the-hill, badly dressed (brown leather pants that display too much in the crotch) player coach for an eastern last place minor league hockey team; Strother Martin as the team’s hot-tempered and colorful general manager; Jennifer Warren in mostly decorative role as Newman’s ex-wife who doesn’t want to reconcile with him; Michael Ontkean as the team’s star player -- a graduate from Princeton, he wants to play real hockey and not the violent sport that Newman wants him to; Lindsay Crouse in generally inexplicable role as Oatken’s alienated, alcoholic neglected wife; the amusing bespectacled Hanson Brothers are of near moronic intelligence, childish tastes, and extremely enthusiastic about violence on the ice; Yvon Barette very amusing as the team’s French Canadian goalie, especially in the introductory interview in which in his mangled English he reveals secrets about playing dirty on the ice. Entertaining and sometimes analytical/cynical film about professional hockey and the fate of the players. The setting

of the film is relentlessly realistic -- amazingly profane language (sometimes very amusing), extreme violence on the ice, blood stains all over the players' uniforms, jiggly breasted groupies following the team around once they start to win, the bleak mill town with the statue of the dog in the main square (he saved the town from a flood in 1938), the equally bleak private lives of the players -- their dingy apartments and their unsatisfactory relationships with women. Outwardly the film mirrors the 'Rocky' genre: the team is a loser, but they turn over a new leaf under the inspiration of their coach and to thunderous cheers from their fans they move on to win the league championship. But this 1970s film shares the analytical and critical approach of the age. It undercuts the rags to riches genre with Newman's encouraging his players to win through violence and intimidation, and when they do win the championship game, they do so by forfeit after a particularly bloody confrontation. The film also conducts a cynical examination of the business of sport -- the team owner (a wealthy woman) has no regard for the welfare of the players as she plans either a sale to a city in Florida (the players are momentarily enthusiastic about moving out of their rust belt town) or she plots to fold the team and take a tax loss. Fairly lame romantic subplots involving whether Newman will persuade his ex-wife to get back together (not likely) and whether Ontkean will decide to pay more attention to his wife, who in the meantime is drowning her sorrows in drink. Postscript is of 'life goes on' variety -- Ontkean and Crouse are back together, Newman and Warren might do so, and since the team has folded, the players are picked up by other minor league teams. Some weak elements, but film is good for a cynical look at the underbelly of the American dream and the gritty performance of Newman. (2011)

Sleep, My Love 1948 Douglas Sirk 3.0 Rich New Yorker Claudette Colbert awakens inexplicably on a train speeding from New York to Boston – cute as a button as always; Don Ameche as expressionless husband who claims to police that Colbert disappears regularly; Raymond Burr as police sergeant called to New York apartment; Robert Cummings as witty young man that befriends Colbert on the airplane flying back to New York – he has strong connections to Chinese people in New York; George Coulouris as boogeyman with horn-rimmed glasses disguised as a psychiatrist whose job is to scare the wits out of Colbert; Rita Johnson as the hare-brained young woman Barby, who is a relative of Colbert; Hazel Brooks as impatient, ambitious Rita Hayworth-like babe that Ameche is playing around with – she is never out of her *négligée*. Well-made thriller imitated from 'Gaslight' in which deadpan Ameche tries to convince Colbert that she is insane so that he can put her away and spend the rest of his life with bimbo Brooks; plot is foiled largely by the intervention of the resourceful, good-humored Cummings, who saves Colbert's life when she is about to leap from a balcony and intervenes at the end in a three-way shootout with Coulouris (who kills Ameche) and Ameche who eventually falls to his death – is this one of the first Mexican Standoffs? Film ends with Cummings comforting Colbert in his arms and with every indication that they will live happily ever after. Characterizations tend to be shallow and clichéd: Ameche is the heartless husband that we scarcely get to know; Brooks is trying too hard to look like Rita Hayworth; it is difficult to believe that Ameche will go so far as to kill his wife in order to spend the rest of his life with Brooks (he is already rich married to Colbert); are we really to believe that Ameche is clever enough to mix hallucinatory drugs with hypnosis to get Colbert to commit suicide, etc. The narrative takes place in a fabulous set: elegant upper-class multi-storied New York apartment with a view of a major Manhattan bridge out the window, and intricately designed and filmed staircase, often photographed in film noir style with contrasts of light and dark and deep pools of shadows. References to previous popular movies: à la 'Suspicion' Ameche or the maid is photographed carrying the drugged hot chocolate up the stairs to Colbert's room; Cummings has a clean-cut, genial Chinese sidekick à la Charlie Chan. Plenty of humor written into the minor characters – Coulouris is hen-pecked by his airhead wife; Cummings always has an effective witty aside. Entertaining, well-made film that strains credibility. (2008)

Sleeping Giant 2015 Andrew Cividino (Canada) 2.5 Sort-of coming of age drama about three young teen boys on vacation with their families on Lake Superior. Jackson Martin as the shy, soft-spoken Adam vacationing with his mother and father; Nick Serino as brash, over-the-top, angry, and destructive Nate mocking everything that is wholesome and good; Reece Moffett as the buck-toothed Riley, anti-social and usually influenced by Nate; Katelyn McKerracher as Taylor, manipulative teenage

girl playing the field; David Disher as Adam's father, bearded and pseudo-cool trying to make connections with the younger generation. Film is set against the fabulous backdrop of Canadian Lake Superior, blue skies, horizon-less vistas of the lake, conifer forests, and the cliffs of the Lake (Sleeping Giant) that serve as an opportunity for the boys to assert their male personas. Using unknown actors, the film is shot with a spontaneous feel, shaky camera, etc. The script is realistic and gritty (a lot of bad language) rather than retrospective nostalgia (such as 'Stand by Me'). The boys spend most of their time just fooling around playing basketball, riding a golf cart, playing monopoly-like board games, foraying into marijuana use (an older guy who encourages their basest instincts), trying to get the attention of Taylor (she doesn't commit to anyone), and dreaming up foolhardy stunts such as stealing beer from a local convenience store (they get away with it; are Canadian police too nice to protect property?). Adam goes through a dark night of the soul when he discovers that his father is getting it on with a local woman; he becomes much more involved and active realizing that all is not perfect in his parents' relationship. The last stunt has the boys jumping off the fabled local cliff (about 100 feet high) to prove themselves: sensible Adam doesn't jump, Riley does jump and survives, but the unfortunate Nate is injured and dies. His demise is not particularly shocking, since his deep anger and despair identify him as one of the damned. One supposes that there is hope, since Riley shows a glimmer of conscience and Adam is more aware and self-assertive as the film ends. The film received positive reviews from Canadian critics, but despite the universal themes of passage through adolescence, its virtues may pale to foreign audiences. (2016)

Sliding Doors 1998 Peter Howitt (Britain) 2.5 Gwyneth Paltrow tall, thin, elegant, genuine smile a bit passive and standoffish as London girl of the late 90s looking for true love; John Lynch stuttering, cowardly, indecisive as indecipherable low-life boyfriend of Paltrow; John Hannah as charming, loquacious Scottish man who, since this is a romantic comedy, is destined to be paired in the end with Paltrow. Moderately entertaining, lightweight British romantic comedy about charming Londoner Paltrow who is living with deadweight dolt Lynch (he says that he is about to finish his novel) but is drawn to the charming Scot. The most interesting thing about the film is the "what if" conceit: it begins with two scenes of the recently fired Paltrow entering a London Tube car: in the first she makes it by the skin of her teeth and meets the charming Scotsman sitting next to her, and then she goes home to catch boyfriend in bed with voracious mistress Jeanne Tripplehorn; in the second scenario she is delayed by a kid playing with his airplane, the door shuts in front of her, and she doesn't get home in time to catch Lynch. The director then plays the two stories side-by-side, cutting back and forth between the two. In the first scenario Paltrow leaves, gets her hair cut short, opens up her own public relations business, takes up with Hannah, and endures the usual complications including pregnancy; in the second she hangs on with Lynch, suspects him of infidelity, and gets pregnant (and Tripplehorn gets pregnant too!). Following the two stories is pretty confusing, but Paltrow's page-boy haircut in the first scenario helps the viewer stay oriented. Toward the end things take a mystical turn and both Paltrows suffer severe accidents, #1 is hit by a car and #2 falls in the stairs after a violent confrontation with Lynch; they both end up in the same hospital. Both lose their babies (presumably to make sure the survivor is free to continue as both wife and professional); then we watched puzzled as Paltrow #1 dies to John Hannah's great grief; #2 however survives. As Hannah leaves the hospital some time later after visiting his mother (who has been gravely ill but is now doing better), another "chance" movement of the elevator's sliding doors unites the two survivors in the elevator. They look at one another in dim recognition, but as soon as one of them repeats a Monty Python quip familiar from a previous (semi-) encounter, they know they are meant for one another. End of film; we know they will live happily ever after, united by fate, or good luck, or whatever you call it. Film has its strengths: an interesting premise and a charming star in Paltrow; many of the characters are clichés; it is beyond belief why two attractive women would be battling over Lynch; toward the end it bogs down in romantic comedy tropes and ends in a head-scratching metaphysical space. (2010)

Sling Blade 1996 Billy Bob Thornton 3.0 Billy Bob Thornton completely disguised as Karl, a gentle retarded man released from the state hospital after serving many years for killing his mother and her yokel boyfriend; Natalie Canerday as owner of house where Karl lives (the film seems to take place in Arkansas); Dwight Yoakum convincing as the obnoxious, drunkard, racist, foul-mouthed boyfriend of

Linda; John Ritter as sweet-tempered gay manager of Dollar Store where Linda works; Robert Duvall in cameo role as Karl's alcoholic father; J.T. Walsh as sex-obsessed hospital inmate who opens and closes the film. Quiet, serious, sometimes slow-moving drama about what happens to a retarded man when released from prison-hospital after a long sentence. The setting is the small-town South (badly painted wood frame homes with tires lying in the yard) not uncommon in Hollywood films. Thornton completely dominates the film with his depiction of Karl: slumped-over, lower lip covering his upper one, with his gravelly voice speaking simple statements in a country accent. Karl is a gentle, pacific soul: having read the Bible (which he understands part of, he says), he has a strong sense of right and wrong, he knows a good, kind person from an abusive, cruel one, he closely befriends a ten-year-old boy (Linda's son), he works hard fixing small machines and saves his money. Since he had murdered impulsively before, the story's suspense is maintained by the viewer's uncertainty as to whether he will commit murder again. At first it doesn't seem so – slow-moving scenes carried by ungrammatical dialogue and long takes establish his gratitude to Linda and the repair shop owner that support him, his innocent friendship with the boy (they meet in the latter's "secret" place by a muddy pond), his embarrassment when a woman pays attention to him, his recognition of the good represented by Ritter and the evil incarnated in Yoakum. We become worried however when Linda – for reasons that are never made clear – is not able to break with Yoakum, who keeps coming back to her house, where he sits around drinking one beer after another and bad-mouthing everyone he comes into contact with. Perhaps motivated by the parts of the Bible (Old Testament) that call for an eye for an eye, Karl makes the decision to murder Yoakum, which he does with a sharpened lawnmower blade; he then turns himself in to the police. The last scene shows him again in the state hospital, but now refusing to listen to Walsh's obscene stories; he probably should never have left. A tour de force by Thornton, who wrote, directed, and starred in this quietly dramatic and moving film. The viewer's attention occasionally wanders. (2013)

Slumdog Millionaire 2008 Danny Boyle (Britain) 3.0 Dev Patel as the adult Jamal; Anil Kapoor as the supercilious, jealous quiz show host; Reida Pinto looking and acting like a model as the adult Latika. Huge crowd-pleasing film set in contemporary India: Jamal is on the Indian version of "Who Wants to be a Millionaire"; his progress toward the grand prize leads to brutal police interrogation and to cued flashbacks telling his life story growing up in the slums of Mumbai. Starting with the interrogation, most of the film time is told in flashback, ending up back in the present where Jamal double triumphs – he wins the grand prize (he is rich!) and he is finally reunited with his one true love, Latika. Although mainly a H(B)ollywood film aiming at the triumph of the main character, it dwells extensively and sometimes compulsively on a vivid portrayal of poverty: the slums where Jamal and his older brother grow up are incredibly chaotic, fetid (he helps administer unprotected privies on the seacoast), violent (Hindu rioters kill his mother because she is a Muslim), exploitative and cruel (nice acting do-gooders taking the street kids to orphanages turn out to be exploiters – they blind the children with hot wax and send them into the streets to make money as blind singers); they train Latika to be a virgin prostitute, but the boys rescue her just in time (Jamal's brother shoots and kills the main perpetrator); and presumably because Jamal is just a slumdog from the slums, the police torture him with electric shock when he is suspected of cheating on the contest (don't they realize that this is not a terrorist?). It is understandable that many Indians thought that the film shed an unnecessarily bad light on Indian society. Very important to the film's narrative is the love story: Jamal meets Latika when they are children; he falls desperately and eternally in love with her from the start, and the narrative motor of the film is his successive searches for her as she is played by three separate actresses; the ending triumph of the film is their meeting on the train platform, whereupon they kiss and ... live happily ever after; as the credits roll, the principals perform a Bollywood musical dance number on the same platform. Destiny – 'it is written' – is the film's philosophical engine: uneducated Jamal knows the answers to all the quiz show questions because he has had unforgettable experiences in his past life that provides the answers (are the gods smiling on him?); and the two lovers are able to overcome all obstacles because "it is written". Everything about the film is charged with energy – from the oppressive, color-drenched cinematography to the high impact editing. Film is a bit formulaic and hyperactive for my taste, but it has genuineness and energy. (2009)

Smash Palace 1982 Roger Donaldson (New Zealand) 4.0 Bruno Lawrence bald-headed, handsome, wiry, and intense as former race car driver now settled with wife and daughter in rural New Zealand; Anna Maria Monticelli as attractive, apparently French wife, Jacqui, who is very unhappy with her life in the Kiwi backwater; Greer Robson as Georgie, his adorable seven-year-old daughter, the apple of her daddy's eye; Keith Aberdein as Ray, thin, sandy-haired local policeman with a yen for Jacqui. Compellingly vivid and genuine drama set in the distant provinces of New Zealand. Lawrence inherited from his father a large and chaotic auto junkyard and repair shop (shown by a helicopter shot in the beginning of the film) that Jacqui despises and wants to get out of. Since her husband essentially ignores her – he wants to stay put – they fight frequently until – motivated by Lawrence's violent actions –, she leaves him taking her daughter with her. At first Lawrence refuses to accept that she is gone for good, and visits Jacqui and his beloved daughter as if the family were still together. When Jacqui however secures a court order forbidding further contact, he goes over the edge mentally: he arms himself with a shotgun, kidnaps his daughter, and hides with her in a camouflaged trailer in the “bush”. Since Georgie gets sick, however, he has to return to town to get her medicine; chased by the police he holes up in the “hubcap room” in Smash Palace; holding Ray at gun point, he drives on to the train tracks outside the junkyard for an apparent suicide; Lawrence seems relaxed as a train approaches frantically blowing its horn, and then it switches on to a different track to miss the car. Lawrence grins and says “Do you think I was going to ruin a perfectly good car?” implying that perhaps he isn't as crazy and dangerous as we thought. End of film. All the filmic elements of the work meld together beautifully. The environment is sometimes picturesque (lovely snow-capped mountain lurking in the background; an extended helicopter ride through a narrow gorge with sheer walls), sometimes gritty and down home (the light frame housing one always sees in Kiwi movies, the colorful chaos of the junkyard, Smash Palace, hanging out by the bridge on the river, holed up in a 50s-vintage trailer in the bush). The acting is first-rate: Montincelli is pretty, endearing, and effective in portraying her plight; little Greer Robson is beautifully directed -- Donaldson has her looking with wide-eyed affection at her parents and playing with her flashlight in her bed while they fight noisily. Lawrence is riveting in his emotional intensity that veers off into rage and near insanity when he is deprived of his little family, especially his daughter. The film has many memorable moments -- Lawrence virtually raping his wife after a violent fight, his ripping the door off his wife's new home when he finds her there with Ray, his stripping down to full frontal nudity and stuffing his clothes through his wife's mail slot to show his desperation, the car resting on the railroad tracks while the train -- foreshortened by a telephoto lens -- descends upon it. Perhaps the only jarring element of the film is an overly active, sometimes annoying jazz score. Memorable film about emotional desperation in an exotic setting. (2013)

Smile 1975 Michael Ritchie 3.0 Bruce Dern low-key and a little quirky as local businessman serving as head judge in teenage beauty pageant in Santa Rosa, CA; Barbara Feldon uptight, perfectly maquillée and coiffed, efficient as the contest's chief organizer, who however is shot in the arm by her alcoholic husband; Michael Kidd as long-suffering dance professional hired to whip the girls' routine into shape; Melanie Griffith cute and teenagey as one of the many contestants. Satirical look at small city American life through a teenage beauty contest held in Santa Rosa, CA. Follows the plot from preparation of the girls in their home towns (Modesto, Antelope Valley, etc.), through the emotional competition of the empty-headed (but sometimes gifted) girls until the announcement of the extremely tearful winner and the beginning of clean-up afterwards. Film is lightly satirical, making it clear that everyone is well-intentioned and doing the best they can, but poking fun at the provincial earnestness of the proceedings. Film gets laughs out of the over-the-top emotions of the girls, their usually boring talent performances (they are constantly being told by Feldon that they don't smile enough), the emerging competitiveness of some of the contestants, who are torn between friendship and solidarity and the desire to win and to pursue a showbiz career: “guys get scholarships for playing football, why can't we get scholarship for beauty”; it is revealed at the end the one girl has panties with the name of the day embroidered on them, which are shown at the beginning of each day's activities. Big laugh following the spying activities of a trio of horny boys, who are caught red-handed when a Polaroid picture they took of one of the girls undressing is developed right before the eyes of a suspicious policeman. Film pokes fun at local businessman organizations, which hold an initiation ceremony in a public park, where they all

wear Klan-like sheets and force the initiates to kiss a dead, plucked chicken on the ass. Film also has a good-natured running joke on the sanitary napkins that the girls insist on flushing down the toilets, thus pushing the two janitors (one of which is played by Denis Dugan) to distraction. Film is a low-key, fairly good-natured satire at the end of the anti-Establishment period of Hollywood movies (1967-75); a new era began with the debut of ‘Jaws’ in the year in which ‘Smile’ was released. (2012)

Smiles of a Summer Night 1955 Ingmar Bergman (Sweden) 3.5 Gunnar Björnstrand as the mournful lawyer who can't decide on his erotic destiny; Eva Dahlbeck as the experienced actress who seems still to have tender feelings for the lawyer; Ulla Jacobsson as the lawyer's very young wife who has never been deflowered; Harriet Andersson spirited and sexy as the fetching and willing maid; Margit Carlqvist as the cynical, long suffering Countess; Jarl Kulle as the Countess' flippant and faithless husband; Björn Bjelfvenstam as the existentially miserable son who cannot decide whether he wants to be a clergyman or a lover. Bergman's very successful attempt at a comedy; its success set him on the road to international fame ('The Seventh Seal' was made the following year). Film is meant to be a kind of sex/romantic comedy, but peppered with the realistic/pessimistic observations of the author. The first half of the film sets up the personalities and the romantic situations of the eight main characters. Then Dahlbeck's elderly mother invites them all to a party on the summer solstice, and in the course of the evening (the sun unrealistically sits on the horizon all night), each more or less finds his partner. The lawyer gives up on his excessively young bride and renews his relationship with the actress; the young wife joyfully throws herself into the finally willing arms of Bjelfvenstam, and they ride off feverishly in an open carriage; Andersson finds herself a mature party-loving groom, they frolic in the hay, and she finally persuades him to marry her; the Count and Countess find their way back together, but with the most cynical conditions. At the end it is up in the air as to whether happiness may ensue: the Count and Countess seem to have no illusions; one wonders whether the young lovers can withstand the friction of the years; and the maid and her groom will remain faithful as long as it is still fun. Some amusing situations – e.g., the initial appearance of the bombastic Count in Dahlbeck's boudoir where the lawyer stands in the Count's nightshirt – but the viewer smiles rather than laughs. Serious moments abound: the lawyer describes himself unflatteringly, the Countess vehemently states her detestation of men; the Count openly proclaims his faithlessness; the lawyer's son trembles at the wrath of God if he gives into temptation. The atmosphere is often light and delightful. Life is difficult, and the best consolation we have is love and sex; but given Bergman's pessimism, it would be surprising if either lasted very long. (2008)

The Smiling Lieutenant 1931 Ernst Lubitsch (wr. Sam Raphaelson) 4.0 Maurice Chevalier as philandering lieutenant in the Kaiser's army who cannot stop mugging, smiling, raising his eyebrows, winking, and developing his charming smile with protruding lower lip; Claudette Colbert hyper cute and enthusiastic as adorable Franzi, working-class violinist in all-women's orchestra – she falls convincingly in love with Chevalier; Miriam Hopkins delivering Lubitsch's arch dialogue perfectly as daughter of the King of Flausenthurm; Charlie Ruggles as silly, love-sick fellow officer. A musical comedy with rather little singing, so that it gets close to a romantic comedy. Chevalier is in love with Franzi, who is way below his station. He is forced to marry Hopkins who is the daughter of the king of Flausenthurm. He does not love her (too old-fashioned) and he cheats on her with Franzi. But all turns out for the best: after Hopkins teaches Colbert how to be modern and seductive, Franzi leaves, and the ever fickle Chevalier falls in love with his wife – more or less the end of story. Film is set in old time Vienna; music played in front of portrait of Franz Josef; high budget production with shining uniforms (the same as in ‘The Love Parade’?) exclusively in the studio (some terrible shots of model railroads!). Lubitsch Touches abound : opening scene with creditor knocking at Chevalier's door but he won't open, and then when a girl knocks, it opens right away. When the lady-in-waiting and the valet arrange the bed in the royal bedroom, the woman places the pillows side by side and the man places one pillow on top of the other! Chevalier explains to naïve Hopkins that you wink at someone when you want to make love, and later on her wedding night she awkwardly winks at him when he is ready to leave their bedroom; but Chevalier explains that married people never “wink” at one another, and he leaves after explaining that no one understands what marriage is all about. Hilarious transformation of Hopkins toward the end: when

Chevalier enters in the last scene she is playing ragtime music on the piano smoking a cigarette and in sexy underwear – he cannot resist her and of course they exchange winks! Dialogue is very verte and off-color; e.g., “first lunch, then dinner, and then maybe breakfast!” (meaning of course after sleeping together); 1) “Toujours dans l’armée” where an impossibly smarmy Chevalier with painted lips sings about the faithful amorous service that soldiers give at night even when they are too old to fight - **1/2; 2) silly little duet between Chevalier and Colbert about how each puts magic in the breakfast (i.e., after a night of love); pretty charming - ***; 3) charming little waltz with Chevalier and Colbert dancing and singing how she doesn’t mind his acting as guide to the king’s daughter during the day so long as she has him for 12 hours at night - **1/2; then immediately 4) inventive duet/trio cutting back and forth between Hopkins naively exclaiming to her ladies in waiting her love for chevalier and Chevalier/Colbert billing and cooing in much more energetic fashion -- ***; 5) Colbert at the piano tells Hopkins to “Jazz Up Your Lingerie” to get the attention of Chevalier; after the song they cut her hair, get rid of her boring underwear, and replace her booties with sexy modern shoes – ***1/2; 6) ends with Chevalier singing “Toujours dans l’armée” to audience outside the door of his bedroom where his recently updated wife awaits him. Nice soundtrack with Viennese-style symphonic music attending scenes – Austrian national anthem when Franz Josef appears; marches; ceremonial pieces when royal folk are processing; and light-hearted, sentimental waltzes; melancholy music when Franzi decides to leave, etc. The perfect film to illustrate free-wheeling pre-Code. (2009)

Snake Eyes 1998 Brian DePalma 2.5 Nicholas Cage, Gary Sinise, Carla Gugino. DePalma trying something new with assassination thriller in essentially one big set – Atlantic City boxing arena and the casino next to it. Secretary of Defense is assassinated in elaborately stage distraction plot in middle of boxing match, and then Ric Santora (Cage) compulsively and nervously heads off to uncover the plot, which turns out to be part patriotic nuts and part greed orchestrated by none other than his best friend Sinise, a commander in the Navy who is supposed to be guarding the Secretary. Begins with great panache with 12 minute steady cam (including showy swish pans as substitute for cutting), great acting fireworks from Cage (although a bit on the showy, neurotic side!), and beautifully orchestrated action all around in the arena. After, Cage pursues the investigation, DePalma injects point of view flashbacks to represent his thoughts as he more or less figures it out; he is incredulous when he discovers that Sinise is behind it all. Some interesting conundrums, e.g., the roles of the two women (both smashing – a redhead and Gugino with short dark hair wearing an outrageous white blond wig) – it turns out that the redhead is part of the conspiracy, but that Gugino is a good guy trying to warn the Secretary. Boring finale in which Cage gets beaten to a pulp, and he and Sinise square off under cover of a hurricane crashing into the city. DePalma has more emphasis than usual on character psychology – Cage starts as self-indulgent, corruptible character, who puts a lot of faith in the supposedly incorruptible Sinise, but then role reversal, as Sinise turns out to be evil, and Cage has mission to uncover the plot and protect the (beautiful) innocent girl. (2000)

Snowpiercer 2013 Joon-ho Bong 3.0 Chris Evans as hunky, intense, short-bearded action hero that leads a revolt against the higher-ups on the survival train; Kang-ho Song in rather featureless interpretation of a drug-addicted member of the revolt, who knows how to open the successive locks blocking access to the different cars of the train; Ed Harris as Wilford, the owner and inventor of the train – he resides in the very front in the “Engine”; Tilda Swinton in yet another bizarre role as Mason, the buck-toothed lieutenant of Wilford – she wears thick glasses and ends up manifesting herself as a coward; Octavia Spencer in dull role as anguished mother (her young son has been kidnapped by Wilford), who is part of the revolt team; Vlad Ivanov as nastily efficient, virtually unstoppable assassin for the Wilford forces. Sometimes interesting and exciting action-adventure film doubling as dystopic science fiction tale. The world is frozen; everyone is dead except several hundred refugees huddling in Wilford’s high-tech train that follows a long, circuitous route around the globe once a day (why everyone has to be moving in a train and how it spans the oceans are underexplained). The population is divided into two castes – the upper crust that lives in pleasant luxury toward the head of the train, and the poor, huddled, suffering masses bunking in the tail, eating disgusting protein bars (they are made from insects) and oppressed by storm trooper-types sporting American accents and wearing American-style uniforms.

Evans leads a well-organized revolt (not the first one, it turns out) that has to confront the vicious Wilford troops and then, when it turns out that the police have bullets for their guns after all, the ineluctable Ivanov. After proceeding through an arboretum, an indoor aquarium, a sushi bar, and a peppy elementary school classroom presided over by the Stepford Wives-like Allison Pill, Evans finally comes face-to-face with Wilford, who informs him that the revolt was actually staged by the ruling class with the objective of killing off enough of the proles to limit the population. The film ends on a hopeful note, when the good guys blast open a door with the explosive addictive drug and escape into the frozen wasteland outside, but with hopes of surviving since the climate seems to have started warming. The action sequences are expertly and very violently staged, and some of the plot revelations are intriguing – the lifestyle of the upper classes, their staging of the revolt and not letting the front-line police have bullets in order to increase the casualties of the tailenders, etc. Although not always convincing, the special effects of the long train snaking through the frozen landscape – over dizzyingly high bridges and through tunnels, bursting through the snow and ice on the tracks – is exciting and memorable. The in-between moments of the characters baring their souls and the final discussion between Evans and Wilford (Harris) are pretty dull. An original take on the dystopia phenomenon, but overall a disappointment in the transition of the gifted Joon-ho Bong from Korean to big-budget, international productions. (2014)

The Social Network 2010 David Fincher (wr. Aaron Sorkin) 4.0 Jesse Eisenberg as the arrogant but socially retarded Jewish genius founder of Facebook; Armie Hammer “Hitler Youth”, “ridiculously handsome” actor who plays both of the WASP Winklevoss twins who first come up with the idea of a social networking program; Andrew Garfield as Zuckerberg’s generally principled and moral co-founder and partner, Eduardo Saverin; Justin Timberlake very effective as the cool, sleazy, fast-talking wheeler-dealer Sean Parker, who captures the loyalty of Zuckerberg halfway through the film.

Tremendously entertaining, more-or-less fictional recounting of the founding and early development of Facebook – from its beginning among undergraduates at Harvard to Zuckerberg’s double-cross of Saverin after the company had gone corporate. The script is exciting, suggestive, interesting, and gripping -- not to mention snappy and amusing dialogue; and the editing is pumped up to give the film tremendous momentum. It is structured like a thriller: in the beginning the guys are using their programming expertise to get the program off the ground at the expense of the Winkelvosses, then the development of the business/experience is intercut with two voir dires (?) with lawyers all around the table while the Winkelvosses and Saverin push Zuckerberg for multi-million dollar compensation for having stolen the idea (Winkelvosses) or for having leveraged him out of the company (Saverin). The film is a man’s world with women playing only girlfriends (the one in the beginning – Erica Albright – who got the ball rolling when she dumped the clueless but offended Zuckerberg) and groupies who give the guys oral sex in the men’s room so they can hang out with them. The social environment of the action – on the Harvard campus and in the more laid back atmosphere of Palo Alto – is convincingly captured. Zuckerberg’s personality and motivation are fascinating: it is obvious that his initial motivation for creating social networking programs is to get even with the former girlfriend that dumped him– revenge; he perhaps is not as morally heedless as Parker, and he doesn’t seem to care about money (despite the billions that the company is worth within a couple of years), but he is arrogant and wants others to recognize that he is the smartest and most brilliant, he doesn’t care a fig for the feelings and well-being of other human beings including his best friend, and he is often naïve falling under the domination of the potentially dangerous Parker. The script draws a clear contrast between Zuckerberg’s moral obtuseness and the essential decency of the rather dull Saverin. The ending is rather neutral: Zuckerberg’s loses both law suits to the guys that he ripped off, all three of whom walk away with tidy bundles of cash, but he is the one left with a company worth \$25 billion and the admiration of every computer geek in the world. The film is filled with amusing scenes: ones that stand out are the initial conversation between Zuckerberg and his girlfriend in which the former shows his emotional cluelessness and the latter dumps him contemptuously and wittily, and the encounter between the Winkelvosses and President Summers of Harvard in which the latter puts the twins down and tells them to take care of their own problems in the courts. Extremely entertaining film. However, what should we think about a social networking tool (Facebook) that was invented and developed by a nerd who wanted to get even with his girlfriend and all the other girls in his life who had avoided him as a nerd? Can it really be good for us? (2012)

Somewhere 2012 Sofia Coppola (American Zoetrope) 2.0 Stephen Dorff as bored, aimless, youthful movie star, Johnny, residing in the Chateau Marmont in Hollywood; Elle Fanning fetching, entertaining as his 11-year-old daughter, an isolated, semi-abandoned child. The film begins with X driving his cool, black Ferrari around a short desert track five times (perhaps two minutes of screen time?); it doesn't take the viewer long to realize that the film is about alienation and anomie -- the best you can hope for is to go in circles and to end up intact. X spends his time hanging out aimlessly in his almost seedy apartment; he is called out for film events -- specialists cover his face with latex to make an elderly mask for presumably his next role; he travels with Chloe to Italy, where he is apparently a big star, for publicity appearances -- the film makes merciless fun of the exceptionally empty and stupid Italian celebrity culture, where journalists specialize in inane and meaningless chatter. He has sex with faceless bimbos in various places -- the viewer sees a lot of (attractive) exposed breasts. Johnny is so bored that he falls asleep while two cute, but unsexy twins do a semi-coordinated pole dance for him in his bedroom, and also while he has sex with one of his girlfriends, who tries disconsolately to wake him up. Coppola underlines the flat meaninglessness of his heroes existence by using long shots to record Dorff doing -- nothing; a good example is a slowly receding two-minute shot of father and daughter lying next to a swimming pool sunbathing, perhaps a -- highly inefficient and ambiguous -- way of showing their increased trust toward the end of the film. The early arrival of sweet, but rather lost, daughter Fanning injects some small bit of motion into the frozen plot. Abandoned by her mother, she puts the charm on her dad by hanging out with him and cooking -- her eggs benedict are appreciated as delicious. Dad becomes more focused and affectionate, horsing with her in the hotel corridor and the swimming pool, rejecting a girlfriend waiting naked in his bed ("This is not the time."), and making elaborate, and rather pompous, arrangements (a rented helicopter) to get her to her Nevada summer camp. Johnny's mental state reaches a crisis stage toward the end of the film when he sobs in despair with a female friend (undisclosed identity) on the phone. He then leaves LA (we see him covering a lot of freeway) to go for another drive in the desert; but then he suddenly pulls over to the side of the road, opens the door to his sexy car, and walks away from the car: credits roll. A lot of time, effort, and expense to get Johnny to realize that his life is going nowhere; there is no indication of what he intended to do. The film is inert and doesn't say much; reminds one of Antonioni. I doubt it would have been made without daddy. (2015)

Son of Frankenstein 1939 Rowland Lee 3.0 Basil Rathbone, Bela Lugosi, Lionel Atwill. This sequel is still in the 'A' category, although the story has become derivative. Wonderful sets in the expressionist tradition – spare in the house (very little furniture, lots of slatted shadows on the wall), the recreated laboratory with angles in every direction (and a hot sulphur pit destined to claim the monster), and the wonderful library with large windows and lightning illuminated storm raging in the background. Performances are good, although one tires of Lugosi's foreign slurring as Igor, and Rathbone chews too much scenery when he turns "nervous" toward the end -- was he mocking his own movie? Karloff gives the monster a little humanity – he cannot throw the little boy into the sulphur pit, even though he is supposed to be possessed of revenge for the death of Igor. Atwill is excellent as the police inspector who has had his arm ripped off by the Monster in a previous movie; he rips it off again toward the end of this one. Story moves slowly, although production is high quality; all shot on the set. Improbable ending, as Rathbone is allowed to leave town despite his monster having wreaked havoc throughout the village (many murders engineered by Igor). (2005)

Son of the Sheik 1926 George Fitzmaurice 3.0 Rudolph Valentino, Wilma Banky. Fairly entertaining purely commercial vehicle intended to refloat career of RV. Partly written by Frances Marion, who wasn't much pleased with her work. RV plays son of original sheik, and with beard also the original sheik many years later. Reprise has more (silly) comedy with focus on villains and weirdos of a troupe of players; Wilma is an exotic dancer who seduces RV. Plot complicated by RV's conviction that Wilma betrayed him: kidnaps her and then subjects her to threats, including an implied (fade out) rape scene. Much anger between father and son (played by same actor!). Fair amount of lust as Ghabah the

Moor tries to take position of dancing girl. RV's sultry mesmerizing look much used. Theme, if any, is that love eventually prevails over hatred and revenge. (2005)

The Song of Bernadette 1943 4.0 Jennifer Jones glowing beautifully as the naïve, simple, yet heartfelt and courageous Bernadette of Soubirous insisting to all that she did see the Lady, Charles Bickford as the Dean of Lourdes, strong, sensitive priest who is skeptical at first and then becomes Bernadette's confidante and confessor when he comes to believe, Anne Revere as ascetic, long-suffering peasant mother who wants Bernadette to turn away from her claims, Vincent Price as the free-thinking, progressive, secular Imperial Prosecutor who also tries to stop Bernadette, fails, is demoted, and appears to convert to belief at the end, Charles Dingle as ineffective Chief of Police, Gladys Cooper as severe Sister Marie Therese who refuses to believe Bernadette, again until the very end when to her shame she learns that Bernadette has suffered horribly from her disease. Outstanding and moving dramatic story of Bernadette's visions of the Virgin. Film focuses mostly on the drama of Bernadette – unlettered, naïve girl who for unknown reasons appears to have been chosen by the Virgin for private revelation, her fight against adversity and disbelief, and when she converts her family and procures the loyalty of the local priest, is finally vindicated. Excellent historical situation – France under Louis Napoleon, the battle of clericals and anti-clericals with the former winning because of the support of the Empress Eugenie. The sets representing Lourdes are flawless and believable, as are the costumes; an excellent script and believable dramatic acting prevent us from being distracted by American actors speaking in English. The story seems to be the victory of the struggling and suffering little people, who need to hope in something in this "vale of tears" against the wealthy and the powerful – both the anti-clerical state and the Church. The film has a measured tone, but from the presentation of the visions, the reverse intolerance of the anti-clericals, and the conversion of Vincent Price in his last visit to the Grotto, it is clear that the film accepts the reality of Bernadette's claims. Bernadette is admirably courageous when she stands up to the Imperial Prosecutor, the Police Chief, the Bishop, when questioned aggressively about her experience; she has simple disarming little statements that unnerve her questioners; she sticks to her story, and it is very important to her that no one – the Dean or Sister Marie Therese – thinks she has lied. The audience roots for her as the underdog. The Dean persuades her to enter the convent near the end – after her experiences she would be necessarily unhappy in the world; she dies there at a young age. In the Catholic view God's ways are mysterious: Why do the good – the saints – have to suffer so? Why did God choose someone so humble and ignorant to be his vessel? In a way a good war movie – protection of such an innocent faith against the barbarians is what the Allies are fighting for; the suffering people of the world in the final analysis have reason to hope. The restored black and white print is beautiful – crisp with eloquent textures and good contrasts. (2006)

Sorry, Wrong Number 1948 Anatole Litvak 3.5 Barbara Stanwyck as selfish, caustic, spoiled rich girl confined to bed in a sumptuous apartment in New York –although she believes she has a heart condition, she is actually a hypochondriac; Burt Lancaster as maddeningly passive husband of Stanwyck – he becomes more dissatisfied with his mistreatment at her hands as the film progresses; Wendell Corey as avuncular doctor that gives Stanwyck information about Lancaster over the telephone; Ed Begley in rather small role as Stanwyck's wealthy businessman father; Ann Richards as Lancaster's former girlfriend and another of Stanwyck's telephone interlocutors. Gripping, fascinating, if sometimes frustrating Stanwyck thriller that delves into film noir territory through its nighttime cinematography and the crime world on the periphery of the story; the film is based on a famous radio play broadcast with Agnes Moorehead in 1943. The film has a terrific gimmick: the ever more hysterical Stanwyck is confined to her bed in her apartment with no person (except at the very end) in the room with her and her frilly white telephone being her only contact with the outside world: either it is constantly ringing or she is making calls herself. When trying to call her husband at the beginning of the film, she accidentally overhears two men talking about a plot to murder someone at a particular time on Sunday. Convinced that she is the intended victim, she spends the rest of the film making phone calls to various persons, who through a complicated series of flashbacks (one of them – the doctor's – a double one, a flashback within a flashback), fill her in on the machinations of her husband. She finds out that he is terribly resentful of her dominating behavior, that he has become involved in some illegal gangster plot to win his

independence, and that he has agreed to have his wife murdered to get her money; one of the flashbacks has the conspirators meeting at a spooky abandoned house on the strand on Staten Island, a image that contrasts tellingly with the well-appointed apartment where Stanwyck is lying. Stanwyck, who becomes ever more shrill and panicky as the film progresses, thoroughly dominates the narrative (she received her fourth Academy Award nomination for her performance). The film has a smash-bang conclusion. Stanwyck, still alone and noting that the time for the murder is approaching, becomes hysterical as she makes more phone calls trying to locate her husband (who she still doesn't think is part of the plot). The camera, which is constantly moving about startling the viewer with different angles, plays a major role in building up the tension; at one point, it glides away from Stanwyck, exits the window, moves down the outside wall, and the picks up the shadow of a man breaking into the house; meanwhile, to the accompaniment of the melodramatic score, Lancaster calls Stanwyck, and after both of them unrealistically regret their past behavior, Lancaster pleads with Stanwyck to go to the window immediately and call for help; as she screams that she can't, the murderer's shadow looms over her, he attacks her, she drops the phone on the floor cutting off the connection with her husband; after the deed, the gloved hand places the phone back on the receiver; it then rings, and when Lancaster asks in a panic whether Stanwyck is ok, the murderer hesitates and then replies, "Sorry, wrong number!" The film is an exciting tour de force – the telephone gimmick, the complex flashback structure, the horrifying conclusion. It perhaps suffers from lacking a character the viewer can identify with, so that in the conclusion we are less shocked than we could have been. Nevertheless, a thoroughly gripping thriller. (2011)

Sous le Sable 2001 François Ozon (France) 3.5 Charlotte Rampling amazingly beautiful in her mid-50s grieving deeply over the loss of her husband to a swimming accident in the ocean at Les Landes, Bruno Cremer as her burly, quiet husband who returns throughout the film to be with his grieving wife, Jacques Nolot as the well-meaning by somehow callow lover of Rampling. Quiet, observant, meditative film on loss: Rampling cannot accept the loss of her husband, and she continues to speak about him in the present and to visualize him in their apartment; she has an affair with Nolot but she makes it clear that he does not live up to her husband's standards (she laughs during sex with him); even when, in a harrowing scene, she views the decomposed body of her husband, she cannot accept his death, and after walking out to the surf to look at the ocean (will she drown herself?), she sees a man standing alone on the beach at some distance, and she runs to him as if she believes that he is her husband risen from the dead; the end of the film is abrupt, and we are left with the conviction that she is not yet ready to give him up. Film is quiet, moving deliberately through beautiful locations in Les Landes (where the couple had a country house) and Paris (where Rampling is a professor interested in Virginia Woolf); the author observes her behavior dispassionately but sympathetically -- not coldly. Photographed and edited in extremely appropriate good taste; the director gives us an impression of the characters' personality through a detailed recording of their everyday domestic activities. The film also belongs to Rampling, who is in every scene; she plays her character flawlessly evoking great curiosity and sympathy from the viewer – she is split between the unhealable wound of the loss of her husband and a desire to move on as illustrated in the affair she has with Nolot and her obvious enjoyment of sex with him (the sex scenes are quite explicit). She often studies herself in the mirror as she asks who she is and whether she can live without her husband. As in 'Swimming Pool', many scenes include water and swimming. (2006)

Sous les toits de Paris 1930 René Clair (France) 4.0 Albert Préjean as street singer of the same name, a good guy, pensive, true lover; Pola Illéry very pretty and cute in her 20s costume (tight bodice, bow mouth, spit curls, tight-fitting hat), flirty, even borderline promiscuous as she changes boyfriends at will. Charming, rather naïve romantic drama (sometimes a comedy) taking place in a working-class quartier in Paris. Virtually the entire film happens on a detailed and credible set with camera panning over the chimneys and rooftops of Paris down past the five or six stories of windows to the perfectly recreated store fronts in the streets covered with pavés. Film appears to be a romantic comedy as Prejean sets his eye on the footloose Pola, whom he courts by inviting her into his tiny apartment to spend the night – a long, sexy scene with no sex, since Pola knows when to put on the brakes, but amusing shots of her in his bed with her underclothes on. Albert's rival is a local small-time

gangster that Pola objects to only weakly. When Albert is mistakenly arrested by the police for theft (a gangster friend left a bag full of stolen goods with him for safekeeping), Pola drifts back to her gangster and to Albert's friend, but when Albert is released, the (American) viewer expects girl and guy to get back together and live happily ever after. Big surprise when – like in Pagnol's 'Fanny' – they go their separate ways: Albert, whose male ego is offended by Pola's lack of strict fidelity, refuses to take her back, acquiesces in his friend's coupling with her, and all walk disconsolately off into the night. The film is sometimes slow-moving, the acting and spoken dialogue is awkward, but it is delightful and original. As Clair's first sound film, it is obviously transitional – lovely mise-en-scene and editing carried over from silent films (cf. 'Le chapeau de paille d'Italie'); most of the action is played against a background of bright orchestral music with straightforward spoken dialogue substituting for title cards; there are only two songs with lyrics that are sung by Albert in his street performances. The film reads like a silent comedy accompanied by attractive soundtrack music. Editing is remarkable in various scenes, e.g., when the police invade Albert's apartment, the camera records the mess they leave behind – close-ups shots of fruit and a baguette on the floor, and then in two later shots more mice are shown consuming stepwise the piece of bread; and toward the end the romantic ruckus in the café is interpreted through the gaze of an older man, who concludes that he has drunk too much absinthe (cf. the pastor's beer in 'Garbo's 'Flesh and the Devil'). Film is very "French" with berets, local men and women gathering in cafes, girls of questionable morals smoking cigarettes, indirect references to sex (Albert tells Pola "Deshabillez-vous."), the police push the common people around (although they release Albert when exculpatory evidence surfaces). Charming, lightweight piece executed in impeccable taste. (2016)

South Pacific 1958 Joshua Logan 2.5 Rossano Brazzi, Mitzi Gaynor, Juanita Hall, John Kerr, Ray Walton, Frances Nuyen. Pretty terrible movie with wooden dialogue, wooden acting, and not terribly interesting plot. Brazzi is corny but good; Gaynor is not as brassy as Mary Martin but carries it along; John Kerr is terribly flat as Lieutenant Cable (he shouldn't be allowed to walk around bare-chested!), and Frances Nuyen is beautiful and bland as his Polynesian love interest. Very little good dancing, although there are a lot of big crowd scenes. Pretty spectacular Hawaiian locations, but often (very!) ruined by Logan's shooting through dorky filters! Excellent sound track, and wonderful numbers – Some Enchanted Evening, I'm as corny as Kansas in August, There ain't nothin' like a dame, I'm gonna wash that man right outta my hair, Younger than springtime, etc. Makes you hum and forget how bad the movie really is. The Japanese are a little distance away on paradisiacal Bali Hai, but they play no role. Theme is racism (Gaynor doesn't want to marry a man who has Polynesian children!), and Cable doesn't want to marry Nuyen, but Mitzi overcomes it with typical 50s liberal intensity and Cable dies. (2005)

Southside with You 2016 Richard Tanne 2.5 Talky romantic drama about the first "date" of Obama and his future wife in South Side Chicago in 1989 (one of the things they do is see 'Do the Right Thing'). Tika Sumpter as decidedly middle-class Michelle Robinson, focused on making her mark in a civil law firm; Parker Sawyers as young Barack Obama, summer fellow at the law firm and already a community activist, pursuing Michelle persistently. The first scenes establish Michelle's family as solid Chicago (lower?) middle-class family – father works in a boiler room, Michelle went to Princeton (affirmative action?) and is now working in a Chicago law firm uncomfortable as a Black woman in a sea of white faces. Obama picks her up in his rickety automobile (she notices its scuzziness and the hole in the floor), and they launch on their long day together, which the cautious Michelle insists is "not a date"; she is also less than enamored by his chain smoking. They attend a neighborhood community meeting, where Obama gives a rousing speech (Michelle calls it good but a little "professorial") about the need for different groups to work together; they then get a beer in a local bar, go to see Spike Lee's movie, and end up getting an ice cream cone, Michelle implicitly admitting her attraction to Barack when she agrees to lick from the same cone (characteristically he buys only one). A conversation with Michelle's white boss outside the movie theater shows Obama at his conciliatory best – he says that Mookie threw the garbage can through Sal's plate glass window because he wanted to distract the mob from harming any people. Screenplay focuses some on the experience of being a successful Black person in an integrated society: mixed-race Obama talks about his reluctance to marry into the family of his white girlfriend at

Georgetown (he's tired of being an outsider), and Michelle talks about having to work to be better than her peers in college and in the firm because she is being closely watched as a black woman. Much attention to Obama's persistent courting – he agrees on several occasions that "Okay, this is not a date", but returns to the charge within a few minutes; Michelle resists admitting any attraction, but at the end of the film it is obvious that she and Barack are gravitating together. The screenplay emphasizes the duo's dialogue, which is often interesting with well-turned phrases. The film's treatment of the President and First Lady is sympathetic and positive. I am inclined to think that much of the film's interest derives from its treatment of two well-liked public figures. (2017)

The Spanish Prisoner 1997 David Mamet 3.5 Campbell Scott low-key and bemused as employee of a mysterious American firm – he has invented a "process" that could make the company millions; Steve Martin as mysterious outside man who befriends Scott (we are suspicious); Rebecca Pidgeon (Mamet's wife) flat and ordinary as junior employee of the film who proclaims her romantic interest in Scott; Ben Gazzara is rather thankless role as Scott's boss, who keeps telling Scott that he will be richly rewarded when "the stockholders' meeting" takes place; Ricky Jay, who spends most of the film complaining that he has the flu; Felicity Huffman. Plot-driven, somewhat mechanical film by Mamet that bears a great resemblance to his first film 'House of Games'. The film is focused on con games (given away by the title, which refers to a classic con game dating from the early 20th century) and deception. The author keeps the viewer constantly off balance trying to keep up with the plot and distinguish the good guys from the con men and women. Steven Martin appears mysteriously in the first scene (did he really fly into the Caribbean island in his own sea plane?); Pidgeon puts the moves on Scott (what does she really want?); Scott suspects Martin, whose sister keeps on not showing up for appointments; help from FBI "agent" Huffman ends up being a con (in cahoots with Martin?) to get their hands on Scott's red book; Scott hooks up with Pidgeon Hitchcock-style to prove Scott's innocence (against all odds), but she turns out to be a member of the grand plot to get hold of the formula; the final confrontation on the Boston ferry plays on the innocuousness of Japanese tourists, and our sudden suspicion that the Japanese will get hold of the process is foiled when the innocent-looking tourists turns out to be a U.S. marshal; Scott is saved and Pidgeon is dragged off to jail. Hitchcockian elements abound: the two "innocent" kids team up to prove Scott's innocence against the big frame; the fear of the police authority figures is played up in the police station and in the NY subway; the action is played out in broad daylight in front of the viewer with skullduggery abounding behind the scenes. The Mamatese dialogue is pretty interesting and it maintains the attention of the viewer; it always portrays suspicions, wariness, untrustworthiness, hostility among the characters, illustrative of the cynical world view of the author; but the clichés and nonsensical phrases sometimes seem mannered, self-indulgent, and close to meaningless. To a large extent the film lacks in-depth characters and it is drained of emotional resonance; but its narrative puzzle and misdirection maintains the interest of the viewer. Highly entertaining film with little poetic depth; but how many films are this much fun? (2007)

Spanking the Monkey 1994 David O. Russell 3.5 Jeremy Davies as gangly MIT student forced by his father to stay home to take care of his mother, who has multiple fractures in one leg; as obnoxious, arrogant, know-it-all jerk of a dad who bullies his wife and belittles his son; Alberta Watson marvelous as the bed-ridden mom, bored, restless, and obviously inappropriately attached to her son; as teenage neighbor interested in Jeremy, confused, curious, and sexually aggressive in an innocent way. Sort of black comedy with tragic subtext about the difficulties that a college kid has reaching sexual and emotional maturity when confronted with an abusive dad, an incestuous mom, a confused aggressive girlfriend, and a bunch of immature buddies clowning around and smoking weed. In the first part of the film Jeremy attempts to take care of his mother, who habitually treats him seductively, letting him rub her back while nude in the shower and rub the inside of her thigh to stop the itching. After Jeremy unsuccessfully attempts to get to his medical internship with the help of the goofy Aunt Helen, he gets drunk with his mother on gin and tonics, and while he is tentatively massaging her hip and again her upper thigh, she lifts up her skirt and the two of them have sex! Meanwhile, the rest of Jeremy's life spirals out of control -- he gets into trouble with the girl's psychiatrist dad for making out with her "too hard" and dad returns home in high dudgeon telling Jeremy that he will not pay for him to return to college next. The film ends with Jeremy trying twice unsuccessfully to commit suicide, and then hitchhiking a ride with a trucker, who carries him off to an uncertain future. The film is thoughtful, moves deliberately, and is very well acted -- by the mercurial Aunt Holly, by the simultaneously horny and vulnerable Jeremy, and by the unhappily married, bored,

off center mom. It can be very amusing -- the dad's bossy, sarcastic bitching; the attempts of Jeremy to let off a little tension by masturbating on the toilet are interrupted several times by the scratching of the dog at the bathroom door; Jeremy's first attempt to commit suicide on the toilet door ends in farce when the mother opens the door and he falls down in a heap. The film is extremely well shot and edited, with quick hyper close-ups to add to the piquancy of a scene, and editing to indicate that a situation with an ambiguous outcome is resolved in a specific way and to show Jeremy's experiences since the beginning of the film flash before his eyes when he jumps from a cliff in the second suicide attempt. The film's dramatic subtext is believable and moving -- a promising young student tries but fails to escape his dysfunctional environment and ends heading off to an unknown future. One wonders how much of Russell's film is autobiographical, and whether he has exceeded this achievement in his subsequent mainstream films. (2013)

Spartan 2004 David Mamet 2.5 Val Kilmer, Ed O'Neill, William C. Macy, Derek Luke. Another thriller from Mamet, this time international style as Secret Service type, Kilmer, sets out to rescue the daughter of the President of the U.S., who apparently has been kidnapped by terrorists, but then turns out she is headed to Dubai to be sex slave (!). Too much Mametese – it works in “serious” movie like *House of Games*, but not in a straight thriller. Mametese tries to hide the intentions and meaning of the speaker, to convey aggression, etc., all of which does not work in an intricately plotted thriller movie. Mamet withholds so much information from viewer that it is hard to get involved – we spend too much of our energy trying to understand what is going on, who is who, and what the Mamet-speak declarations mean. Mamet also tries to make cynical points about American politics (the whole security apparatus of the U.S. government on the move to keep the President from being embarrassed! -- he is apparently a womanizer and revelations about his daughter would somehow make his reelection unlikely). Some good action scenes; he films violence very well – crisp gunshots, crisp editing, and intriguing: the killing of the two men in the beach house; the killing of Luke by a sniper on a boat lurking off the coast; and especially the longish sequence in Alabama (?), in which the feds stage (?) the murder of a policemen, then actually murder a condemned criminal (he is going to die anyway) in order to pump up the anxiety of the imprisoned head of the sex slave ring. The bad guys are mostly Arabs. Despite all the velocity, end of movie is slow, and we just don't give a damn whether the girl is rescued or not. (2005)

The Spectacular Now 2013 James Ponsoldt 3.0 Miles Teller as Sutter, high school live wire who is also an alcoholic; Shailene Woodley ('The Descendants') as Aimee, reclusive, studious high school kid who discovers Sutter passed out drunk in a front yard; Kyle Chandler, good-looking ne'er do well appearing in brief role as Sutter's alcoholic father; Jennifer Jason Leigh also in small role as Sutter's well-meaning mom; Bob Odenkirk in even briefer role as Sutter's clothing store employer. Genuine, realistic high school coming-of-age comedy-drama about a classic popular kid who is hiding his hurt by drinking whiskey from a flask and being the life of the party. The film is in part a romantic comedy that brings Sutter and Aimee together out of mutual need; they are separated when Sutter has to face reality through meeting his father; after a separation, they come together in the end with however no clear indication of their future. The film is set in semi-suburban Georgia (filmed in Athens?) – convenience stores, two-lane blacktop through wooded neighborhoods, tasteful wooden frame houses. It navigates familiar high school territory – inchoate adolescent speech from the two principals, football games, graduation ceremonies, fear of peer pressure, etc. It focuses intently on the two main characters. Woodley is charming in her shy indifference to high school culture, blooming from the experience of finding herself loved by a boy and causing anxiety in the viewer that she might be hurt emotionally by Sutter. Sutter is the center of the drama: luxuriating in his popularity among his peers, bull-shitting his geometry teacher who reproaches him for not studying, announcing repeatedly that he is living for pleasure in the Now and that he doesn't care about his future, periodically taking hits of whiskey from his chrome-plated pocket flask, even showing up buzzed for work, the viewer senses that he is running from some unresolved issues; one detects however a fundamental decency and sensitivity in the way he treats Aimee – e.g., he doesn't pressure her into having sex. The turning point occurs when Aimee persuades him to visit his father, whom his mother has always forbidden to see; the dad turns out to be an alcoholic and a flake that runs from his son rather than be honest about his past. A nice scene with his employer, Odenkirk, in which an honest Sutter declines to promise that he will stop drinking on the job, is an indication that he has become

aware of the emotional scar that lies at the origin of his own alcohol dependence. There is some hope for Sutter after all. An honest high school movie without the usual clichés – the high school bitches, the jocks, the guys horsing around looking for sex, etc. The film's deliberate development is sometimes tedious. (2013)

Spectre 2015 Sam Mendes 3.0 Daniel Craig in his fourth outing as the "new" Bond; Christoph Waltz boyish, sly, cruel as the chief villain, who turns out to be the old villain Blofeld (in one scene complete with white cat in his lap) and who has personal, family reasons to pursue and torture Bond (he appears only in the last third of the film); Lea Seydoux ('Blue is the Warmest Color') cool and pretty as the Bond girl -- her chemistry with Craig is limited, despite one passionate kiss; Monica Bellucci as gangster widow, who catches fire with Bond while wearing her grieving black; Ralph Fiennes cool, collected and reasonable as Bond's superior, M; Ben Whishaw as an underage Q, who does however provide some cool (the sports car!) and useful gadgets; Naomie Harris is a young and sexy Moneypenny; Andrew Scott as the new intelligence chief, C, who is plotting to take over MI6. The newest Bond gets high marks for budget (\$300 million), spectacular scenes (the jaw-dropping opening scene in Mexico City that has Craig skipping across city roofs, sliding down the side of a collapsing building, and fighting to get control of a helicopter over the Zocalo populated by thousands of extras dressed in Dia de los Muertos death head costumes), and a relentless Bond that never slows down until he gets his man. Craig is no-nonsense, grim, and unstoppable (cf. Roger Moore's flippant attitude), impeccably and elegantly dressed, not terribly good-looking and with less attention to women, cocktails, and haute cuisine than previous incarnations. The story begins with Bond doing personal work avenging the death of Judy Dench (who appears briefly in a video demanding revenge), but in the course of a long, linear narrative happens upon a typical 007ian plot by some malcreants to dominate the world; the last of a committee of cosmic plotters, Waltz plans to take over by appropriating with C Britain's -- and presumably the world's -- intelligence operations; he is locked in a bureaucratic battle with M, whom he plans to send into retirement; in a final Armageddon-like confrontation with Waltz, Bond defeats the plot and wins the hand of Seydoux, who had previously delivered Bond an ultimatum that he quit his spy work (in this film his profession is "assassin"). One wonders what the inevitable sequel will consist of -- mowing the grass? The chase sequences (particularly the one careening along the banks of the Tiber in Rome) and the fights (particularly the wild one in the Moroccan train) are terrifically entertaining. The film takes us on a picturesque and colorful travelogue to several interesting places: Mexico City, London several times, Rome, atop a pointy mountain in the Alps, a small hotel in Tangier, and a Bondian high-tech installation in the Moroccan desert. The body count is horrendous; Craig mows down the bad guys while barely taking aim on his automatic weapons. Eye-popping action and special effects combined with a charismatic Bond. (2015)

Spellbound 1945 Alfred Hitchcock (Selznick) 3.0 Gregory Peck as the fake Dr. Edwardes with amnesia and many secrets, Ingrid Bergman as hyper smitten psychoanalyst who breaks most every rule of her profession to "cure" Edwardes, Leo G Carroll as the former head of the psychiatric facility who, it is revealed in the end, murders his successor so he won't have to give up his position, Michael Chekhov (nephew of Anton!) as adorable father figure analyst to Bergman. Hitchcock's earliest excursion into a psychoanalytic thriller; it was a big critical and financial success when released. The key to solving the mystery is to cure Peck of his amnesia: he remembers a childhood trauma (killing his brother by accident) and other more recent details (expressed in Dali's famous dream sequence – lots of eyes, a slut kissing everyone, someone cutting the backdrop with scissors, people falling off the edge) that reveal that Carroll is the guilty party. The script's focus on "the guilt complex" (without at first realizing it, Peck harbors huge guilt about the death of his brother and of his friend Dr. Edwardes) certainly appeals to Hitchcock, who, as he often admits, experiences guilt about many episodes in his life – e.g., abandonment of his mother in 1939. Story has a lot of problems. Many details do not hang together – the progress of Peck's and the real Edwardes' acquaintance, Carroll's motivation in killing Edwardes – to keep him from succeeding him? Peck's motivation for posing as Edwardes at the asylum – so he won't have to recall the horror of the latter's death? Also very improbable that a psychoanalyst – Bergman – would abandon her patients and all her other medical obligations to go chasing after Peck because she is hopelessly in love

with him. Gender politics is that Bergman is rather an incomplete person in the beginning since, as pointed out by her amorous colleague, she is devoted to science to the detriment of her womanly virtues; but once she commits herself – successfully – to Peck’s cure, she is a happy person as she kisses him on the way to departure in the train station; one supposes she will continue her medical career, but this is not mentioned. Many strong points however. Bergman’s performance is convincing and passionate – we really believe how dedicated she is to Peck – despite the improbability of her motivation (Peck, although handsome and glamorous, strikes me as too passive – somewhat contemptible). Chekhov is humorous, human, and endearing as the psychoanalytic father figure, although he can carry it a bit far. Not to mention the cinematic tours de forces: Peck’s scene where he descends the staircase with straight razor in his had, and then camera shoots directly through the glass of milk as he drinks it; of course, the final scene where the giant hand + revolver follows Bergman out of the room without firing, and then slowly turns on itself and fires (commits suicide) – I did not see the flash of red. Peck’s fixation on patterns of straight lines and then its unraveling adds some interest. The image of opening of several successive doors was striking but a little corny. Probably the visually weakest of the main scenes was the skiing scene, where backgrounds were so sketchy and unrealistic that they were distracting. Overall, interesting, although not entirely successful, attempt to make a psychoanalytic picture. One wonders how much interference Hitchcock had to endure from Selznick, who insisted on pumping up the romantic angle with Bergman. (2007)

The Spiral Staircase 1946 Robert Siodmark 3.5 Gothic horror-thriller featuring mute girl in a vast Victorian house threatened by an unknown serial killer. Dorothy McGuire unremarkable as sensible, frightened mute young woman who doesn’t speak a word until the denouement; George Brent looking a bit long in the tooth as the master of the house where McGuire works; Ethel Barrymore lying old and weary in her bed – she utters mysterious statements about previous crimes in the house and comes to life in the climax; Kent Smith as straight-arrow town doctor who wants to cure McGuire; Gordon Oliver as free-wheeling, outspoken half-brother of Brent; Rhonda Fleming, Sara Allgood, Elsa Lanchester, Rhys Williams have small roles. An entertaining, extremely well-executed genre picture from the studio era. Brent’s house is large, labyrinthine, beautifully decorated with Victorian bric-a-brac with many mysterious corners. Most of the film takes place in the one house with a storm of thunder and lightning raging outside. Every time a murder is committed or threatened, eerie music intones and the camera tracks into the (unidentified) killer’s iris. The film is also a traditional whodunit: some serial killer is knocking off women with a defect (in a wheelchair, mute, etc.), the mute McGuire is obviously the intended next victim; the question is which one of the males in the film is the killer: the handyman; certainly not the open-faced Smith who is intent on curing McGuire; perhaps the rather disreputable Oliver, who often acts in a threatening way (but isn’t that too obvious?); and who would think the avuncular Brent would do such a thing? Makes the viewer think of the Thin Man series. Siodmark pulls off well the fast-paced, well-edited climax and denouement: McGuire feels threatened by the suspicious Oliver in the creepy cellar, and she manages to lock him in a storeroom; feeling secure with Brent on the main staircase, he reveals himself as the killer (devoted to eliminating imperfection in the world!) while donning his close-fitting black gloves; McGuire manages to escape, Brent catches up with her, but he is shot down by Barrymore with the pistol she has in her room; the excitement is magnified by McGuire’s muteness, but when she has to make a phone call (the old vote is voice activated), she finds her voice. The shock has enabled her to overcome her childhood trauma and has restored her ability to speak! First-class studio entertainment vehicle – tight script, good cast, crisp direction. ‘Gaslight’ meets ‘The Thin Man’. (August 2017)

The Spirit of the Beehive 1973 Victor Erice (Spain) 3.0 Fernando Fernan Gomez as red-headed loner fascinated by bees in their hives; Teresa Gimpera as his wife, very pretty, perfectly coiffed, and aloof – rarely speaks; Jose Villasante appears in one scene as the Frankenstein Monster; Anna Torrent as adorable little girl who is haunted by the image of the monster; Isabel Tellería as her older sister who feeds Anna’s fears; Juan Margallo as the fugitive. Famous European art film made in Spain just before the end of the Franco era. Perhaps stands out for its realistic, palpable evocation of a small village in Central Spain in 1940; village is very poor with muddy, rutted streets; the two girls live in a voluminous

tumble-down manor house with their parents; little girls walking to school in plain smocks and dark stockings. The film is slow-moving with little narrative energy; images and composition are memorable: shots held on immobile subjects for a long time, e.g., father in his office, Ann inspecting the contents of a well, the little girls running repetitively through the fire, Anne walking slowly toward a mysterious door in the middle of the night; automatic gun flashes in the night in the building where the fugitive is holed up – without explanation; Anna staring out of the window of her bedroom into the pale moonlight. There are many beautifully textured shots of the bare landscapes of central Spain, of the plain-walled buildings. The author also makes intensive use of sound effects – sounds of the night, walking across a squeaky floor, lying down in a groaning old bed, the sound of the father winding the fugitive's watch while the camera lingers on the father's wife, the little tune the watch plays, the sound of wind blowing through the abandoned building, the dog's persistent bark toward the end. The narrative is very spare: little Anna is fascinated with the image of the Monster, her sister teases her; Anna has some traumatic experiences, e.g., the death of the fugitive (Franco repression?), and when the Monster appears to Anna while she is sitting alone by a lake (thus aping the famous scene in the movie) and touches her with his hand, she regresses into catatonia. Alleged symbolic references to repression in Franco's Spain are difficult to verify. The atmosphere is repressed, stilted, but it seems to have more to do with the oppressiveness and emptiness of provincial life and a child's experience of it; even the parents are a bit bizarre (the father writing strange poetry about beehives and the mother writing what appear to be love letters to an unidentified person) and distant. The ending suggests that children raised in such an atmosphere are marked and may not recover. The film's enigmatic nature will limit its acceptance. (2011)

Spirited Away 2001 Hayao Miyazaki (Japan) 3.5 Excellent touching animated feature (anime) by master of Japanese animation. Chihiro and parents wander into spirit world, parents are changed into pigs (amusing!), and Chihiro must go through many experiences to mature and get her parents back, who are as clueless at the end as in the beginning. Great animation with beautiful poetic backgrounds, great attention to detail (Miyazaki seems especially attuned to little girls), colors with realistic foreground textures, although animation motion isn't as smooth and seamless as American features. Pace is rather slow with not as many crises as US features. The impact of Japanese folk creatures (apparently?) could confuse American audiences. Miyazaki has very fertile imagination, and variety of creatures is impressive (who were those little paper birds?). Miyazaki is environmentalist (the poor stink monster who expels river pollution from his body!). Emotional payoff in the end brings tears to the eyes. Miyazaki has a weakness for sentimentality. (2005)

Splendor in the Grass 1961 Elia Kazan (writer William Inge) 3.5 Warren Beatty as Bud, son of a wealthy man – he is deeply in love with...; Natalie Wood delicately beautiful as the mentally fragile girlfriend – her parents are not so well off; Pat Hinkle as the bull-headed wealthy father of Beatty; Audrey Christie excellent as the thick-headed, puritanical mother of Wood. Story of frustrated first love set in 1920s and 1930s Kansas. Being 1961, the main issue is sexual frustration since both Beatty and Wood think a good girl just doesn't do it; the impact is to split the couple apart – Wood ends up 2 ½ years in a mental institution, and Beatty obeys his domineering father and spends a year flunking out of Yale; when the two finally meet at the end of the film, Wood is about to marry someone else, and Beatty has already married a woman he met in a restaurant in New York and has had a child with her; the two separate in bittersweet fashion – an ending to be used a few years later in 'Les parapluies de Cherbourg'. The import of the film is that there is nothing as intense and pure as that first love, but you have to take what life gives you and move on – what you find later may also be beautiful. The film is a step above other soap operas of the period – it is more a drama than a soap opera. Film is carefully and economically directed; it avoids sentimentality; it is photographed in subdued grayish colors that are a welcome relief from the garish 50s colors. The performances of the two leads are excellent – Beatty is good as a pained and frustrated lover, as a son browbeaten and embarrassed by his father, as the married man who knows he cannot allow himself to speak his feelings to his first love; Wood is even better as the enthusiastic teenager, as hysterical when she senses she is losing Beatty, as the healed woman who hints at regret and sadness when she finds Beatty married and happy with his new family. The film is played against the backdrop of the rise and collapse of the stock market in the 1920s – Beatty's father commits suicide when

his financial world collapses. The film is also about parents and children: the deleterious effects of a father dominating his son; the dangers of a puritanical upbringing – in this case actually driving a teenage girl into hysteria for which she requires lengthy hospitalization. The film capitalizes on the obsession with teenage sex in the late 1950s and early 1960s – should I or shouldn't I? Kazan seems to be saying that if kids aren't allowed to express their sexual feelings, the consequences could be serious. An eloquent and touching comment on the dignity of traditional heartland America and the pain and difficulty of transition to America's postmodern culture. (2008)

Split 2016 M. Night Shyamalan 2.0 Shyamalan's attempted comeback film that errs in its slow pace and its lack of narrative clarity. James McAvoy as Keith, the damaged kid with 23 (supposedly) personalities who is preparing the way for the 24th, the Beast (!), by kidnapping three cute teenagers; Anya Taylor-Joy ('Witch') pretty unexpressive as the least well-adjusted; Jessica Sula pretty cute when she takes off her pants and parades around in her underwear; Haley Lu Richardson ('The Edge of Seventeen') who also looks cute when she has her shirt off and pleads for help in her bra; Betty Buckley as psychotherapist suffering from a terminal case of logorrhea (Is that the reason the Beast squeezed her to death?). Film begins pretty well with Dennis's (one of McAvoy's alters) disturbing kidnaping of the three girls. They are imprisoned in a dank dungeon with multiple rooms including a kitchen and storage rooms with storage shelves. They are periodically visited by one of McAvoy's personalities, who threatens them and mistreats them without doing too much harm (the film is rated PG-13) nor letting the viewer know what they are up to. Much of the time is taken up by the girls wringing their hands trying to decide whether to submit to their captor(s) or try to escape. Some hackneyed attempts to escape, such as using a wire hanger to try to force the bolt on the outside of the door; or Anna convincing Hedwig, an arch nine-year-old alter, to take her to his room where she thinks she might crawl out his "window". Meanwhile another alter, Barry (good-humored gay decorator), pays visits to Buckley, where the extremely long-winded psychotherapist alternately explains to the audience what is going on or leads them astray (e.g., by asserting that the Beast is a fantasy). Only toward the end of the film does the viewer realize that McAvoy is preparing the way for the Beast by feeding him the three girls for dinner. They will thus raise all suffering people to a position of domination in the world. McAvoy suffered grievously in his childhood because his mother was a hyper-neat freak with OCD, and when he discovers (in a very slow-paced scene) that Taylor-Joy has been sexually abused by her uncle, he spares her life while the Beast (same guy) kills and consumes the two other girls. The ending does not seem to have the patented Shyamalan twist: it turns out the prison rooms are in the basement of a zoo (!) and that Bruce Willis is waiting in front of a TV to launch the sequel that would connect this film with other Shyamalan oeuvres. The narrative has possibilities, but is poorly executed. The bulk of the film moves at a snail's pace with interminable discussions by the different alters and particularly by the loquacious psychotherapist; the PG-13 rating deprives the film of much of its shock value (not a good thing in a horror movie); and the postscript ending is puzzling and botched. Not looking forward to the sequel. Occasionally amusing to watch McAvoy chew the scenery with his varied personalities. (May 2017)

Spotlight 2015 Tom McCarthy (AA best film) 3.5 Entertaining, in the end arousing journalist procedural on the Boston Globe's 2001-02 pursuit of the Boston Archdiocese sex abuse scandal. Michael Keaton as Robby Robinson, the dedicated head of the "Spotlight" investigative unit (four journalists) working for the Globe; Mark Ruffalo as young reporter, dedicated, sometimes hot-headed, relentless Spotlight reporter; Rachel McAdams also a member of the team, quieter, better at getting reluctant subjects to talk in interviews; Liev Schreiber paternal, semi-bearded editor, an outsider that orders the investigation when he senses that the Catholic culture of the staff might be impeding their curiosity; Brian d'Arcy James, a researcher, quiet and methodical member of the team; John Slattery ('Mad Men') as Robby's boss; Stanley Tucci snarky and abrupt as a lawyer that sympathizes with the investigation; Len Carius in effective cameo appearance as the mendacious Cardinal Law. The methodical, realistic account of the sex abuse investigation gathers momentum slowly as the members of the team branch out seeking victims, verification of their stories, documents held under court seal, etc. in order to build up a dossier to warrant publication. Acting is generally low key, but always effective. Memorable is the heated confrontation between Keaton and Ruffalo over the timing of publication –

Ruffalo wants publication as soon as they nail the story of a single victim, while Keaton, knowing the guile of the archdiocese, wants proof on “all 87”. Suspense builds up as the Church brings pressure on the newspaper, but the unsealing of documents that show Cardinal Law’s failure to act despite his knowledge of past abuse cases pushes the team to publication. The film ends quietly as Spotlight gathers information on additional cases: in the end, they publish 600 well-documented articles that set off a world-wide revelation of the abuses and the Church’s negligence. The film possesses great resonance, recalling the glory days of investigative, much-raking journalism and in particular the Woodward-Bernstein saga of Watergate (*‘All the President’s Men’* 1976); the enormously favorable film reviews might owe something to the nostalgia for real journalism in the Internet age. Aside from the heroic energy of the journalists, the film also emphasizes the stubborn wiliness of the Catholic Church that used its enormous power in the Boston community to stonewall both legal and journalistic investigations, and refused even at the moment of publication even to comment on the subject. The screenplay also stresses that the whole community bore some responsibility – the indulgent attitude of all Boston (even doubts as to whether the judge would allow release of the key documents since she was a loyal member of a Catholic parish), the Globe for not pressing earlier stories, the members of the Spotlight team, who were all “still Catholic” although lapsed. Film is gripping and timely, although perhaps overrated. (2016)

Spring Breakers 2012 Harmony Korine 2.5 Selena Gomez as the Christian good girl, Faith; Vanessa Hudgens, Ashley Benson, Rachel Korine as the bikini-clad, blond, bad girls ready for almost anything; James Franco over-the-top as weirdo gangster rapper, Alien – tattoos and steel teeth. Hey, you think spring break is all about beach nudity, drunkenness, and beer funnels, and ogling 2/3rds-nude girls, then get a load of this. You have plenty of that – the four distaff principals wander around almost always in nice-looking bikinis – but this film completely subverts the genre. It is hard to figure if Korine is satirizing/criticizing American culture or just showing off. The idea seems to be that a lot of college kids are alienated by boredom and sameness, as illustrated by the dark, sparsely populated campus in the beginning of the film, where the desperate girls are already doing drugs and screaming the f... word at every opportunity. In steps spring break, defined by the girls as a chance to “find yourself”, to escape from “reality” for a while before you return to the same ol’, same ol’. After a few days on the beach, Gomez realizes she is over her head and tearfully returns home, but the other three throw themselves into self-indulgent behavior (drinking, sex, taking drugs); and after they are bailed out of jail by hyper-weirdo Franco, they plunge into the dark side – three-way sex with Franco in a swimming pool, playing with guns while not worrying whether they will go off, finally carrying out a hit for Franco against his gangster enemy; the climax is blazing their way with automatic pistols into a Mexican-cartel-style compounds and killing every person they meet, while dressed in their yellow bikinis and tight-fitting pink hoods with eye slots. The film seems to be a pessimistic take on human nature: once you challenge society’s rules, there’s no stopping where you will go including murder and self-destruction and then tell your mom on the telephone that you have had such a good time and have made amazing friends; but boy was it fun! The film moves slowly and is pretentiously assembled – sudden short flashbacks, repetitions of key lines to make sure we catch them, shooting important scenes in black and white or washed out colors, oppressive close-ups. The constant voyeuristic staring at the bikini-clad bodies is either a challenge to the viewer to stay clear of sexual and social chaos or it betrays the filmmaker’s continued obsession with teenage sex. None of the girls establishes any individual character, but Franco is repulsive, exploitative, and even sometimes seedily charming in his extravagant performance. Some rewarding moments if you are patient and tolerant. (2016)

The Spy in Black 1939 Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger (Britain) 3.5 Conrad Veidt tall, thin and severe as dedicated German naval officer in World War I ; Valerie Hobson dark-haired and attractive as apparent German secret agent posing as school teacher on Isle of Hoy (Scapa Flow); Sebastian Shaw as nice-looking guy posing as disaffected British naval officer claiming to provide information to Veidt; Marius Goring in small role as Veidt’s second-in-command on his submarine; several salty, down-to-earth players that add humor and color to the film; and a lot of sheep bleating every time the action moves outside (an obvious characteristic of the Orkneys). Well-made, entertaining, often amusing and dramatic small movie about Germany’s attempt in 1917 to destroy much of the British high

seas fleet in Scapa Flow. Most of the film is told from the point of view of the Germans, who are presented as honorable men with human characteristics – e.g., their obsession with getting butter when they arrive on the island of Hoy, their reluctance to kill anyone British; but their priority of course remains advancing Germany's war effort. A small narrative switch in the beginning when the real school teacher is murdered and replaced by apparent German agent Hobson (she speaks good German); but the bigger one comes about halfway through when the apparent traitor, Shaw, turns out to be a British double agent teaming up with Hobson, who turns out to be a British agent, who has replaced the German replacement (OK, a bit far-fetched); their aim is to foil the German plot. The story is spiced up by a budding romance between Veidt and Hobson, while he stills thinks the latter is German. Veidt manages to escape Hobson's cottage disguised as a British clergyman (whom he has left tied up and gagged), and a fairly exciting chase on a Scottish ferry ends in irony (it is shelled by Veidt's own submarine that has mistaken the ferry for another ship), and noble tragedy (Veidt chooses to go down with the ship rather than escape with the British crewmen). The film is obviously inexpensive, but it effectively evokes the coast of Scotland (a specialty of Powell) and benefits from crisp, dark-toned cinematography and excellent acting all around – sometimes dramatic, sometimes comic. Nice shots of the British fleet lying dispersed in Scapa Flow, prehistoric monuments that Veidt uses as guideposts, the scow that plies among the snug harbors of the Orkneys. Highly enjoyable, especially for fans of the Powell-Pressburger team. (2016)

The Spy Who Came in From the Cold 1965 Martin Ritt 4.0 Richard Burton unusually passive in his role as demoralized spy in the British Secret Service; Claire Bloom looking like Virginia Kiser in role as member of the British Communist Party who falls in love with Burton (somewhat inexplicably); goateed Oskar Werner in energetic role as East German Secret Service assistant chief Fiedler, who is ultimately framed by Control; Cyril Cusack urbane, smooth and slippery as Burton's boss Control hatching the plot; Peter van Eyck as dignified East German spy chief Mundt, who it turns out is really a British agent. Outstanding John le Carré gloss on the Cold War spy mania typified by the James Bond movies. The plot is fiendishly complex and clever: Control wants to protect Mundt against his arch-rival Fiedler (no one knows this), but he deceives Burton into pretending he is an alcoholic disillusioned defector to the Communists so as to discredit Mundt and have him replaced by apparently friendly Fiedler; things seem to go according to plan, but at the East German tribunal that is trying Mundt for treason(!), the tables are turned by the arrival of Bloom as witness; Burton's testimony is discredited, Mundt is cleared, and Fiedler is bound for execution. Burton of course is extremely disillusioned by Control's heartless manipulation of both Bloom and himself; when Mundt has them escorted to the Berlin Wall for escape, their supposed guide shoots Bloom (obvious that Mundt was afraid that she would blow his cover – after all she is a Communist), and then Burton, who is urged to go over the top, refuses, climbs back down next to Bloom on the East German side, and he is shot dead – end of movie. All performances are first rate; although Burton won an Oscar for his performance, he spends most of the film looking passive, disenchanted, often in an alcoholic daze, and arguing a perfectly cynical line in his discussion with Bloom; when he breaks out, as in the car with Bloom just before they get to the Wall, he knocks you out of your socks. Leamas' character is fascinating – he is an alcoholic disillusioned character pretending that he is alcoholic and disillusioned! Art direction is terrific: we are always in cloudy, drizzly weather; London looks pretty good (shiny streets), but East Germany is suitably shabby and grey, especially with the abandoned buildings near the Wall. Depression and disillusionment reign. As Control puts it, we (the British) are the good guys, but we have to do dirty things to protect ourselves against the bad guys. What Burton discovers is that there is little difference between the two sides – they both are ruthless and without compunction, as shown vividly in Control's manipulation/betrayal of the two principals. Perhaps some psychological improbabilities: Why would Burton agree to undertake such a dangerous mission if he didn't believe in his cause (habit)? How could a beautiful woman like Bloom fall in love with an apparent deadhead like Burton? Film is fodder for interesting discussions. Filmed in beautifully restored (Criterion) low contrast black and white. (2009)

The Spy who Loved Me 1977 Lewis Gilbert (Britain); produced by Albert Broccoli 3.0 Roger Moore looking fairly fit and dashing in his third Bond film; Barbara Bach blank and toothy

showing a lot of boob as supposed Russian agent, XXX – she seems more a beauty queen graduate training for a centerfold in Playboy; Richard Kiel in his first appearance as the celebrated indestructible super-villain, Jaws, whose shiny choppers strike terror even in the hearts of sharks – in the end he survives ready for appearances in the inevitable sequels; Curd Jürgens a bit dull as the usual insane megalomaniac (he keeps sharks as pets) plotting to destroy the world with kidnapped Polaris missiles; since he stole both a British and a Russian submarine, the two secret services team up to defeat him. A generally entertaining Moore Bond vehicle: the long sequence in Egypt drags, but action and interest pick up with Bond's and Bach's arrival in bright, sunny Sardinia; the one-liners are entertaining, the gadgets are imaginative, especially the Lotus that turns into a submarine and then back into a car on a beach crowded with stunned onlookers, and Moore is energetic and humorous, intimating quietly that this film is meant to be fun and not taken seriously. The film starts with a bang: the celebrated sequence of Moore skiing off a cliff, falling sickingly into the abyss, and then at the last minute sprouting a Union Jack parachute that eases him to the ground; followed by Carly Simon's memorable song, 'Nobody Does it Better', which is only partly undermined by the silly graphics of a female gymnast cavorting on the barrel of a revolver. The monster shootout in the end (dozens of poor bastards blown skywards with hand grenades) is long and boring. The film ends with a humorous bang when, caught by all the higher-ups having sex with Bach, Moore quips that "We have to hold up the British end." Credits roll. (2015)

The Square 2008 Nash Edgerton (writer Joel Edgerton) (Australia) 4.0 David Roberts a bit stiff and always with a pained expression on his face as Ray, the wayward husband; Claire van der Boom pretty and engaging as his much younger girlfriend Carla, who is married to the lowlife Smithy (Anthony Hayes); Joel Edgerton as the ill-tempered, violent arsonist Billy who is however rather nice to his pretty girlfriend; Lucy Bell as Roberts' almost invisible wife Wendy. Cracker-jack Australian neo-film noir. The film has a delightful tight script whose lesson is – if you break the law (moral or legal), all hell will break loose, and you will be deeply sorry; no way to stop the rush to perdition. Roberts begins by having a passionate affair with Carla; to get hold of a large amount of money that Smithy has amassed, the two lovers contract to burn down his house, but the arson mistakenly results in the death of Smithy's mother; an employee of Roberts (Brendan Donoghue) finds out about a kickback scam that Roberts is pulling off with a subcontractor, and their confrontation ends in the death of Donoghue (#2) and Robert's burying him in 'the square' (a spot in the middle of the construction site that he is working on; Ray's efforts to have concrete poured over the spot produce innumerable complications); Roberts begins to receive blackmail notes (from whom?); another confrontation with Roberts' foreman ends in his accidental death (#3); although the viewer has assumed the blackmail notes refer to Roberts' murders, it turns out that their subject is the kickback scam; in the final confrontation, Roberts and Carla are about to abscond with the money, when the arsonist appears; Smithy stumbles in, guns are drawn, and the fire fight results in the deaths of Smithy and of Carla, shot in the head (deaths #4 and 5); Roberts walks away from the scene broken-hearted, crushed at the death of the young woman he loves. The film is intricately plotted, always providing a point of suspense and yet not sacrificing credibility and realism; the laying out of the dual story (the kickbacks and the arson) is ingeniously handled, very pleasingly intermingled (cf. ambiguity about what the blackmail is about), and resolved. Little bits in the development of the story add piquancy and a little humor: Ray's and Carla's dogs develop an attachment to one another while their owners are having sex in Carla's car, and as a result Carla's dog later swims across the river separating their houses and scratches on Ray's patio door...until he is killed by a shark (spreading pool of blood in the water underlines the moral of the story!); when the arsonist has finished wiring Smithy's house, the camera tracks him behind wall partitions, and as he exits the front door, the camera reveals that the mom is asleep hidden in an easy chair; after Ray and Carla have a potentially incriminating conversation at the refrigerator of a neighbor, Ray discovers that they have been overheard by two little kids playing hide and seek (too young however to understand what they heard). The superior plotting and camera work is enhanced by real, believable characters, although motivation and background -- the source of the unlikely bond between Ray and Carla, the depth of Smithy's relationship with his mother, etc. -- are treated only sketchily. The strong acting adds to the believability of the characters and the plot developments. The film is a model of success in commanding the unending attention of the viewer through all of its intricate plot twists. (2011)

The Squid and the Whale 2005 Noah Baumbach 4.0 Owen Kline excellent as confused 10-year-old Frank; bearded Jeff Daniels as the dominating, articulate, obnoxiously competitive (both tennis and table tennis), intellectually snobby, foul-mouthed writer Bernard; Laura Linney as Joan, sensitive, drifting, self-absorbed, also aspiring to become a writer; Jesse Eisenberg resembling Kevin Bacon as precocious, admiring son, Walt, who parrots the literary judgments of his father; William Baldwin as Ivan, the tennis instructor, who turns out to be surprisingly sympa (his resemblance to his famous brother is amusing); Anna Paquin as sexy, edgy writing student, Lili; Halley Feiffer as cute grad student that bonds with Walt. Pitiless autobiographical film about two self-absorbed, egotistical adults going through a disastrous divorce; they are obviously Baumbach's self-absorbed parents; Walt obviously stands for the author. The film takes place in nice Brooklyn neighborhoods with brownstone buildings and shade trees. The family is close, although in the first scene of a family tennis match, Bernard shows his true feelings by firing volley shots at his wife. Conversation often revolves around literary themes, since Dad is a writer, Mom's aspiring to be, and Walt worships and parrots his father; Bernard qualifies as a philistine middle class person who does not appreciate good films and books. The main event is the couple's decision to separate; the rest of the film is devoted to analyzing the impact of the divorce on the two children and the parents. The boys think that "joint custody blows". Frank becomes impatient, foul-mouthed (got that from his dad), and obsessed with sex with lots of masturbation and smearing his semen on library books; he also starts to drink beer. The film spends more time chronicling the impact on Walt. He favors his father, and until the end of the film he asks him for advice – e.g., play the field, have sex with a number of girls instead of be affectionate and faithful to his girlfriend. He is hostile to his mother (who for some reason wants to give him details about her affairs). He takes up with a girlfriend, but he is indecisive, incompetent in bed (an amusing scene about premature ejaculation and wiping the jizz off the sheets); he then dumps her, telling his mother he could do better. Until the final scene Walt cannot make the move to break the domination of his father and find his own way. Bernard does not do well by himself: he takes up with one of his predatory students, but in general he remains hapless, lonely, and unhappy, begging Walt to stay with him because "I need the company"; in serious moments when the viewer hopes for change, he makes instead a critical reference to a book or to a New Wave movie (rubbing his lips like Belmondo in "À bout de souffle" – which he pronounces in French). Joan's success in getting a story published in the New Yorker deals a further blow to his ego; she is also having an affair with the local tennis pro. The film has a satisfying ending. In a conversation with Walt in the hospital, it becomes obvious that Bernard has learned nothing despite collapsing in the street. The camera watches Walt remove his hand from his dad's; he seems to understand that he has to break away and move on; he then runs through New York to the Museum of Natural History, where he stares at the huge exhibit of the squid and the whale. The image is an obvious reference to his parents, whom he sees as monsters destroying one another. An eloquent, searingly honest independent-style film – one of Baumbach's best. (2015)

Stalag 17 1953 Billy Wilder (Paramount) 2.5 Light-hearted, patriotic comedy-drama about the shenanigans of American POWs in German camp at the end of World War II; based on popular play. William Holden in AA performance as venal, cynical pow (essentially all are sergeants); Don Taylor although highly billed, in small role as officer added to the group; Otto Preminger suitably Teutonic but not as ruthless and cruel as most German commandants; Sig Ruman comic relief as buffoonish German sergeant, Schulz (legacy of 'To Be or not to Be' and 'Hogan's Heroes'); Robert Strauss as irritating ape-like POW fantasy in love with Betty Grable; Richard Erdman neutral performance as the barracks chief; Neville Brand as the angry guy leading the pummeling of Holden; Peter Graves as the handsome barracks "security chief" who turns out to be a Nazi informer. Moderately entertaining film. A great deal of it is spent watching the prisoners' high jinx; you know, they are normal, good-humored American kids who just want to have fun and horse around. They play cards and chess, play tricks on one another, deal in contraband goods, organize Christmas parties and dance together man-to-man. A continuous source of good times is mocking Sergeant Schulz, the affable German non-com played by the immortal Sig Ruman; when he tries to be stern and serious, his face puffs up, he begins to bluster and blow, all of which the guys find terribly amusing. There is however a serious undertone to the film, which is established early

by the death of two men trying to escape and the apparent operation of a German informer among the prisoners. Because of his laid-back cynicism, Holden is the prime suspect; as a result he is persecuted and beaten by the group (but of course since the guys are good kids, they don't hurt him bad). By a nifty bit of detective work on the chessboard in the middle of the barrack, Holden discovers that Graves is the guilty party -- a German immigrant from Cleveland, he had volunteered his services to the camp commandant. To punish him, the prisoners throw him into the middle of the camp yard during a security alert, where he is gunned down by the guards. Taking advantage of the confusion, Holden escapes from the camp (not too difficult if you just use your head), telling the men bitterly that he doesn't want to see a single one of them after they get home. Holden is impressive, especially in the last part of the film when he is confronting his accusers and solving the puzzle. The film doesn't measure up to Wilder's best -- it includes a pretty good thriller plot, but the stale, good-ol'-boy campy humor is dull and annoying. (2017)

The Star 1952 Stuart Heisler 2.5 Bette Davis as over-the-hill Hollywood star (probably Joan Crawford?) who tries a comeback, Sterling Hayden as much younger admirer/boyfriend, who bails her out of jail and waits for her to devote herself to him (in the meantime he doesn't seem to have anything to do except tinker with some old marine motors), Natalie Wood playing young and naive as Davis' child living with her (very understanding) stepmother. Film is follow-up to Davis' triumph in 'All About Eve,' but it just doesn't have the great script. Davis does some strong acting – drinks too much, drives drunk, spends a night in jail with some hard-bitten gals – but film does not avoid Hollywood clichés. Davis looks out of shape – overweight, smoking cigarettes, and wearing dowdy clothes. She goes from misery to misery until her agent gets her a screen test with one of her old producers: in perhaps the best scene of the film, she refuses to take direction from the director, and plays the part of the "older sister" as a sexy younger woman putting the moves on her sister's boyfriend (?) – she wants the younger part and she cannot accept that she has to play the older, more mature role. As a result, she does not get the role; she returns to Hayden's shipside pad with Wood, where Davis falls into Hayden's arms with great relief, while Wood smiles and jumps on her tippytoes with happiness. For once, Davis has accepted the domestic solution that is pushed hard in the 50s – no comeback for her, but cooking and washing dishes for a shipyard repairman. Dialogue and direction are pedestrian, but it is still fun to watch Davis throw off sparks. (2008)

A Star is Born 1937 William Wellman (David O. Selznick) 2.5 Janet Gaynor a bit old for the part as ingenue from North Dakota yearning to be a Hollywood star; Frederic March as Norman Maine, older, handsome, and an alcoholic; Adolph Menjou as avuncular studio head that takes Gaynor under his wing (without trying to seduce her); Andy Devine as sexless assistant director that befriends and supports Gaynor without laying a hand on her (thank you, recently created Code); Lionel Stander his usual gravel-voiced self as hard-hearted studio publicist; May Robson as Gaynor's kindly grandmother that supports her granddaughter's ambitions. Classic studio film about the experience of a girl that comes to Hollywood for fame and fortune and about the alcoholism of her husband and its impact on their marriage. Gaynor is an instant star when she is given a little break (it happens too fast to be credible); she marries March, but despite his and her best efforts, he soon slides into full-fledged alcoholism while his career disappears; he commits suicide in a beautiful, rosy Hollywood ocean scene (such nobility), leaving his clothes behind bunched in the surf; heart-broken, Gaynor decides to quit the movies, but Grandma Robson comes to Hollywood to persuade her to stay, saying that she would no longer have a reason to live if her granddaughter was not a star. In the famous concluding scene at a movie premiere, Gaynor identifies herself as "Mrs. Norman Maine", thus paying homage to the sacrifice of her dead husband. Film is well-acted and well directed, but it exudes often corny, self-serving Hollywood optimism (what else would you expect from Selznick, who wrote a good part of the script)? The viewer is invited to share vicariously in the triumph and glamor of the girl from rural America. She is promoted by three selfless men, Menjou as the production head, Devine as the punchless male friend, and of course the tragic March; and Robson reinforces the message that no life could equal that of a Hollywood star. There are however several instances of the cruelty of Hollywood culture: March is treated with disdain and then forgotten once his career begins its decline; and Stander's hatred of him, and indeed of all Hollywood actors, is blunt and vicious (one speculates he is jealous). March is excellent, but Gaynor's age is

distracting; the film would have been far more engrossing if she had been able to play the part ten years earlier (the time of ‘Seventh Heaven’). This version is inferior to the 1954 remake. (2009)

A Star is Born 1956 George Cukor 3.5 Judy Garland, James Mason, Charles Bankston (supportive studio head), Jack Carson (studio pr man). Spectacular 50s musical extravaganza in widescreen Technicolor with astounding decors, costumes; and it is beautifully restored. A pleasure to watch. Musical numbers are extremely well staged and well performed, but music is a bit pedestrian (but lyrics by Ira Gershwin). Judy Garland restored after her bad days; her musical performance top notch, but her acting, though sincere, sometimes reaches too much; she also looks a little ragged around the edges, tired. In my opinion, the best performance is James Mason (Norman Maine) as the alcoholic star actor on the decline, who falls sincerely and deeply in love with Esther Blodgett and sponsors and supports her to stardom. Good scene when he recognizes her star power; she has it! Which is a contrast with 1937 version, where the viewer has a hard time believing in Gaynor’s rapid rise to stardom. She completely devoted to him, quite touching – even to the point of being willing to quit her career to nurse him (a hopeless task!). When Mason overhears her decision, he acts cheerful, and then commits suicide in classy fashion – camera records it in beautiful, understated way. Esther tends to withdraw and mourn, but then she reappears at classy charity function, announces herself as “Mrs. Norman Maine,” implying that she will continue to perform; after all, Norman would have wanted it. Seems like genuine sentiment to me. Big brassy movie that kept Hollywood alive in 50s. (2006)

Star Wars: The Force Awakens 2015 J.J. Abrams 3.5 Superior installment in the Star Wars series: highly entertaining space thriller. Oscar Isaac as pilot for the Resistance against the evil First Order; Daisy Ridley charming, spunky, quietly charismatic as the scavenger Rey, who rises far above her station; John Boyega as Finn, the First Order storm trooper, who out of revulsion against violence defects to the Resistance; Carrie Fisher demoted from her previous status as princess now a general leading the Resistance; Harrison Ford definitely the life of the party as the good-humored, sometimes snarky old captain of the Millennium Falcon returned to help the Resistance; Adam Driver as sensitive, choleric Kylo Ren, charismatic leader of the First Order campaign against the Resistance; Mark Hamill appearing only in the final scene as the grizzled Luke Skywalker, the possessor of the Force. Perhaps the most exciting and dramatic of the Star Wars Series. As accounted in the beginning scroll, the plot involves the Resistance protecting a missing Luke Skywalker against the First Order – his capture would swing events irretrievably toward the dark side. The film is then a series of exciting, beautifully choreographed clashes and chases and meeting with new characters and situations until the First Order planet is blown to smithereens, Han Solo and his son (!) Kylo Ren are killed, and Rey climbs a long Neolithic-looking staircase to discover Skywalker. Exchange of looks and the circling camera indicates that the Force is now being transferred from Skywalker to Rey, setting up sequels with the Resistance further confronting the First Order (one assumes that the chief villain Snoke has escaped his burning planet). Ford (humorous dynamism), Driver (choleric viciousness with moments of interior conflict and regret), Ridley (pretty, spunky, energetic, and captivating) are the most entertaining actors to watch. The film has constant mythic overtones – the struggle between good and evil, the spiritual Force (God) with good and evil (dark, black) sides, a kind of Catholic theology where one must take the initiative in order to invoke the grace of God (God helps them who helps themselves), the fate of the universe lies in the balance. The film draws on social historical images to depict the two sides: First Order mimics the soldiers (Stormtroopers), the dictatorial authority structure, the Nuremberg Rally-style public meetings of the Nazis; the Resistance people are a ragtag, almost undisciplined, cowboy-like group able to triumph through good-natured courage, good technology, a willingness to sacrifice. The dynamic, colorful, exciting score by John Williams, which often recalls Wagner, adds to the white-knuckled excitement. An occasionally irritating aspect of the film is the constant introduction of artifacts from the first series: some of it successful – Han Solo and Chewbacca –, some of it not so much – the cutesy droids, the low-key Carrie Fisher. Overall, compelling show. Perhaps they could abbreviate the conflict in the next installment. (2016)

Stardust 2007 Matthew Vaughn 3.0 Charlie Cox as handsome, naïve young Tristan who goes off to find a star for his girlfriend but then falls in love with the star (i.e., Danes); Sienna Miller as his self-absorbed girlfriend; Claire Danes as tall, pretty, petulant fallen-star-turned-human who is sought by every main character in the film; Michelle Pfeiffer as one of three witch sisters seeking to regain their youth by finding Danes and cutting her heart out; Robert DeNiro as captain of flying pirate ship – although kind and effeminate (he cross-dresses in front of mirrors), he is very concerned to maintain his reputation for ruthless cruelty; Ricky Gervais in rather flat role as a merchant haggling with DeNiro about lightning captured in a barrel. Bright, cheerful, special-effects filled PG-13 fantasy film based on a contemporary graphic novel. Tristan crosses the wall from his English village into a land of fantasy. The complex plot has every major character pursuing star (Danes) or the faded ruby around her neck: Tristan wants to retrieve the star to prove to Sienna that he truly loves her; various sons of the dying king of the fantasy land (Peter O'Toole) need the stone in order to claim the throne vacated by their father; the witches need the heart of Danes to restore their youth (they are all depicted as hyper-wrinkled old hags with Pfeiffer getting a temporary reprieve through magic). In the final confrontation scene in the witches' hall of mirrors, both Pfeiffer and the last heir to O'Toole's throne are killed in donnybrook battle, Cox turns out to be the last of the royal male line (!) and is crowned king and he realizes that he loves Danes and leaves Miller to her fate. The film is a harmless charming fantasy in which most anything can happen, magic regularly turns humans into animals and then back again in clouds of smoke, principal characters are lifted up in aerial combat, a modernistic pirate ship flies through storm clouds high above spectacular lake and mountain scenery, a unicorn carries Danes through the woods, horsemen gallop along mountain paths with spectacular imported Icelandic scenery green-screened in the background, ill-tempered, ugly witches cackle into the camera, etc. Stays safely in family boundaries although Tristan is sired by his father with a fetching brunette to whom he is not wed and Danes often looks enticing in her long satin dress. Sometimes amusing – Danes' petulant, teenage complaints and especially the running humorous commentary of the dead offspring of the king, who are visualized in black and white in the condition they were left in when murdered. Bears resemblance to the 'Lord of the Rings' series and perhaps to 'Pirates of the Caribbean'. Pretty and entertaining, although one yearns for more adult fare. (2011)

Stardust Memories 1980 Woody Allen 3.0 Woody Allen in his familiar anxious, neurotic role as filmmaker reevaluating his life; Marie-Christine Barrault as apparently his true love; Charlotte Rampling as passionate, mercurial girlfriend; Jessica Harper charming although neurotic girlfriend who has constant trouble with men; Tony Roberts as playboy friend; Sharon Stone and Geena Davis in bit roles. Sometimes amusing, usually annoying autobiographical Allen film about his relationship with his own work and with his women (who as usual cannot resist him). He attends a retrospective film festival on his work where he has to deal with his fans and try to straighten out his relationship with his three women. Stylistically the film reflects Allen's admiration for Fellini, particularly his '8½': the film begins with an arresting scene in a dilapidated railroad passenger car from which Allen is not able to escape; the structure of the film is constant flashbacks to his childhood and past experiences with women as well as fantastical scenes that recall Fellini (people doing magic tricks, an elephant standing alone on the beach, mingling with ufo aficionados in an open field); many of the scenes of Allen making a film also take place on the beach; in the end, it appears that the whole movie is a film that Allen has presented to an audience unbeknownst to us. The film is ill-tempered: Allen complains constantly about most anything; he makes fun of people – especially his fans who are constantly crowding around telling him how much they admire him, asking him to support their fundraiser or to have sex with them; they are superficial, obnoxious, speak in loud, flat New York accents, have funny-looking faces (shot with a wide-angle lens to make them look that way) and are often presented as freaks. Allen's main issue is that he no longer wants to make funny movies that entertain people, but to elucidate the human condition, alleviate human suffering, and find true meaning in life (but is that possible for an atheist who insists that happiness and success depend on luck?). He also tells us that he is seeking the ideal woman with whom he can settle down: not apparently Harper, who is too neurotic and whom he doesn't know well enough; probably not Rampling who is exciting but given to frequent, violent attacks of anxiety and hostility; perhaps more likely the charming Marie-Christine Barrault, whom Allen appears to admire. But as the spectators exit

the movie theater the end of the film is inconclusive and open-ended: life will just go on with the same indecision and anxiety; there is no payoff, no insight that the viewer can leave with. The film is beautifully shot; the cast is charming (although one tires of Allen's stammering); and there are some funny lines and situations: Allen has an incompetent agent who hires wanted criminals to work for him; Allen's chauffeur is arrested by police for mail fraud; one-liners – "To you I am an atheist; to God I am the loyal opposition"; I am an absolute expert in art and masturbation"; "For years I thought the Goldberg Variations were something Mr. and Mrs. Goldberg tried on their wedding night"; to cops, 'You can make an exception in my case. I'm a celebrity'; Harper on her night with her boyfriend, "He was so affectionate last night in bed. I told him that I had herpes." Worth watching for Allen aficionados. (2009)

State Fair 1945 Walter Lang (20c Fox) 2.5 Dull Rodgers and Hammerstein screen musical celebrating the virtues of rural America. Jeanne Crain very pretty a la Hollywood, although wearing prissy, cutesy costumes; enthusiastic and sincere, she is restless looking for romance, a man; Dana Andrews as womanizing newspaperman, who turns into a true lover for Crain; Dick Haymes as Wayne, Crain's brother also on the romantic prowl; Vivian Blaine as brassy red-haired singer at the fair that Haymes falls for; Charles Winninger and Fay Bainter very cute as Crain's parents; Harry Morgan as barker at the state fair; Donald Meek as very cutesy pickle judge; Frank McHugh as song peddler. All the characters are wholesome and clean-cut, participating in the Iowa State Fair activities (food competition, animal competition, dancing, songs, midway thrill rides, milling about) and pairing off romantically. Andrews (miscalled?) meets Crain on the roller-coaster, after which they go to the snack shop to "exchange ideas about life over a Coke". She falls into his arms when frightened by the rollercoaster ride; he courts her persistently, finally asking her to marry him to go to Chicago with him to be a reporter. Haymes falls hard for the brassy Blain, but when it turns out that she is already married, he – rather abruptly – returns to his old girlfriend: they close the film riding in the car reprising 'It's a Grand Night for Singing'. Hammerstein's lyrics are colorful and evocative; a couple of good songs. Intro song 'Our state fair is the best state fair' traded among characters as they drive, cook *** reprise on several occasions; 'It Might as Well Be Spring' (AA) – pretty, descriptive, rich lyrics a la Hammerstein expressing Margie's romantic yearning for romance – reprise countless times***1/2; Vivian Blain 'That's for Me' typical 40s croon; 'It's a Grand Night for Singing' (really ...for falling in love) sung at the fair dance with chorus joining in the waltzy tune ***; 'All I Owe Ioway' – corny stage song by ensemble** Folksy, down-home humor abounds with Donald Meek et al. mugging and tasting pickles and mincemeat in the food competition. The film is well-preserved in brilliant Technicolor. Aside from the homogenized beauty of Crain and the pair of good songs, there isn't much to recommend the film – just clean cut kids standing around singing and old fogies looking and talking cute. (2016)

State of Grace 1990 Phil Joanou 2.5+ Sean Penn as old friend of Irish gangster in Hell's Kitchen, who returns as a cop mole to end the gang's activities; Gary Oldman in typical role as psycho, over-the-top gang member who has a terrible temper and is willing to kill at the drop of a hat; Ed Harris as somewhat colorless head of the clan (he lives in a New Jersey suburban home) – he has a hard time making the sometimes incompetent group function; Robin Wright a bit over her head as Penn's ex-girlfriend, who is trying to stay as far away from her mafia-style family as she can; John Turturro in early role as police sergeant in charge of Penn's infiltration. Rather typical crime film that holds the viewer's attention. Takes place in Hell's Kitchen; Irish gang that seems to be selling drugs. Harris is concerned to stay on good terms with neighboring Italian gang, but he has his problems: his own group seems more inclined to bicker among themselves than strike the enemy; and Harris has to perform painful deeds to maintain the relationship – ice the best friend of his brother (Oldman) and then finally kill his own brother (he looks him in the eye and shoots him several times in the chest – presumably so his face won't be disfigured for the open casket at the wake). The plot focuses on Penn's plight – he is caught between his job as a police mole (undermine the organization) and his connections to the family, embodied in his good buddy friendship with Oldman and his (somewhat unconvincing love affair with Wright). After Harris himself shoots Oldman, Penn goes berserk and indulges vigilante justice, walking into a bar and killing about six of the Harris group, including their leader. Ending ends in utter destruction, worse than the 'Godfather' series, since Michael is still alive at the end. Film has resemblances with Scorsese's 'Mean Streets' (the intense friendships with mob-related buddies in the neighborhood, Catholic Church in the background) and 'Godfather' (Harris having a 'sit down' with the leader of the Italian family and working

out strategy). Much violence and gunplay; bullet wounds are annoying – much blood splatters out at impact, and a lot of slow motion. Film at 2:10 is rather long, and how ‘State of Grace’ fits in is a brain teaser. (2008)

The Station Agent 2003 Tom McCarthy 3.0 Peter Dinklage as taciturn, but emotionally intense dwarf living in New Jersey who living a solitary lifestyle; Bobby Cannavale as loquacious, gregarious Cuban American who sets up his snack truck outside Dinklage's station home; Patricia Clarkson as sometimes annoying divorcee artist constantly angry and mourning the loss of her child (she turned her head while he was playing on the jungle gym in Princeton); Raven Goodwin ('Lovely and Amazing') as apparently parentless child that makes friends with Dinklage; Michelle Williams as pretty, sexy, forlorn (and pregnant) librarian who also strikes up a friendship with Dinklage. Slow-moving, uneventful but charming film dealing with personal isolation and the serendipitous finding of "family" and companionship when the characters meet in rural New Jersey. Dinklage, who apparently has learned to deal with his condition by avoiding human contact, moves to rural New Jersey when his boss – owner of a model railroad shop – unexpectedly dies and leaves him a semi-abandoned railroad station in the sticks. He says almost nothing when approached by others, but enough humanity remains so that he does not reject their overtures out of hand: even though he tells Cannavale that he wants to be left alone, he doesn't object when he inevitably returns; in the beginning of the film he is almost rundown twice by Clarkson's bad driving, but he is there to support her and inquire about her when she retreats into her inner world because of troubles with her ex-husband; although he doesn't want to get romantically involved with the horny Williams, he feels sorry for her, tries to defend her against her loutish boyfriend (and lets her sleep with him chastely on the couch when she needs a place to go). The film is peppered with charming vignettes: Cannavale sitting in front of his snack truck, calling out to Dinklage and trying to make a connection; Dinklage and two friends "walking the right of way" (walking between the rails for no particular reason) when they decide to join in his train hobby; Dinklage and Cannavale chasing a freight train whooping and hollering in Cannavale's snack truck. The viewer often wonders what the point of the film is, but it is simple and obvious: at the end, after bailing Clarkson out of her raging and ranting crisis with her husband (he has decided to have another child!), the three friends sit contentedly together watching television – credits roll. Nice to see a quite, unassuming film with none of the usual Hollywood hoopla. (2011)

Steamboat Bill Jr. 1928 Charles Reisner 3.5 Buster Keaton, Marion Byron. Vintage Keaton comedy that starts a little slow, but has wonderful final stormy, high wind sequence that makes the movie. Keaton is college kid returning home; he must prove himself to his dad a steamboat captain, who doesn't approve of his college clothes and ways. BK pursues the girl, Marion Byron, who is cute, pretty, and klutzy and as helpless as the girl in ‘The General.’ Set in Mississippi, but it looks as if it might have been filmed on the Sacramento River Delta. Keaton is his earnest and humorless self with little expression on his face. He scrambles all over to please his father, but bungles every attempt until he rescues him at the end. He has his usual problems with machines (here the river steamboat, which he cannot master when his dad tries to teach him), but he triumphs in the end when he clammers athletically/acrobatically to the top like a monkey in a big tree. BK delivering constant pratfalls throughout. A car accidentally snaps his suitcase while carrying it through the street; he has great pratfall. Good scene of his imperious dad trying several big hats on his head, and most of them looking ridiculous! Nice sequence in prison, where his dad is being held; BK tries to smuggle escape tools in a big loaf of bread (some comedy on the son being a baker), and then tools fall on the floor. Best sequence by far is the final 15 minutes, in which he is persecuted by very bad weather – rain but particularly wind: wind blows roof off hospital ward where BK is sitting in bed; an entire building collapses behind him; blown in hospital bed through the streets; façade of building falls on him, but he happens to be standing in the door opening; rescues the clinging girl on the house immersed in the water. Ends with usual happy ending with dad's boat back in business and BK has the girl, although he is in the water. (2008)

Stella Dallas 1937 King Vidor (Samuel Goldwyn) 3.5 Barbara Stanwyck cute with pretty toothy smile, outwardly gentle and sweet working class girl in small factory town; she has a flat American accent and improper grammar – always talking fast, she is obviously anxious to move up in life; she is spoiled and loves to have a good time; he clothes are of questionable taste—huge ribbons in her hair,

jangles on her wrists, fur-lined bathrobes, and she gets more slovenly as time passes; and she reads ‘True Confessions’ magazine in bed. John Boles as cultivated businessman – always fit, handsome, and perfectly decked out; he is lonely and sitting duck for Stella, and then becomes a resented and long-suffering voice of reason with the willful Stella. Marjorie Main (Ma Kettle) as put upon mother. Anne Shirley plays Stella’s pretty and enthusiastic daughter Laurel who is often over the top – Stella adores her. Alan Hale plays good ol’ fun-loving Uncle Ed, who loves to play practical jokes and would like to hook up with Stella; he plays an excellent drunk. Boles goes off to New York for work, and the two live separately for most of their marriage. Stella is lonely, but she doesn’t drink and doesn’t fool around – “I don’t think there is a man around that could get me going now.” She is too attached to her daughter for whom she sews a varied wardrobe! Things begin to get tough for sweet-hearted Stella, when Dallas strikes up a relationship with a wealthy widow in New York, and Laurel’s head is turned by her wealth and elegance. Stella decides that she will compete with Stephen’s girlfriend and give Laurel the best of everything – she plays tennis, goes to polo games, and rides bicycles with the best set. Laurel falls in love with her tennis instructor (played by a very young Tim Holt), and he gives her his fraternity pin. More heartbreak for Stella when she parades at the country club in cheap clothing, and she is cut and criticized behind her back by the cruel rich; Laurel tries to resist, but she can’t help being humiliated by her mother. Stella has a classic self-sacrificing interview with Mrs. Morrison in which she agrees to allow her beloved Laurel live with Stephen and his future wife. Laurel refuses loyally; but Stella plots to turn her away by pretending that she is marrying alcoholic Ed, giving Laurel the impression that she sent her to Morrisons because she wanted to get rid of her. At Laurel’s wedding Stella stands outside the window in the rain; she is happy when she sees Laurel kiss the groom; tears roll down her cheeks, and she walks away beaming with happiness. Music is extremely sentimental, heart-tugging, sometimes cloying with intense weeping strings. Woman’s movie characteristics in everyone’s finest and most up to date clothes and the Morrisons’ perfectly appointed house. An inspired women’s weeper, put together with taste, honesty, grace, sincerity. (2007)

Stella Maris 1917 Marshall Nielan; Frances Marion (wr) 3.0 Mary Pickford as both Stella Maris and the orphan Unity, Conway Tearle as the loving, sensitive John Risca, Marshall Manon as the violent, alcoholic, cigarette-smoking wife. Very sentimental vehicle in which Mary Pickford plays both leads – lame Stella who has been protected by her upper class family from all the ills and seamy side of life, plays with her dogs and imagine that visitor John lives in an enchanted castle, and Unity, a spunky, rambunctious, uneducated orphan, who is first taken in by John Risca’s wife who beats her brutally, and then taken care of by John when the wife goes to prison. Risca is the light of Stella’s life while she is still confined to her bed (sealed off in her room); after Stella’s successful operation, she realizes that she loves him, bit of course the evil wife is in the way, and on top of that Unity also has fallen in love with him. After wife is released from prison, Unity realizes that she stands in the way of John’s happiness, so she murders her with a pistol and commits suicide, leaving behind a note to John hoping that he and Stella will be happy! Final scene has the couple idyllically happy with Teddy the dog in a bucolic setting. Pickford is quite remarkable in the double role, especially Unity, who is stooped, craven and submissive (she is used to taking orders and being beaten), hair smoothed over with Vaseline, speaking with a Cockney accent. The two have a couple of scenes together; most of their interaction is done through cutting, but there are several shots with the two appearing simultaneously. Print is in three or four different tints; a nice symphonic score played by a East European orchestra; irises used to highlight; judicious use of close-ups to enhance emotion; acting is pretty natural (Manon being perhaps the exception). The moral seems to be the need to educate girls properly: Stella’s life almost went to ruin because of her ignorance of the world, and Unity’s education started way too late. Wonderful intercut scene in which Unity looks with sadness at her plain face in the mirror while John and Stella are kissing and exchanging protestations of love in the garden. (2009)

The Stepford Wives 1975 Bryan Forbes 3.0 Pretty good horror movie. Slow moving in beginning as movie laboriously sets up premise. Katherine Ross not bad; Paula Prentiss good as she goes from peppery and salty to domestic robot. Good scenes toward end – PP shorts out when KR stabs her producing no blood! Scene is haunted mansion a little campy; but discovery of robot plot intriguing.

Overall a critique of suburban society that somehow turns women into zombies/robots. The women want “to make their own lives” (KR and her photography, Tina Louise and her tennis), and not be just mothers and homemakers; men though willing to go to most any length to keep them in their place. (2004)

Steve Jobs 2015 Danny Boyle 3.0 Instead of the expected biopic, a three-act impression of Steve Jobs, the Apple entrepreneur. Michael Fassbender convincing as a non-literal Jobs – driven, arrogant, basically indifferent to the feelings and well-being of his family and his collaborators; Kate Winslet almost unrecognizable (thin?) as his non-romantic right-hand woman, who is not afraid to argue with him; Jeff Daniels a challenging father figure (he fires him following the Macintosh fiasco) as Jeff Scully, the sometime CEO of Apple; Michael Stuhlbarg as Andy Hertzfeld, Jobs’ technical specialist; Seth Rogan as Steve Wozniak, wearing himself to the bone trying to get the obsessed Jobs to recognize publicly the creators of the Apple II computer, whose strong sales kept the company from going under in the 1980s. Entertaining, dramatic portrait of Jobs, the entrepreneur and the person. The film vividly portrays the hero worship directed toward Jobs at his periodic unveiling ceremonies: wildly cheering fans evoking comparisons with elite sporting events. The first act occurs in 1984, when Apple releases Jobs’ brainchild, the Macintosh (turns out to be next to useless in the pre-Internet era despite the brilliant design); the second in 1988, when as the recently fired Jobs releases his (equally dazzling and unsuccessful) NEXT machine for the college market; the third in 1998, when Jobs, recently restored as CEO of the faltering company, releases his turnaround machine, the Imac. The film thus cuts off at the beginning of Jobs’ brilliantly successful run (he mentions the Ipod in passing toward the end of the film), still valid in 2016. The film is virtually a one-man act with Fassbender portraying the driven, stubborn, unrepentant Jobs, insisting that his way is the only way, shouting at subordinates who don’t get it the way he wants, ignoring the human factor of the people around him, undaunted by his failures, and finally finding success – the idol he worships – in 1998 along with a tempering of his personality. His character is vividly portrayed by the device of having a gadfly Winslet at his side from the beginning to the end. Jobs shows his insensitivity repeatedly by refusing to recognize his daughter Lisa as his own (it is true that he names a failed business computer after her); he does soften somewhat toward her in the final act. Although he repeats that he loves Wozniak and protects him, he deeply hurts his co-founder’s feelings by refusing twice to recognize the creators of the Apple II at his release ceremonies. An entertaining and well-made film portraying the different sides of one of the most iconic entrepreneurs of American history. (2016)

Story of O 1975 Just Jaeckin (France) 2.5 Softcore erotic film based on infamous Réage novel (published in 1954). Very little in film to hold one’s interest aside from attractive female nude bodies and the sight of women being abused (whipped, having sex at the whim of her master, etc.). Plays on women willing, indeed enthusiastic, about sexual submission and being abused a la Marquis de Sade in mysterious chateaux outside Paris in Roissy. Intrigue is what do they get out of it – it would seem they do it for love (submit oneself to your lover) rather than for sexual pleasure; the men get off on dominating and abusing. Plot and character are very thin and do not hold your interest. A lot of dreamy, gauzy photography of people walking, simulating sex and simulating being whipped, branded, etc., all to accompaniment of annoying synthesized music. Has mainly historical interest on the trend of softcore porn in the 1970s. Photography of female nudity fetching and tasteful (not a hair of male nudity, excited or otherwise); Corinne Clery stars. (2005)

La Strada 1954 Federico Fellini (Italy) 4.0 Anthony Quinn, English speaking, as the angry and abusive Zampano; Giulietta Masina as the almost dumb-mime Gelsomina; Richard Basehart as the comical “fool”. Famous early film by Fellini, badly dubbed in Italian. It is set in rural and small-town postwar Italy, when the country was still poor, the people dressed in rags or very simply, and many

of the towns still under construction – e.g., partly finished streets and sidewalks, piles of rubble lying around. The influence of Italian Neo-Realism (this is 1954) is obvious. Gelsomina is sold (!) by her parents to an itinerant performer – Zampano is ungifted; his trick almost anyone could do, but the people are still impressed. He abuses, abandons, drags along Gelsomina; but apparently he has no sexual interest in her. Gelsomina behaves as a mime with big frowns, hyper furrowed brow, exaggerated smile, a face heavily made up to resemble a mime or a clown, etc.; she doesn't say much; she recalls a little Charlie Chaplin in her semi-waddling walk, her little routines. Basehart is the Fool, a gifted tightrope walker, who takes an interest in Gelsomina, but apparently not sexual; he giggles and laughs a lot, and at first gives the impression that he is not serious, but he becomes Gelsomina's spiritual adviser; Zampano is gruff – he hardly talks but just grunts – and elemental; Gelsomina tells him that he never "thinks"; he just satisfies his elemental needs. Film focuses on the suffering, and ultimately the dignity, of all the characters (and also of the bystanders, who always seem to have pity on them). Zampano accidentally kills the Fool in a fit of anger and revenge; Gelsomina loses her mind as a result, and after Zampano abandons her in some snowy mountain area, she wanders aimlessly to die alone. The revelation is Zampano, who acquires a conscience with the death of the Fool and the insanity of Gelsomina: he seems to understand that he has caused huge suffering, and that he could have loved this woman, but he was too blinded by sin and rage. In a famous scene he dies alone on the beach after a drunken orgy: he looks imploringly in the sky and then grovels through the sand as the camera observes. Scorsese says that Fellini is reflecting the 'Franciscan' element in Italian Neo-Realism – a love and respect for all living creatures, in this case the good, the innocent, and the bad: although perhaps tempted by the jidea of Gelsomina accompanying him, the Fool ends by counseling her to stay with Zampano – after all, if she doesn't who will? Style is still basically Neo-Realist, but Fellini fantastical comes through in many scenes: the appearance and behavior of Gelsomina; the scene of Gelsomina's obsessive curiosity about the handicapped boy with the big head in bed; the scene of the Fool with angel's wings attached to his back tight-rope pedaling high above the street. A film that will linger in your memory for a long time. (2009)

The Strange Affair of Uncle Harry 1945 Robert Siodmark (Universal) 2.5 Studio production that begins as family drama (à la 'The Magnificent Ambersons') but ends as twisted thriller. George Saunders in uncharacteristically milquetoast role as Harry, scion of the New England patrician Quincy family that has fallen on hard times; Ella Raines a bit of a fish out of water as young fresh face, Deborah, relocating in Quincy from New York; Geraldine Fitzgerald does the heavyweight acting as Saunders possessive, hypochondriac sister, Lettie; Moyna MacGill as older sister, Hester, who turns out more simpatico than Lettie. The narrative centers on Saunders' mismatched relationship with the callow Raines. She seems like a teenager from a wartime Hollywood musical; he seems old enough to be her father. They fall in love, and Lettie, at first seen as sympathetic sister, is revealed as jealous hellion, pulling every trick to break up the relationship that threatens to take her beloved, submissive brother from her: she has heart-to-heart conversations with Raines, and stretches her search for a new house for herself and her sister to unreasonable lengths. When she succeeds in breaking them up, Saunders (very uncharacteristically) decides to poison her with a tincture that Fitzgerald had bought to put their dog down. In a mix-up the poisoned hot chocolate is given to Hester, who falls dead on the spot. In an instant, Saunders sees that he can blame Hester's death on Lettie, since she had bought the poison from the druggist and had taken the beverage up to Hester. She is duly condemned to death by the jury. When Saunders has a crisis of conscience and goes to Lettie with his confession, she rejects his offer, taking pleasure that Harry will live his days out immersed in guilt. Well, Harry seems to be getting away with murder, which of course is not okay with the Code; so an egregiously improbable conclusion comes to the rescue. Raines shows up unexpected in Harry's observatory (he is constantly observing the planet Saturn), she and Harry embrace joyfully, Hester – obviously not dead – enters to congratulate them, and the lovers take off for a lifetime of happiness. It turns out everything from the beginning of the poison plot is a fantasy, presumably by Saunders, who never carried out his plan! The ending might have worked if cut off when Harry leaves Lettie's cell, but the censors would never have allowed it. Story has possibilities – the setting and some of the characters are interesting – but the ending spoils the film. (2017)

The Strange Love of Martha Ivers 1946 Lewis Milestone 3.0 Barbara Stanwyck tortured, guilt-ridden industrialist entrepreneur in Iverstown, a town that she virtually owns (as she has expanded factory employment from 3000 to 13,000 in just a few years); Kirk Douglas in his maiden Hollywood role as weak, semi-alcoholic husband of Stanwyck that is dominated by his wife and shares her guilt about the murder of Stanwyck's aunt; Van Heflin has the film's principal role as ambiguous childhood friend of Stanwyck and Douglas who stirs things up big time when he arrives in town; Claire Trevor blond and innocent as floozy-type character that Heflin falls in love with and who offers him hope for salvation from the Iverstown mess. Very atmospheric, semi-film noir potboiler tragedy with a large amount of confusing psychological melodrama. After an introduction that takes place in 1928 recounting Stanwyck's hatred of her aunt and her murder of her on the elegant curved steps of her house, the main action of the film begins with Heflin's arrival in Iverstown in 1946. His presence sets off a complicated series of psychological interactions dealing with Stanwyck's guilt about the murder (and her willful condemnation and execution of an innocent man for it), her ambiguity about her relationship with Heflin, whom she still seems to be romantically attached to, her dystopic marriage with Douglas, her and Douglas' attempts to frighten Heflin into leaving town, and Heflin's on-again, off-again relationship with Trevor; the action peaks in the Stanwyck mansion with Stanwyck helping Douglas to kill her by placing her own finger on the trigger of his gun and then Douglas committing suicide before Heflin can rush in to stop him. Having cleansed the town of its guilty owners, Heflin then leaves town for future happiness with the innocent Trevor in the passenger seat. The requirements of the Hayes Code are thus met by having the evildoers punished in the end. Direction and editing are competent although not outstanding. A continuous soundtrack featuring a solo violin against the backdrop of the orchestra gets a bit tiring. Although it is not a classic film noir, the film has many noir characteristics: dark lighting (virtually the whole film is filmed on soundstages and the backlot), flawed characters that are fated to destruction, a semi femme fatale who dominates a weak male character (although the viewer sometimes feels sympathy for guilt-wracked Stanwyck). The initial crime might be forgiven since it was done in the heat of passion, but the couple compounded their sin hopelessly by blaming the crime on an innocent person who was hanged. Some risqué dialogue: e.g., Douglas referring to their relationship as teenagers: "I was a pretty big boy for my age. Remember?" Stanwyck "Yes, I remember." Screenwriter Rossen (formerly member of Communist Party) tries to indict capitalist greed a bit, but it is buried by plot and the character of Martha. The film might have been improved by clarifying the script: shorten the film by 15-20 minutes, clear up motivations, and eliminate unnecessary scenes. Nevertheless, enjoyable noir-style film that commands the viewer's attention. (2008)

The Stranger 1946 Orson Welles (S.P Eagle); soundtrack Bronislau Kaper 4.0 Despite the film's modest reputation, this is an effective and stylish, if sometimes improbable thriller. A still svelte Orson Welles as curly-haired Nazi war criminal Franz Kindler, history professor in New England college, the "stranger in town"; Edward G. Robinson as Wilson, commissioned by the War Crimes court to find Kindler; Konstantin Shayne as naïve, reformed Nazi Konrad Meinike; Loretta Young as naive, fresh-faced, pretty Mary Longstreet, who marries Kindler at the beginning of the film; Philip Merivale as Mary's avuncular judge father; Richard Long as Mary's white bread brother; Billy House as gabby, good-humored owner of local general store. The film was made in 1946, when Nazi war criminals were still a hot topic; the impeccable restored version – crisp and clear – makes the film a joy to watch. Robinson journeys to a small town in Connecticut to find Kindler. The latter is firmly embedded in the town with a job teaching history at the local college and – right after Robinson's arrival – marriage to the daughter of a judge (guy works fast). Kindler murders Meinike and buries his body in the woods when he realizes that the latter's Christian conversion endangers his disguise. The rest of the film charts the gradual unveiling of Kindler's identity and to the marital drama between him and his devoted, extremely naïve wife. A recurrent McGuffin throughout the film is Kindler's fascination with mechanical clocks and his tending of the large mechanical clock in the church belfry. The local small town atmosphere is quite convincing, particularly the town square and the quaint general store presided over by the humorously fussy House. Although Young's performance is convincingly dramatic, her character is impossibly naïve in her relationship with Kindler: she doesn't seem to know anything about the man she marries and she

remains passionately loyal to him despite all the most shocking revelations by Robinson and even her father. She tells him “I am a part of you”, but then helps Robinson kill him in the final scene (one supposes her conscience has got the better of her). Several scenes feature Welles trademark chiaroscuro cinematography: the striking opening scene when Meinike is being tracked in a South American port; several scenes toward the end of the film when Welles and Young are together; all the scenes in the bell tower, particularly the final one when Welles confronts Robinson and his wife and is baroquely run through with the sword of a mechanical angel before falling to his death. With its dramatic close-ups and exciting juxtapositions, Welles’ mise-en-scene and editing is often arresting. The last 25 minutes of the film is an effective extended nail-biter. Will Mary admit to herself and Robinson that her husband is guilty of the murder? Mary hosts a Hitchcockian dinner party with dramatic cross-currents caused by the presence of Welles, Robinson, the uncertain Mary and some amusingly vapid guests. Welles can’t seem to decide whether he loves his wife or whether he should murder her. The attempt of Mary’s housekeeper to protect her from her husband’s plot to murder her by sabotaging the long ladder that leads to the belfry. And then the final extravagant confrontation in the tower followed by Welles’ unfortunate encounter with the angel’s sword. The naiveté of the script is often befuddling (Mary’s father leaves her with Kindler knowing that the latter is a murderous Nazi?), but the cinematic spectacle of the irrepressible Welles more than compensates. (June 2017)

Stranger on the Third Floor 1940 Boris Ingster (RKO) 3.0 John McGuire, dark-haired and chiseled often overacting as ambitious newspaper reporter; Margaret Tallichet attractive, solid and sensible blond as McGuire’s fiancée (she soon marries William Wyler and retires from acting); Peter Lorre so thin that his usual bulging eyes are even more prominent has minimal screen time as homicidal psychopath; Charles Halton (the theater director in ‘To Be or not to Be’) as creepy elderly tenant living in the room next to McGuire’s; Ethel Griffies as nasty landlady poking her nose into everyone’s business; Elisha Cook, Jr. makes a dramatic impression in the beginning courtroom scene as the man falsely condemned for murder. Courtroom-whodunit-perhaps horror movie that has early components of film noir. Film is interesting, although the drama sometimes falls flat. It is essentially about McGuire’s bad conscience for having given erroneous testimony leading to Cook’s death sentence. The first half of the movie is dominated by McGuire’s voiceover as he reflects on the gaps in the prosecution’s case, the possibility that Cook might be innocent, and even the statements McGuire has made that might lead the police to think he had committed murder (he harbors violent feelings against his obnoxious next-door neighbor). The most celebrated passage in the film depicts McGuire’s nightmare, in which he is condemned for a murder he did not commit and which ends on the verge of execution when the victim (Halton) appears and laughs at him; the multi-scene passage is filmed in high German expressionist style with intimidating special effects. The film then rushes to its conclusion with a second murder, this time of Halton, the suspicion that McGuire might have committed it, and eventually identifying the creepy street person Lorre as the maniac that killed both victims. The story ends with the convenient elimination of Lorre in a street accident after he has chased Tallichet around the set for a while. The last shot has McGuire and Tallichet climbing into a taxi hosted by the beaming Cook, who has just been released from prison (but does he realize that his release is incidental to McGuire’s clearing his own name?). Although not a true film noir, the film has elements of the style: extensive use of light and shadow, in the nightmare sequence elements of expressionism (much more so than in film noir), the suffering male at the center (although he is not weak and manipulated), the psychological emphasis; but the element of doom and the destructive femme fatale are absent. Film is an interesting break with the plot-dominated whodunits of the 1930s. (2016)

Strangers on a Train 1951 Alfred Hitchcock 4.0 Farley Granger as Guy, a rather weak-willed tennis star with big ambitions for marrying into a prominent family, Robert Walker as insinuating, homosexual and pathological tempter of Guy, Ruth Roman as standard Hollywood, cold fish, passive heroine, Patricia Hitchcock as crime loving sister of Ruth, Leo G. Carroll in insultingly small role as Roman’s senator father, Marion Lorne as perhaps senile, amusingly doting mother of Bruno (Lorne’s film debut), Laura Elliott as slutty Miriam, estranged wife of Guy, Norma Varden as charming lady at Senator’s party that almost allows herself to be strangled. Excellent Hitchcock thriller that focuses on the

idea of strangers exchanging murders in order to escape detection. Walker in classic role as persistent, homosexual, parent-hating psychopath, who tries to persuade Granger to exchange murders, and then proceeds on his own when latter demurs; Bruno honestly likes Guy and is very offended when Guy objects to his actions. Granger is upstanding hero, pretty dorky; he must bear some guilt and responsibility since by bad-mouthing his wife in initial train conversation, he tacitly encourages Bruno to act. Visual choices are very striking. Hitchcock appears in one of his best cameos as he carries bass fiddle on a train in Mayfield. Marvelous beginning when Hitchcock photographs two pairs of legs with different kinds of shoes walking to catch a train in New York, then a shot from the front of the train of progress through some switches, and then the two men appear together in the observation car. Photography of Bruno's murder of Miriam on the amusement park island is intriguing – all is silent (as it should be since he is strangling her) and much of the act is photographed as a reflection in her glasses that have fallen to the ground. Thick glasses become a McGuffin later in film, when (sicko) Bruno begins to demonstrate the art of strangling to an amusing old lady at dinner party, when he becomes fixated on the glasses worn by Patricia and he is reminded of the murder of Miriam; he loses control and almost kills her. A second McGuffin later in the film is provided by Guy's lighter. Arresting scene of Guy practicing tennis; all the heads of spectators in the stands follow the ball back and forth, except for one – of course Bruno's who stares straight ahead at Guy! Hitchcock realizes that his audience is fascinated with murder – again he includes this old lady who is flattered when Bruno proposes to demonstrate strangling on her neck; and in final merry-go-round crisis little boy – enjoying himself on the accelerated merry-go-round – tries to help Granger subdue Walker. Riveting final sequence using parallel editing between 1) Guy's tough match at Forest Hills (drama in public places – vide the second 'Man Who Knew Too Much') and his rush to head Bruno off in Mayfield, and 2) Bruno arriving at amusement park to plant the lighter (to incriminate Guy), losing the lighter in the storm drain, retrieving it with difficulty, and then the two converging next to the merry-go-round. The audience's loyalties are ambiguous: Guy and Ruth Roman are the good guys, but on the other hand, Bruno is much more interesting and colorful (we all cheer when he pops the balloon of a boy who has 'shot' Bruno with his pistol), Guy is very dull and self-seeking, Roman is cool and unsexy, and it seems awfully convenient that Guy gets rid of Miriam without cost or responsibility. Film photographed in film noir style with a lot of contrasts in the night scenes, e.g., Guy's visit to Bruno's 'father' (an improbable scene in the story), and the murder on the park island. The amusement park sequences indicate that even places of fun can be the scene of crimes and perversity – we are never safe; indeed, the merry-go-round probably killed a few people. (2011)

Stray Dog 1949 Akira Kurosawa (Japan) 3.0 Toshiro Mifune as young, handsome, extremely anxious, Western-looking Tokyo detective anguished by the loss of his pistol – pickpocketed in the metro; Takashi Shimura as calm, avuncular older colleague who helps Mifune track down the criminal who has his gun; Keiko Awaji as very cute showgirl (the actress is 17) that turns out to be the girlfriend of the criminal, Yusa (Isao Kimura). Interesting, sometimes draggy linear detective s tory à la Sam Spade that follows leads from one subject to another until you finally reach your objective. The viewer is led to a hotel, a meeting in the park, a cabaret full of exhausted showgirls, the home of Azusa's sister, where we get a look at Azusa himself hammering away without Mifune realizing he is his target, and most memorably a Japanese baseball game (1949) with small Japanese guys playing gracefully, umpires saying "play ball", and 50,000 fans in the large stadium. The script leads us through different personalities of lower Japanese society, impoverished strikingly just a few years after the end of the war; at one point the director makes a false step having Mifune trudge perhaps 10 minutes through various manifestations of Tokyo slums. Mifune seems to a western observer to be overacting – repeatedly pulling his hair and making frustrated, anguished sounds at the shame and stain on his honor from losing his pistol; Shimura calmly reassures him that it could happen to anybody, and the crimes committed by Yusa are his doing and not the responsibility of the gun owner. When quiet, Mifune and Shimura discuss the impact of the war on Japanese society – it turned most of the veterans into stray dogs (they all seem to have had their backpacks stolen on the train home after demobilization), not knowing where to find their place, and some of them like Yusa are morphed into mad dogs, against whom the police must protect good citizens. The final confrontation with Yusa is pitiful and moving: the latter's movements demonstrate his desperation, running and stumbling from the police, firing three bullets at the unarmed Mifune and hitting

him only in the arm; both Mifune and Shimura are wounded, but recover. Even the criminals we pity. (2014)

Strictly Ballroom 1992 Baz Luhrmann (Australia) 3.0 Paul Mercurio as intense, sensual and skilled dancer who has an independent streak, Tara Morice as plain Jane wannabe beginner who joins with Mercurio to seek the Pan-Pacific championship, venerable Bill Hunter as the corrupt dance federation president who has his own reasons for insisting that all dancers follow his strict rules. Over the top, extremely corny, Rocky-style work-for-success dance movie that is very entertaining, however improbable. Set in the world of Australian ballroom dance competition. Drama involves the generally undeveloped love story between Mercurio and Morice; and Mercurio's determination to be his own man and dance his own very flashy steps instead of following the traditional prescribed routines set down by the Federation. Theme/moral of the film is embodied in the Spanish proverb repeated by Morice – to live with fear is scarcely to live at all (in Spanish). A subplot also shows how the parents' obsession with the success of their son Mercurio derives from their own disappointments as a young dance couple that almost made it to the championships in the 1960s. Film is psychologically and dramatically improbable throughout, focusing on the 'Rocky' crowd-pleasing paradigm: all the female dancers are completely glitzy, hysterical and superficial with the exception of Morice, who is the prototypical ugly duckling turned by opportunity into a beautiful young woman; Morice's family turns out to be expert flamenco dancers themselves and after initial hostility they teach the couple flamenco steps for the competition; the finale in the ballroom is enormously melodramatic with no outcome – the story is in chaos but there is no resolution as everybody just ends up dancing together. The style is aggressively glitzy and pumped up – lots of grotesque, fish-eyed shots of oddball adults, enormous quantities of sequins and skimpy, glitzy costumes, intense candy carnival colors, fun-filled stylized flashbacks (e.g., the one describing the former careers of Mercurio's parents). The dancing is generally entertaining. Not a movie to be taken seriously; just enjoy it! (2006)

Sugar 2008 Ana Boden; Ryan Fleck 3.0 Algenis Perez Soto simple and honest as aspiring baseball player from Dominican Republican who moves into the USA minor leagues; Ann Whitney and Richard Bull entertaining as folksy, avuncular local baseball fans in Iowa who room and board Sugar; Ellary Porterfield as fair-haired and fair-skinned daughter of the Iowa couple – she has a brief flirtation with Sugar. Low-key, honest, down-to-earth film about Dominican player coming to the USA to play in the minor leagues for the Kansas City operation. The genre of course pumps up expectations for either a hard landing in the USA and misery at the hands of federal officials or Sugar rising to the challenge and toughing his way toward ultimate triumphant success, 'Rocky'-style. The film does neither, and it remains resolutely realistic, quiet, and fair-minded. Sugar's tight family and his pretty girlfriend back home are excited about his prospects and the money he sends home. Sugar makes a good first impression with especially his curve ball (one must admit that in the on-the-field scenes the actor never looks much like a baseball player) and he moves up to a minor league team. But when loneliness and discouragement set in (he misses his girlfriend and he makes little progress speaking English), he goes into a major slump and is not able to snap back; and rather than be cut by the organization, he quits and takes off for New York, where he settles in a Caribbean neighborhood in the Bronx and starts to make an American life for himself without baseball. It becomes clear that the film is about how the average immigrant acculturates rather than melodramatic hype about triumph or repression. Soto delivers a simple and honest performance; he has a sweet shy smile and is good at portraying sadness and isolation; sometimes the unremitting focus of the camera on his marginally expressive face tires the viewer. The film gives a lot of information and insight into the experience of playing in a minor league franchise. There is not a hint of racism against Caribbean players throughout the film. Nice low-key movie that could use a little more charisma and excitement. (2009)

Sullivan's Travels 1941 Preston Sturges: Paramount 3.5 Joel McCrea breezy and attractive as successful Hollywood director of comedies ('Ants in Your Pants of 1939') who wants to make a serious social commentary, 'O Brother Where Art Thou?' (later of course the source of the Coen Brothers film); Veronica Lake as the sexy, husky-voiced "The Girl" that he meets in the "travels" that Sullivan

undertakes to find out what the Depression really means; the unforgettable members of Sturges' stock company – Jimmy Conlin, Franklin Pangborn, Eric Blore, Robert Greig, William Demarest – clowning and grimacing. Rather confusing mixed genre of a film mixing slapstick comedy (the big bus careening through the countryside knocking around the people inside), rapid-fire screwball dialogue ("a little sex" but with a focus on the ills of America), and extensive recording of the sufferings of America's poor, as they hitch rides on freight trains, trudge along the streets in rags, die in railroad accidents, and suffer from discrimination by courts and prison guards (condemned to six years in prison for slugging a railroad security officer); the film also becomes a romantic comedy with the reunification of McCrea and Lake in the final sequences and the bigamy of McCrea's wife. The distinct parts of the film are priceless: amusing dialogue; funny slapstick sequences, such as the pool dunking sequence involving McCrea, Lake, and members of the company; sensitive and moving depiction of the plight of the down and out, both black and white; gorgeous black and white cinematography that is high-toned in the Hollywood scenes and expressively shadowed in the homeless shelters and the railroad yards. But the overall theme of the film creaks: after 30-40 minutes of observing social oppression, McCrea watches a Disney cartoon with prisoners in a black church (?!), and observing their laughter, he decides that he no longer wants to make a serious film ('The Grapes of Wrath' or 'I am a Fugitive from a Chain Gang') but a comedy – "All some people have is laughter. It's not much but it is something in this cockeyed caravan", and the film ends with a montage of prisoners' laughing faces. He is also semi-miraculously sprung from prison with no further references to his offence (slugging a guard) or to judicial proceedings; McCrea remarks that "they" don't put movie directors in prison for that kind of thing. The film reads in part as Paramount's defense of making escapist comedies and musicals – that's what the people, even the poor and miserable, want, not heavy issue films. And yet the film expends a lot of energy showing the viewer injustice, unhappiness, and suffering in America. The film teems with genius, but is rather head-scratching in its ambiguous point of view. (2016)

Sully 2016 Clint Eastwood 3.0 Strong Hollywood-style drama about Chesley Sullenberger's ditching of the US Air A-320 in the Hudson River in 2009. Tom Hanks his usual competent, reassuring, sometimes eloquent self as the modest Sully; Aaron Eckhart sporting a thick mustache as Sully's loyal, reserved co-pilot; Laura Linney not too much to do as Sully's loyal wife; Anna Gunn as one of the NTSB investigators; Katie Couric as herself. The film posits the screenplay issue at the NTSB hearing in the beginning of the film – was Sully's landing of the plane in the Hudson an act of heroism that saved 155 lives? Or did he commit an error by deciding not to return to a LaGuardia runway, thereby risking the life of his passengers and destroying a valuable airline asset? The tension is well established by the business-like, skeptical, challenging attitude of the review board, and several scenes in which New York everymen proclaim their admiration for Sully. The film then flashes back to the real events of that day: Sully's real-time decision not to turn back toward LaGuardia since he reckoned he had insufficient altitude with both engines blown by the bird strike; the supremely skilled landing in the Hudson; and the calm demeanor of the passengers, and the heroic attentions of New York ferries, policemen, and firefighters to pluck the passengers out of the river before they froze to death in the icy waters. The viewer comes from the film with an admiration not only for Sully, but for the spirit of New York; the passengers were lucky to have crashed in that city. The film then grabs the viewer's attention with a riveting hearing room scene, in which Hanks delivers an impassioned and precise speech contradicting the simulator evidence adduced by the board and convincing them that the decision to steer for the Hudson was the correct one given the emergency situation that the pilot was confronted with. The screenplay thus leads us through a classic Hollywood narrative, in which the conflict is suspensefully resolved to produce a happy ending. Eastwood's direction is as usual straightforward with no frills, repetitions, or longueurs. Laura Linney has to be satisfied with her role as the supportive wife, but pungent supporting roles go to Patch Darragh as a competent, haunted traffic controller and the actor who played the ferry boat captain. Nice to see a film depicting a real hero that is not military. (2017)

A Summer Place 1959 Delmer Daves 2.5 Sandra Dee glowing and sincere in her peaches and cream complexion as teenager deeply in love; Troy Donahue stiff and inexpressive as extremely decent teen hunk who returns her love; Dorothy McGuire dignified and wise as Donahue's mother who falls for

Richard Egan; Richard Egan strong and convincing as Dee's loving and rather indulgent father; Constance Ford enjoyably over the top as Dee's impossibly puritanical and tyrannical mother, who wants Dee to wear a girdle so she won't bounce, who has Dee examined by a doctor when she thinks she may have had sex with Donahue, and who despises every existing minority in the USA; Arthur Kennedy as Donahue's alcoholic slob of a father. Sometimes ridiculous and confused but often entertaining over-the-top soap opera from the late 50s. It is set on an island off the coast of Maine (the film seems to have been filmed on the California coast). This is a teen exploitation flick that takes the side of sincere and virtuous teens in love when pitted against unreasonable and impossibly benighted parents. Parents are divided into good -- McGuire and Egan -- and really bad -- Kennedy and Ford. The moral situation is clouded by the love affair between McGuire and Egan -- they both despise their spouses and meet in the boathouse to commit adultery; they then divorce and marry, ending up living in the Frank Lloyd Wright house on Carmel Bay. The kids talk and agonize endlessly about what "good" and "bad" girls should do, whether Donahue should be aggressive with Dee, and whether they should have sex. The rather confused script has Egan talking about the importance of expressing your love and showing passion, and in a famous scene he tells off his villain wife, who walks out of the room and slams the door; and then he and McGuire inexplicably abet the togetherness of the kids, who seem to decide to get pregnant so that they can marry and live happily ever after -- love conquers all. Movie is fundamentally irresponsible about teenage sex: pregnant and finally married, the kids are happily kissing at the end with the apparent intention of skipping college and refurbishing and reopening Donahue's family hostelry on Pine Island -- no sign of the serious difficulties facing teen newlyweds who are pregnant. The film had great business from teenagers who basked in the confirmation of their resentment against their impossibly stuffy parents; the Max Steiner theme song undoubtedly promoted the film's popularity. The film doesn't hold a candle to the great Douglas Sirk soaps of the same era. (2008)

Summer with Monika 1953 Ingmar Bergman (Sweden) 4.0 Harriet Andersson unforgettable as the free-wheeling, sexy Stockholm working girl looking for something better right now; Lars Ekborg as sweet, blond fellow working in the same shop who falls for Monika (who could resist?). Early Bergman film exploring the power of female sexuality, the charms of the Swedish summer, the beauties and difficulties of teenage rebellion. Early scenes detail the flat, deprived, boring lives of working-class kids in Stockholm – dull jobs, crowded streets, gruff bosses, unhappy lives with their parents (Monika has to sleep in her mother's living room with her younger brothers climbing all over her), no opening toward the future. The aggressive Monika picks up a relationship with the shy Ekborg: they make out in movie theaters together, and when things get tough, they take his father's boat and flee to the country in the Archipelago to the east of the city. The extended idyll in the countryside is the heart of the film. It is treated as a glorious escape from the difficult life of the city: beautiful scenes of water, the never-failing putt-putt motorboat cutting across the bay, rocky shore with pools of (apparently) warm sea water where Monika bathes naked, surf, islands in the distance, glorious skies in Bergman's textured black and white. The heart of the idyll is romance and sexuality: the kids' obvious infatuation with one another, playing together joyfully like children, kissing and caressing in Bergman's elegant, affectionate close-ups, the two discreet nude scenes of Monika – one lying on the hood of the boat with her breast and nipple showing, the other on the side of her breast and then a good look at her ample and adorable butt as she walks to the water to bathe (at the end of the film Ekborg expands on the scene as he entertains fondly the memory of his time with his ex-girlfriend). Monika, who finds herself pregnant, soon shows her true colors: she becomes angry about the lack of food and other comforts, and instead of collaborating with Ekborg about going back to the city, marrying, and returning to school to make a good life for them, she hatches a hair-brained scheme to steal roast beef from a home in the forest. The third act of the film occurs back in Stockholm, where the kids get married, set up a household with the baby, and Ekborg goes back to school. Monika ignores the baby, insisting that Ekborg get up at night to quiet her; when Ekborg leaves town for work, the aunt takes care of the child, while Monika is out on the town "enjoying herself while she is still young"; when the husband returns to the apartment a day early, he finds Monika in their bed with some guy; Bergman never shows us the couple in bed, but just Ekborg's shocked expression before he leaves unobtrusively. The film ends pessimistically (what do you expect from Bergman?): with his daughter in his arms and Monika nowhere to be found, Ekborg enters the yard of the company where he

used to work; a drunk stumbles across the camera's field; the credits roll. The film belies its reputation as a sexploitation film: the (few) nude scenes of Monika serve one of Bergman's themes – the charm and power of female sexuality; most of the film is reserved and serious focusing on the difficulty of the lives of poor young people in the city; life is difficult enough, why shouldn't they try to escape for a few months of pleasure and happiness? The film appears to represent Bergman's pessimistic take on women (beautiful, charming, but destructive) and marriage (doomed to conflict, misery, and failure). Impeccably filmed and restored: the black and white is so precise, textured, and expressive, one never yearns for more realistic color. (2012)

The Sun (Solntse) 2005 Aleksandr Sokurov (Russia) 3.0 Issey Ogata as the Emperor of Japan; Robert Dawson as Douglas MacArthur. Moody, dark, slow-moving film about the Emperor's final days at the time of the surrender of Japan in August 1945. The film does not attempt to be historical – no clear indication of the passage of time, no reference to the decision to accept the American terms; the viewer is surprised when American soldiers show up at the front of the bunker. Most of the film takes place in the Emperor's bunker, with the exception of the time he spends at MacArthur's headquarters. The furniture and clothing in the film are exclusively western – nary a kimono in sight. The film's theme is ambiguous, but it seems to be an analysis of the psychological and emotional transition of the Emperor from the status of a revered god removed from humanity and the real world to his renunciation of divinity and his (touching) reunion with his wife, the Empress. For most of the film Hirohito (his name is never mentioned?) is alone, lonely, neurotically nervous (tics and sighs), with no human relationships aside from his reserved, fawning servants (eternally bowing and backing up in his presence). Even now the Emperor is musing about what it means to be a god and whether he is one. He meets once with his Council of Ministers, at which time he delivers a poetic speech saying that Japan must continue to fight until victory (n.b., the Americans arrive shortly after this). He is particularly resentful of the US exclusion of Japanese immigration passed in 1924. The Emperor's single interest is his scientific research on crustaceans, which he appears to do with the help of a scribe recording his spoken observations. When they arrive, the sloppily dressed Americans inject much informality into his life: chattering photographers crowd around him when he leaves the palace; MacArthur makes a gift of a box of Hershey chocolates; the General receives him informally in his office, where they chat and take refreshments (the Emperor speaks halting, if intelligible, English). Mac Arthur is mysteriously polite and after some initial probing, he makes it clear that the Emperor "has nothing to fear" (provided he renounces his divinity). Back in his dark bunker, he is surprised when his wife comes to visit: after an embarrassed and awkward beginning, they warm up to one another, he tells her with obvious relief that he has renounced his divinity, and they walk out of the room hand-in-hand (flesh to flesh) to see their children. Is the film celebrating the Emperor's finding of his humanity? The final scene "saves" an otherwise slow-moving film with its dark cinematography, its long takes, and its lengthy close-ups of the Emperor's face. (2015)

Sunrise 1927 W.F. Murnau -- Janet Gaynor, George O'Brien, Margaret Livingston (City Girl). Moralistic melodrama about fidelity, trust, and married love; struggle between good and evil ends in triumph of good and redemption of hero (husband) after a narrow scrape. No character has individual name but all generic ones, "the wife," "the city girl," etc. Contrast and struggle between the wholesome country with open sky, wind and trees, pure, wholesome wives and pretty children, a settled traditional existence, fidelity; and the city, which is exciting and entertaining (scene at the amusement park), but also corrupt (images swirling around the City Girl) and dangerous (almost getting run over by automobiles several times). Film seems to take place in Europe, probably Germany, with its juxtaposition between peasant society near the city and the modernity of the city. Story is husband's infidelity and temptation to murder his wife; his utter remorse; the cruel twist of fate that almost kills the wife by accident on the lake where the husband intended to murder her; her apparent death, and his near murder of the City Girl; and then her joyous return and their living happily ever after. The Library VHS print is absolutely terrible; so it is difficult to appreciate the famous visual artistry of the film. Slow editing that forces viewer to look at length on poetically conceived scenes; moving camera that follows footsteps of husband through mud and then pushing through shrubs as he walks to see his lover; the movement of the streetcar that carries the married pair to the city. Film cuts to imagined scenes (dancing frenzy, plans for

the murder, etc.) when the character thinks or speaks about them. Film has dead serious tone in beginning and mostly at end, but the city interlude is light-hearted and filled with humorous touches like the married pair's guilt about breaking the head and arms off the photographer's statuette of Venus de Milo! Gaynor is mostly either silent with head bent over in sadness, or laughing charmingly (Academy Award quality?); with her broad skirts, wooden face, tightly wound hair and stooped posture, she is an icon of peasant married fidelity. One wonders whether the happy ending, when Wife is unexpectedly found alive, is indigenous to the drama, or imposed by the U.S. studio's determination to have a happy ending. (2006)

Sunset Blvd 1950 Billy Wilder 4.0 Gloria Swanson, a faded silent movie queen, playing her more or less insane self living in LA 25 years later, William Holden looking trim and handsome as down-in-his-luck screenwriter who agrees to work for Desmond, Erich Von Stroheim stiff and ceremonial as Desmond's butler that defends her in her illusions, Nancy Olson as impossibly wholesome story reader for Paramount who provides a potential haven of sanity for Holden; cameos from Buster Keaton, Harry Warner, Hedda Hopper, and an especially important and affectionate one for Cecil B. DeMille. A great Hollywood classic that somehow doesn't charm as much as it should. Set in LA about 1950 with nostalgic shots of the streets of Hollywood and West LA. A Hollywood film about Hollywood dealing with the old stars that won't fade away gracefully (Did Norma "used to be big?" "I am big. It's the pictures that got small."), and the lengths that young people on the make will go to be a success. Film is reasonably favorable to Hollywood -- there is nothing evil about the old fogies that make up the 'Wax Works', and DeMille, although somewhat absurd in his tall boots on the set, out of kindness refrains from telling Norma the truth about there being no next movie. Movie has elements of film noir (the voiceover narrative by a dead man, the shadows, and the femme fatale that leads Holden to destruction) and also of decadence-evoking Gothic horror movies like Todd Browning, 'Phantom of the Opera', etc. -- the over-decorated, baroque house with even a weird sounding organ, the over-the-top grotesque facial expressions of Swanson as she pushes her character in the camera's face, the bizarre relationship between Norma and Max, who had been her director at the beginning of her career and is now as sickly attached to her as she is to her monkey (the funeral scene is another macabre touch). Characters are convincing, especially Gillis, who obviously represents the tendency of opportunistic young people to make Faustian bargains -- often sexual ones -- for success; and then he seems to fall under Norma's domination (sexual in nature?) and has a hard time leaving. Some great scenes: opening scene with the police cars racing down Sunset Blvd. at dawn, and then the police discovering Holden's body lying face down in the water and shot from below; the New Year's Eve Party, where there is a full orchestra for dancing the tango, and yet only two guests in a nearly empty room -- Norma and Joe. The final scene is one of the greats: after shooting Joe out of jealousy, Norma thinks the police and the newsreel crews waiting at the steps are camera crews making her new movie on 'Salome'; Von Stroheim stands between the cameras egging her on ("roll 'em!") by pretending that he is the director; she drifts down the stairs weaving her arms in a baroque and decadent 'Dance of the Seven Veils' gesture; "I just want to tell you all how happy I am to be back in the studio making a picture again. You don't know how much I have missed all of you. And I promise you I will never desert you again, because after 'Salome' we will make another picture and another picture! You see, this is my life. It always will be. Alright, Mr. DeMille, I am ready for my close-up", and she moves toward the camera filling the lens progressively with her grotesque features, and the picture fades out to an indistinct, gauzy image. (2005)

Sunshine Cleaning 2008 Christine Jeffs 2.5 Amy Adams luminously entertaining as hard luck young woman looking to make her way through life; Emily Blunt miscast with irritating teeth and taking herself too seriously as an actress as Adams' more or less lost little sister; Alan Arkin cutesy and camera-aware as the quirky granddad (straight out of 'Little Miss Sunshine'); Steve Zahn uninteresting in thankless role as Adams' adulterer boyfriend; Jason Spevack as overly cute 10-year-old son of Adams stricken with impulsive non-conformity (he licks his teacher's leg, but of course that was only because he was bored and not given enough to do); Clifton Collins as nice-guy one-armed model builder and owner of cleaning supplies shop; Mary Lynn Rajskub with eternally quivering chin and pained expression as lesbian girl who like the two sisters has lost her mom. Occasionally engaging story about two sisters in Albuquerque trying to get over the suicide of their mother and make a living cleaning up body fluids in crime sites; everybody more or less goes through tough times; film ends

on feel-good note when Arkin sells his house to go into the cleaning business with Adams. Film is annoying first of all because it is a dead-on rip-off of 'Little Miss Sunshine' – the cutesy, quirky granddad, the cute, attention-grabbing kid, the family hanging together through thick and thin, the self-consciously Indie film looking for attention. It is annoying mainly because it is manipulative and throws in everything the writers can think of to ingratiate themselves with the Indie crowd with little attention to social reality, plot consistency or character integrity. Do schools really have the right to order parents to put their kids on medication? (One suspects it a plot device to trumpet obnoxious individuality and to get the kid out of school so he can appear in a lot of scenes.) Is it really honest to have a film about coming to terms with the bloody suicide of your mother constantly to put the two daughters in contact with foul-smelling body fluids and to make a running joke out of it? (Some of the scenes are funny, e.g., the clean-up of the "Decompo[osition victim]", and they do get the audience squirming). What about having two or three of the characters go into the cavernous van and use the CB radio microphone to communicate with God or the dead about existential subjects (you know, I forgive you, Mom, and I hope you are happy). When Adams is depicting her business to her suburban housewife ex-high school buddies, would she really describe the nastiness in such vivid language (well, sure, because it evokes a laugh from the audience)? With all said and done, however, the film is worth watching because of Amy Adams' persona and acting – pretty, enormously sincere with engaging smile, mobile face, genuine emotional intensity, bonding with her audience. Too bad she had to deal with such a meretricious script. (2009)

Sunshine State 2002 John Sayles 3.0 Edie Falco as weary, disabused and slumping proprietor of Delrona Beach motel who is under pressure to sell to developers, Jane Alexander as her mother, the head of a local community theater troupe, an environmentalist, and it turns out in the end, a hard bargainer, Angela Bassett as recently married infomercial star who returns to Delrona after many years of exile, Mary Steenburgen as pretty empty-headed but earnest head of the local historical pageant – highly silly and “disneyfied,” Timothy Hutton as nice-guy landscape designer working for the developers, Alan King as a funny, cynical real estate developer who acts as kind of Greek chorus with three other smart old guys on a mangrove golf course. Rather essayistic look at a Florida East Coast town in the throes of development – the local white community (represented by Falco and her parents) and the Black folks (represented by Bassett and her parents) have to decide whether to cooperate or refuse to sell. The old Civil Rights activist, Dr. Lloyd, tries to rally the folks to opposition, but has little success; at the end, the march toward luxury condos is stopped only by the accidental discovery of an Indian burial ground (that shows evidence of mass murder, thus belying the message of Steenburgen’s historical pageant); end of movie indicates that there is little hope of stopping the development juggernaut – even the black folks are undercut by the cooperation of Bassett’s old flame, Flash Phillips, a University of Florida ex-football star, who is fronting for the developers in buying up beachfront property. Lots of laughs from foolish Steenburgen trying to make the pageant work for the Chamber of Commerce, the suicidal silliness of her husband Earl, who almost kills himself suicide with a staple gun, the fate of Falco’s ex-husband, who after the glory days of playing in a popular rock group, now plays minor roles in the pageant, walking the plank into a plastic swimming pool or patrolling the walls of the Union fortress in a blue uniform. Bassett spends most of the movie somewhat tediously working out the past with her mother, who sent her away when she was pregnant at 15. Falco has a dull short affair with Timothy Hutton; it ends when he is sent by his developers to Puerto Rico. At the end Falco tells her mother to sell the motel – she is fed up with small town life – but we don’t know what is in store for her. Movie drags a bit because of lack of dramatic curve and length, but well written with good dialogue and making a good point about popular culture and the inexorable pace of real estate development in modern America. (2007)

Super 8 2011 J.J. Abrams 3.0 Joel Courtney as Joe, sweet-faced kid who has lost his mother, is in love with Fanning, and has trouble getting on with his dad; Kyle Chandler as Joe’s dad and Ohio town’s deputy sheriff – he has bitter resentment against Ron Eldard, who had something to do with the death of his wife; Elle Fanning as the deep acting friend of the boys, many of whom are falling in love with her; Riley Griffiths as the chubby boy making the Super 8 vampire movie throughout the film; Ryan Lee as the pyromaniac with the braces-filled mouth. Over-the-top Spielberg-inspired adventure, science fiction film with all sorts of heart-rending personal stories of alienation and reconciliation. The sci fi story is a bit creaky – a monster from outer space trapped on earth, basically a decent guy who wants to return

home but who gets really nasty when frustrated (high velocity violence, kidnapping, imprisonment of victims hung upside down in his lair in the cemetery, and quite a few deaths); faceless, hyper-disciplined, uniformed Air Force personnel are all over the town with enormous trucks carrying out debris from the wrecked train, tanks facing up vainly to the alien at the end, and generally disrupting the quiet, Midwestern routine of an Ohio town in 1979. When the kids finally confront the alien in the end, he somehow manages a smile in his ugly, articulated face, and then goes positive, building a space ship with all the metal objects he has collected in his stay and then blasts off from our puny earth to the wonderment of all the townsfolk, looking upward at the magnificent sight with their hair flowing and music playing in the background (yes, much like E.T.). The movie has a slam-bang beginning with the kids making the Super 8 zombie movie gathering at the railroad station, where they discover the extraordinary thespian abilities of Fanning and then witness one of the most shocking and kinetic train accidents ever seen in film – enormous momentum of cars plowing into and jumping over one another, cumbrous objects flying through the air and landing right next to you with an enormous thump, fire breaking out and raging in all directions – a real scene from hell. Special effects continue to be outstanding throughout the film, especially in their levitating of automobiles, high-impact ripping of motors out of their engine compartments, violent crash of heavy metal objects flying through the air. Amusing picture of the gaggle of five friends, often hyper-excited, wide-eyed in amazement looking at objects that the viewer cannot see, all talking and shouting excitedly at the same time in overlapping dialogue. Drippy sentimentality abounds: in the beginning great alienation between Fanning and her no-good (alcoholic?) father, hatred of Chandler for Eldard because of the death of Chandler's wife, tension between Joe and his dad caused mainly by the dad's anxieties about parenting; but our hearts are warmed by the ersatz four-way embrace as the smiling, reconciled group observes the ETish departure of the (well, murderous) monster. The stability and normalness of small-town American family life is restored. Zone should not miss the amusing and instructive showing of the whole amateur zombie movie during the roll of the seemingly endless credits. (2011)

Super Size Me 2004 Morgan Spurlock 2.5 Muck-raking documentary about our hero who decides to eat McDonald's -- and only McDonald's -- meals three times a day for a month. What he discovers is of course pretty obvious – 25-lb. weight gain, severe temporary (hopefully) damage to the liver, disappeared sex appetite, serious malaises, which you wonder how much they are genuine and how much manufactured for the camera. At the end of the ordeal he looks pretty much the same (we get to see his body dressed only in a USA flag speedo) although a bit tired and vacant-eyed. The film is fairly dull -- lots of scenes of Spurlock eating McDonald's goodies, lots of interviews with well-meaning dietitians and reformers who expatiate on the obesity epidemic in the USA and on the dangers of bad diet and of fast food in particular, visits to school cafeterias in California, Texas, and Illinois to discover how bad is the food given to the kids. Aside from an interview with Spurlock's vegan girlfriend, who describes in some detail the decline in Spurlock's sexual capabilities, the film lacks the in-the-face chutzpah, the faux-innocent gleefulness of Michael Moore; nary an interview with corporate spokesmen, who must have seen Moore's movie, since they refuse to return Spurlock's phone calls. The protagonist is supervised by three doctors, who – perhaps thinking of a civil suit – record the decline of his health and urge him to abandon the diet before it is too late. The point of the film is a bit ambiguous, since Spurlock admits that no one eats MacDs three times a day and McDonald's itself has avowed that the high concentration of fat and sugar in its food can be dangerous to their customers' health. Spurlock departs from his easy-going affability at the end by recommending we kill McDonald's before it kills us (picture of a cemetery). Like celery sticks, good for your health but not much fun; the film would be best as a 20-minute segment on '60 minutes'. (2007)

Superbad 2007 Greg Mottola 3.5 Jonah Hill as fat, unattractive overweight motor-mouth high school outcast obsessed with sex; Michael Cera as his lifelong friend, who is more sensible and sensitive; Christopher Mintz-Plasse as impossibly nerdy, snorting and mugging buddy (he was recruited from an actual high school!); Bill Hader and Seth Rogen completely hilarious as irresponsible, fun-loving cops. Very funny, foul-mouthed film about the lives of three sex-obsessed high school seniors looking for action in their last months before going to college. Narrative focuses on friendship between Hill and

Cera: they have always planned on going to Dartmouth together, but since Hill didn't get in, there is tension in the air since they don't like to talk about it. Through a chaotic night, they become honest with one another and bond together, and even state at the end that "I love you"; they also more or less learn to be respectful of women, and in the last scene in a shopping mall (where Hill prefers tight pants since they show off his balls and dick for potential sex partners!), they pair up with the two girls they had wanted to get drunk at the party, and walk off looking sweet and tamed by society: film has important romantic subtext. The pith of the film though is the hilarious comedy: the boys drooling over the girls but then having nothing to say when they attract their attention; Mintz-Passe securing a fake ID with no first name; making fools of themselves trying to buy illegal liquor; ending up at a party where disquieting characters are snorting coke (and Cera has to sing pop songs for his stoned audience); making a mess of their opportunities to have sex (at last!) with the two girls, etc. The comic pièce de résistance, however, are the two cops: incompetent when investigating a convenience store hold-up; having a few beers with Mintz-Passe in a bar where they are supposed to be dealing with a drunk; shutting off their intercoms despite victims of violent crimes pleading for help; driving drunk; crashing their cruiser when trying to do wheelies and other tricks in a parking lot; setting their cruiser on fire and firing bullets into it, etc., etc. They are relentless, and the script keeps providing them with hilarious comic material. The film is obviously in the tradition of 'Animal House', the 'Porky's' series, the 'American Pie' series of raunchy teenage sex comedies; this one differs from its quality and its romantic heart – every guy out there is looking for the right girl. (2008)

Sur mes lèvres 2001 Jacques Audiard (France) 4.0 Emmanuelle Devos as semi-deaf wallflower woman working as underappreciated secretary in a property development office, Vincent Cassel as essentially good-hearted ex-con hired by her to help her out mostly with photocopying, Olivier Perrier as Cassel's probation officer who has his own marital and psychological problems. Superior French psychological thriller; mixes psycho-sexual insight with thriller plotting in the second half of the movie. Setting is a development firm in Paris – a lot of office politics/one-upmanship, the routine of everyday work, the cheating and bribing that go on to get things done, etc. Devos is hard-working secretary who has extra responsibilities because of her competence and dedication to her job; depending on her large hearing aids, she turns them on and off according to the needs of the moment (they are hidden under her long hair). Under her dowdy clothes Devos is lonely and hungry for a man; she has an active solitary sex life, and she jumps at the opportunity to hire a man (she tells the employment agent that she wants a man with nice hands); she then dominates him much in the same way that her bosses have exploited her, except that she is obviously romantically attracted to him. Cassel is very unsure of himself since he essentially has no place to live and his probation officer is watching his every move. Devos begins to break out of her rut, showing that she is energetic, sexually interested, and that she can stand up for herself – she uses Cassel to incriminate a boss that tries to take credit from her and she joins Cassel in his criminal adventure. Cassel decides to steal money from some very dangerous small-time hoods and uses Devos to watch them and find out what they are saying by reading their lips; as things get tough and violent, her lip-reading ability (an obvious McGuffin) gets her out of trouble and enables her to turn the tables on the bad guys. Some improbable complications and near escapes, but the film ends happily with the two lovers escaping and finally having sex in the car. Excellent direction – lots of intense close-ups to portray the anxiety of the situations, the sound track comes in and out as Devos adjusts her hearing aids (the director uses a lot of subjective shots), sexual scenes are photographed with a Griffith-like iris effect. Devos, although not pretty or glamorous, is captivating: our sympathy is with her from the beginning and we exult when she discredits one of the firm's executives, and we sweat when she is in danger of discovery or injury; we feel her loneliness and we root for her to "land" her man (although we have doubts about whether Cassel is a good catch). A very engaging film expertly made; the viewer's mind is not allowed to wander. (2008)

Suspicion 1941 Alfred Hitchcock (RKO) 3.0 Cary Grant charming, handsomely turned out, but inexplicable as ne'er do well man about town that sets his sights on...; Joan Fontaine spinsterish, pretty, and emoting heavily (Academy Award 1941) as young woman of the English gentry who falls heavy for the dashing Grant; Nigel Bruce (Basil Rathbone's Watson) as Beaky, dim-witted, good-hearted,

and amusing friend of Grant's that shows up at the young couple's house to hash over good times together in school; Dame May Whitty in minor, do-nothing role as Fontaine's genteel mother; Sir Cedric Hardwicke usually behind his newspaper, pipe and reading glasses as her crusty father. Overrated Hitchcock thriller with severe narrative issues, which is partly saved however by the charm and savoir-faire of the principals. 95% of the film is a focused puzzle as to whether Grant (Johnny) is just a happy-go-lucky guy with no evil intentions aside from attaching himself to a well-off family or a sociopath intent on murder if it suits his interest. Hitchcock mixes the positive and negative clues without giving us the data to decide definitively one way or another. On the one hand, Grant is so charming, he is usually very kind to Fontaine, and virtually everything he does can be interpreted in an innocent light. The negative clues however generally predominate – it is clear that he is an embezzler stealing money from his employer, it is highly suspicious that his friend Beaky dies in Paris shortly after he agrees to invest a large sum of money in Johnny's crazy real estate venture (on the Cornish coast!), and Fontaine discovers that he is trying to borrow money against his wife's life insurance policy (he would presumably have to kill her when the company turns him down). The pièce de résistance is the final scenes that establish Johnny's interest in murder (borrowing murder mysteries from a local author, a sort of on-screen Agatha Christie), his knowledge of a poison that kills instantly without leaving a trace in the victim, and of course the famous surrealistic scene in which Grant carries the glowing glass of milk gracefully up the deeply shadowed stairs presumably to poison his rather fatalistic wife. She however refuses to drink the milk (we see it unconsumed on her night table the next morning), and in the confusing final scene in the car Johnny appears to save Fontaine from falling out of the car over the cliff; after he stops the car, he then explains to her breathlessly that all her foreboding was pointless since he wasn't even in Paris when Beaky died, etc.; and the car then turns around and from a long shot the viewer sees him with his arm around his wife's shoulder driving back down the road to their home. The ending leaves a hint of doubt (he could be guilty and just planning to kill her later?), but it comes across clearly as a studio (Hayes Office?) imposed ending that hastily cleans up all the suspicion to keep Grant from being guilty of murder and getting away with it. The viewer goes away feeling cheated by the plot. The film also suffers from being filmed entirely on the lot with matte backdrops all of which look spectacularly artificial and from the repetitious torment and hand-wringing of Fontaine. 'The House on Telegraph Hill' (1952) has much the same plot, but it distracts the viewer with more plot complications. Not one of the master's better 40s thrillers. (2013)

Suspiria 1977 Dario Argento (Italy) 2.5 Jessica Harper as naïve, pixie-faced American ballet dancer arriving for lessons at a famous ballet school in Freiburg, Germany; Stefania Casini as her very similar friend Sara, who is murdered about two-thirds through the film; Alida Valli ('The third Man') as the bizarre assistant director wearing wing-shaped hair and flashing big, bright teeth; Joan Bennett (33 years after 'Woman in the Window'!) as the more innocuous-looking director of the school. Bizarre, aesthetically focused, not-very-scary horror shocker about the gradual discovery of a witches' coven headed by Valli and Bennet in a German ballet school. The film is presented in English, but the only actor that seems to be actually speaking her lines is Harper – the rest are obviously and clunkingly dubbed a la italiana. The film is all surreal aesthetic design with little plot and character. Most of the film is shot inside the ballet building – carefully colored and lit walls that sometimes reflect a modernist art design and sometimes recall a bordello, light filtering through Art nouveau style windows and windowed doors, stylized light fixtures on the wall, images of the mysterious snoring woman viewed through a translucent curtain (she turns out to be the dead founder of the school), passing through doors into unknown adjoining rooms, viewing the hyper-energetic stride of Valli flashing her bright teeth. Set pieces include the atmospheric arrival of Harper in a driving rain at the German airport and then in front of the school from which the first murder victim escapes in a panic, two gruesome murder scenes (especially grisly is the initial one in which a girl stabbed repeatedly and mechanically with red-pink blood all over the place), a hanged ballerina crashes through a stained-glass window, the killing of the blind accompanist by his own seeing-eye dog in the middle of a deserted square surrounded by German classical buildings, the raining of thousands of icky maggots on the girls in their dormitory, gory images of a beating heart being stabbed and a throat being methodically slashed, and of course the fiery destruction of the school building and the witches as Harper escapes at the end. The intense scenes of the film are accompanied by a

deafening, electronic-sounding rock music score. The film fails to generate much terror since there is little plot, no characters for the viewers to identify with, and not even a sense of place – everything seems to take place in the middle of a kinetic modern art gallery. (2013)

Sweeney Todd 2007 Tim Burton 2.5 Johnny Depp as dour, revenge-bent London barber with a cool white streak through his bounteous hair; Helena Bonham Carter as Mrs. Lovett, the meat pie baker who helps Todd dispose of the bodies of his victims but gets scant thanks for it; Alan Rickman as traditional meanie who has Burton's daughter as his ward and plans to marry her; Timothy Spall effective as the sadistic, revolting Beadle, Rickman's assistant; Sacha Baron Cohen hilarious as Italian with a bad accent – he is the first person murdered by Todd; Jamie Campbell Bower as the cute little guy Anthony; Jayne Wisener as prim and proper Johanna, Todd's daughter. Perplexing and sometimes off-putting dark tale about a man who returns to London after a lengthy imprisonment abroad; he finds his wife and daughter missing, and he sets out to punish (murder) the Judge who sent him away and stole his family. The famous musical includes the score by Stephen Sondheim: although highly regarded, it came across flat in the film, perhaps because Rickman's, Depp's and Carter's voices were barely up to the task, perhaps also because of the flat melodic line of Sondheim's music, perhaps because the characters did not flourish in this production; still, lyrics about ‘The Worst Meat Pies in London’, “Johanna”, “Pretty Women” (the reprise while Rickman is waiting to have his throat cut by Depp in the barber chair) stick in the memory. The film is dominated by the snarling, bellowing revenge rage of Depp and the gore of the wall-to-wall murders: the first – of an outrageously funny Cohen – is amusing though squirmly; but afterwards the viewer is subjected to a string of apparently pointless and extremely graphic murders of unsuspecting customers who happen to drop by Depp's shop for a shave; the bodies are then dumped several stories from a specially fitted barber chair and crash on the basement floor with neck-, skull-, and back-shattering force. Then Depp and Carter come up with the idea of using the chopped- and ground-up bodies to make her meat pies (which, by the way, are a grand success with the public). The ending scene tops them all: in his uncontrollable rage, Depp slits the throat of his own wife, their little apprentice realizes what is happening when he bites into a fingertip imbedded in a meat pie, Depp graphically burns up Carter in the baking furnace when he discovers that she has kept his still-living wife's identity from him, and the apprentice then crawls out of the sewer and sneaks up behind Depp and cuts his throat. The degree of the revenge is inexplicable. Aside from Cohen there is barely a breath of humor. It is pretty incredible that Carter would be so much in love with Depp that she collaborates in his crimes; and she does not convince the viewer that she is possessed by love. Entertaining and squirm-inducing horror and gore, but Burton's venture into a pure horror realm lacks his usual imaginativeness. (2009)

Sweet Sixteen 2002 Ken Loach (Britain) 4.0 Martin Compston as Liam, sweet, innocent, gawky Scottish 15-year-old determined to make a better life for his mom when she gets out of jail; Michelle Coulter as his passive mother doing time for drug dealing; Annemarie Fulton as Liam's sister Chantelle, who wants to stay straight and raise her son respectably; William Ruane as Liam's chaotic, impulsive friend Pinball. Affecting drama about vulnerable teenage boy trapped in an environment of crime, but who wants to start a new life with his mother when she gets out of jail. Film follows the antics of Liam and Pinball when they start selling cigarettes and then steal drugs from Liam's hostile grandfather and start dealing on their own; Liam then meets a small-time crime boss, who takes to him big time and sets him up in a pizza business delivering pizzas while he sells drugs. But the mobile home that Liam has bought for his mother burns mysteriously, after which everything goes awry: Liam wounds Pinball with a knife in a fight; when he brings his mother to the apartment provided by the boss, she is not happy, returns to her husband Stan (also a drug-dealer), and when Liam comes to confront them he stabs Stan in the gut with the knife. The film ends with a scene straight out of Truffaut – wanted by the police, Liam is walking on the shore of the loch, the camera holds, and the film goes blank; no one knows what the future holds. Film is vivid and memorable. Colorful and accurate portrayal of Glasgow and environs and of the scruffy working classes dependent on drug dealing. The viewer has to turn on the English subtitles, since the Glasgow working-class accent is virtually indecipherable (although the completely comprehensible word “fucking” usually dominates the dialogue). A lot of engaging Scottish humor as the boys mock and set up their no-good-for-nothing grandfather and horse around with one another. Several

surprises spice up the narrative – the burning of the mobile home, the stunned passiveness of the mom when she first tours her new apartment, her subsequent disappearance and the viewer’s discovery that her husband is the one who torched the mobile home to make sure she returns to him. Perhaps the main strength of the film is its honesty and genuineness: despite his faults (materialism, taking shortcuts), Liam’s passionate innocence draws in the viewer; the acting of all the players – from the loopy inconsistency of Pinball to the snarling, mindless viciousness of Stan – is real and natural. The tragedy of the film is gripping. None of the main characters (perhaps exception Chantelle) is going to escape the grip of their environment: Mom returns to her worthless husband, Liam resorts to violence and has an uncertain future before him after jail time for the attack against his stepfather. (2012)

The Sweet Smell of Success 1957 Alexander Mackendrick (wr. Ernest Lehman and Clifford Odets)

3.5 Tony Curtis in one of his best roles as the eager, supine NY press agent Sidney Falco, Burt Lancaster just as good as the imperious NY columnist J.J. Hunsecker. Hard-hitting drama about two louses who vie with one another to see who can be worse. Lancaster is the arrogant king of the roost, a columnist who rewards his friends (i.e., sycophants) and destroys his enemies (those who dare to stand up to him) by appropriate notices in his daily column; he spends most of his time in NY bars and restaurants; he never raises his voice, since he figures he is so powerful he doesn’t have to. Curtis is that much despised animal, the press agent whose job it is to get his clients mentioned in Hunsecker’s column; ambitious, grasping, he runs around plotting, betraying, manipulating to get his clients in the public eye, except when he is around Hunsecker, his idol and his manna, when he is supine and subservient: when Hunsecker says he would kill Falco with a bat if he touched his sister, Falco, now the loyal dog, responds by eagerly lighting his cigarette. Plot is driven by Hunsecker’s attachment to his sister, whom he does not want to wed a guitar player; he intimidates Falco into breaking up the romance – if he doesn’t, he is completely shut out of the column. The weakness of the movie is the brother’s psychological reasons for this – unless he has incestuous feelings for her, it is hard to understand why he would go to such lengths to torpedo the romance. Jazzy big band score by Elmer Bernstein is excellent, very 50s. High contrast black and white photography by James Wong Howe gives a vivid impression of New York as a place of bustle and ambition. Film is a little off-putting because the two main characters are extremely unlikable; they dominate the mise-en-scene, and they don’t change – they are just as obnoxious and even evil at the end as in the beginning. (Curtis dominates the first part of the movie, but Hunsecker is in charge in the second.) The plot development at the end is that the two lovers apparently are going to challenge Hunsecker and get married anyhow, but the two main characters haven’t changed a bit. Quotations: Hunsecker about Falco -- “a press agent eats a columnist’s dirt and calls it manna,” and “a man of 40 faces, not one, none too pretty, and all deceptive.” Hunsecker to Falco, “I’d hate to take a bite out of you. You’re a cookie full of arsenic.” The evil characters and the biting dialogue are very entertaining. (2006)

Sweet Sweetback Baad Ass Song 1971 Melvin Van Peebles 1.5 Melvin Van Peebles.

Not an enjoyable movie. MVP is a sex performer in a night club, who gets mixed up with some militants, is involved in shootings (death?) of cops, and then spends more or less the rest of the movie running from the police. Lots of avant-garde filming techniques so that it is hard to know what is going on – shaky, handheld camera, underexposed stock, etc. Seems like the filmmaker is trying to give impression he is cool and advanced while possessing minimal abilities. Film is uninvolving; a sort of picaresque adventure of a black dude on the lam. Almost no dialogue, especially from MVP who just runs and screws; characters of no interest; just there for him to interact with (have sex with?) and then move on. Supposed to be a “searing racial indictment,” but hard to see it; white people (cops and motorcycle gangs!) have all the bad characteristics previously ascribed to blacks in racist movies; white cops are unbelievably callous and callow! Black protagonist seems not at all interested in politics, but just in fucking like a sex machine! Begins with a child porn scene (and there is apparently no one protesting now). Soundtrack is mind-numbingly repetitive. (2005)

Sweetie 1989 Jane Campion (Australia) 3.0 Genevieve Lemon, Karen Colston, Tom Lycos, Jon Darling. Bizarre, expressionist film about highly dysfunctional family – Karen (Kay) trying to escape from aftermath of childhood, but then irritating, annoying Sweetie (Dawn) shows up wreaking

havoc on all around her. Sweetie was spoiled by her father, who still adores her and tries his best to make her happy: she shows up at Karen's with Bob, supposedly a producer who will help her career, but who in fact is a narcoleptic freeloader; when she doesn't get what she wants, she barks and growls like a ill-tempered dog; parents take her back in at end of movie, whereupon she imprisons herself naked and smeared with mud in tree house, and then falls to her death (relief?), when her father and sister try to get her to come down. Major image is Kay's idea of trees: they represent her unhappy childhood and the favoritism shown Sweetie; she is thus unable to appreciate life and let things grow! Meanwhile, Sweetie contributes greatly to ruining the relationship of Kay and her boyfriend, who are brought together by Kay's superstititiousness (a tea leaf reader predicts that she will meet someone with a "question mark" on his head (curl of hair in front and a mole on the forehead)); he stalks out shouting that "you are abnormal!" Movie seems to have existentialist subtext, since everyone is unhappy and trying unsuccessfully to build enduring and satisfying relationships – lots of shots of Kay and Louis (Lycos) staring at each other silently and emptily; they quit touching and having sex soon after they get together: "we're out of that phase." Movie has quirky visual style – odd camera angles (under tables), arty color composition against walls, fantasy sequences of trees growing, etc. Music is Shaker-like gospel music intervening several times. Social milieu is ugly environment of working class life in a lower level Sydney suburb. Not very entertaining, but interesting at times. (2005)

The Swimming Pool 2003 France: François Ozon (France) 3.0 Charlotte Rampling as middle aged, though sexy British crime writer trying to recharge her batteries in the Luberon, Ludivine Sagnier as young, sexy waif who shows up at the same house as Charlotte, poses as the publisher's daughter, and swims in the pool often with nothing on, John Bosload as Charlotte's somewhat devious publisher. Entertaining slippery psychological thriller set in sun-drenched Luberon area of Southern France. Rampling is excellent as somewhat prim and proper (or is she?) British mystery writer who tries to revive her literary inspiration by her contact with Sagnier, the apparent daughter of the publisher who runs around charmingly half naked, makes too much noise, and brings a different guy home every night for noisy sex. Atmosphere is intriguing and thought-provoking despite the bright Provençal light suffusing everything in the screen. At first we think the film is a psychological drama about Rampling learning something new about life, opening up vicariously to life and experience to write better stories, etc.; the relationship between the two women begins to thaw halfway through the film. An apparent murder mystery intrudes, and the viewer is thrown off by the seeming inconsistencies and awkward passages in the film (does Rampling really seduce the old codger gardener to keep him from telling the police about the location of the buried body?). Throughout Rampling is writing a thriller that will be different from anything she has done before; it appears that she is drawing on the character and experiences of Sagnier. But then a too rapid twist at the end: when Rampling returns to her publisher in London, she discovers that Sagnier is not his daughter. Nice startling revelation that leaves the viewer in more or less confusion. Was the Sagnier episode just the product of Rampling's imagination and her groping toward a more liberated attitude toward sex as she was writing a bad new novel? Or did Sagnier really exist, but she just wasn't the daughter of the publisher? A nice movie for after-theater discussion over a beer. (2006)

Swingers 1996 Doug Liman (wr. Jon Favreau) 3.5 Jon Favreau as nerdy-looking guy with a big chin – he can't get over the break-up with his girlfriend after a six-year relationship; Vince Vaughn as his best friend, who looks rather to pick up than fall in love with girls ("babies"); Ron Livingston, Patrick van Horn, Alex Desert as three of the two principals' buddies; Heather Graham as pretty, sincere blond that Favreau meets in a bar in the last scene. Sometimes slow-moving but ultimately sincere and entertaining buddy movie about single male 20-somethings in the LA bar scene; all seem to be unemployed and looking for girls, or perhaps a mate, by bar-crawling after they play video games and drink a few beers in one of their apartments. Favreau is persuaded by Vaughn to go to Las Vegas to forget his ex, but it doesn't work out: they lose most of their money right away pretending they are high rollers, and when Favreau gets hooked up with a pretty girl, he ends up ruining the encounter by confessing his depression about his girlfriend. Back in Los Angeles, Vaughn insistently keeps Favreau on the move looking for action: among the highly entertaining bits is Vaughn's disappointment when a girl he tries to pick up at a party turns out to be a motor mouth, when the guys get into a macho-fueled

confrontation with some toughs exiting a bar and are “saved” by one of the guys pulling out a handgun from his waistband, and when Favreau is rejected by a girl after she asks him what kind of car he is driving and he disappoints her with his red Cavalier. Much of the film plays as a buddy movie, as the guys enjoy one another drinking, playing video games, prowling around the streets of West Hollywood, wisecracking, and posturing about picking up women (none of them is very expert at it). Vaughn stands out of the group with his handsome, good-natured goofiness and his attachment and loyalty to Favreau. Favreau finally strikes it rich when he meets the pretty Graham in a bar and they bond with their eyes and dancing an energetic swing together; when his girlfriend calls him the next day to suggest that they get back together, Favreau finds that he has finally “moved on” and he ends their phone conversation so he can take the call from Graham. Film ends with a humorous, clever scene in a diner: Vaughn is flattered and excited when a woman a few tables from him starts making affectionate faces, but the joke is on him when we discover that she is playing with her baby, who is seated invisible to the viewer with his back to Vaughn – payback for his immature treatment of women and calling them “babies”. Film is very well written by Favreau with clever lines and incidents and; some amusing manipulation of phone messages. Too bad that Liman did not go on to make many more films like this one. (2012)

The Syrian Bride 2004 Eran Riklis (Israel) 3.0 Clara Khoury as Mona, the pretty young Druze bride who resembles Barbara Streisand in a pleasing way; Derar Sliman as Syrian TV star she is betrothed to marry; Julie-Anne Roth as pretty Red Cross worker who is intermediary between the two sides that won’t talk to one another; Eyad Sheety as Hattem, Mona’s older brother; Hiam Abbass as Amal, Mona’s older sister, who is married unhappily and wants to go to Haifa University. Endearing small film about young woman (already once married) that wants to marry her Syrian cousin: the problem is that Mona lives in Israel-occupied Golan Heights and her bridegroom in Syria, and since the two countries do not recognize one another, they have to survive immense bureaucratic complications about passports being stamped to get married; and Mona will never be allowed to return to Israel to visit her family. The film fills in the details with stories about Mona’s family: Amal does not get along with her husband and is ready to defy his traditional authority to study social work in an Israeli university; Hattem is alienated from his father, who in turn is under great pressure from the old fogey village elders not to associate with his renegade son for having married a Russian doctor; and Mona is at times heartbroken about leaving her loving middle-class family for a man whom she has never met. Roth is the very pretty, earnest Red Cross worker, who at the end runs back and forth several times between Israeli and Syrian checkpoints trying to work out a compromise between the two administrations so Mona can actually cross into Syria; everything seems to be working against them and Mona sits disconsolately and alone staring off into the distance, when she suddenly resolves to take things into her own hands, defies the bureaucrats, and crosses the neutral zone to her arranged husband. You have to take independent initiatives and not follow regulations to solve such problems? Editing is sometimes confusing, when the director introduces a new character without revealing how he fits into the picture. The film in general is warm-hearted and sometimes humorous. You like all the characters, you admire their fortitude, and you care what happens to them; and you wish someone would resolve the damn Israeli-Palestinian question. (2010)

Syriana 2005 Stephen Gaghan 2.5 George Clooney in middling role as a tired, rather disillusioned CIA operative not fully trusted by his superiors (his acting is very restrained, which leads us into all sorts of confusion [what are his motives??]; it is hard to fathom why he received an Academy Award); Matt Damon as boyishly enthusiastic American financial expert living in expatriate luxury in Geneva; Chris Cooper as the guy who runs Killen – with a Texas accent; Christopher Plummer as a Washington lawyer who works for the Justice Department (or is he in an independent law firm that is part of the Great American Oil Conspiracy); Amanda Peet as Damon’s rather rebellious wife (she won’t get over the accidental death of her son in the Emir’s swimming pool); Jeffrey Wright as low-key lawyer who keeps making statements that seem to inculpate the players. Extremely confusing geopolitical thriller about the all the forces in place in the Middle East oil scene with emphasis on the conspiracy among the oil companies, the Justice Department, and hired gun law firms that plot and manipulate to keep the oil flowing to the USA. There are something like five plot lines – Clooney’s career issues and

his (more or less unexplained) attempt to save the good Dubai oil prince from assassination; Damon's decision to become the Economic Adviser of the good prince Nasir; Nasir's struggle within his kingdom to be named his father's heir and to bring Western-style reforms to his country (he was educated at Oxford and in the USA); the evolution of a Pakistani worker who is laid off by the oil companies and who then joins a radical Islamist mosque and commits a terrorist attack in the end, etc. The director gives us these independent stories that make more or less sense in themselves, but we are always asking how they relate to one another. The thriller genre thrives on incomplete information and misdirection, but the extreme reached in this film is distracting and keeps us from plunging into the story and identifying with the characters. We switch from story to story, from locale to locale, and we always say – What does that mean? Does he work for the CIA? Is there really a Justice Department investigation? Film ends with twin terrorist act – the US assassinates Clooney (and perhaps Prince Nasir, but of course this is not clear) with a smart bomb guided by Washington operatives, and the disillusioned Pakistani steers his small boat into an enormous tanker with the bomb given to him at the beginning of the film by Clooney (apparently he did this unintentionally). This film is in the line of loosely associated Postmodern, multiplot movies like 'Nashville,' and 'Shortcuts', the impossible 'Magnolia' and 'Crash,' and it follows Gaghan's own superior effort in his previous Mexican drug film. (2006)

Tabloid 2010 Errol Morris 3.5 Fascinating, one-of-a-kind documentary about a confabulating woman, Joyce McKinney, pursued by the London tabloid press (The Sun and The Daily Mirror) for her alleged kidnapping and rape of her Mormon husband in England in the 1970s. The film also examines her background as a nude model and sex worker in Los Angeles and her success in having her beloved dog 'Booger' quintuple-cloned by a Korean scientist sometime in the 2000s. Most of the film is devoted to lengthy interviews with Joyce, but it also takes testimony from a cynical, good-humored London gossip columnist, a photographer for 'The Daily Mirror', and a small-plane pilot that Joyce hires in Long Beach to help her in her campaign to reclaim her boyfriend and would-be husband. Part of the focus of the film is the tabloid culture rampant in Britain in the 1970s – it is very amusing to see the two papers competing with one another for the juiciest story about her. Part of the fascination of the film is the elusive nature of reality – the viewer spends most of his time hearing Joyce's side of the story, but we are aware of the improbabilities and contradictions in it and that there is at least one less admirable, alternative interpretation of events expressed by the tabloid reporter. The truly riveting part of the film is the shamelessly manipulative personality of the principal character. Probably "barking mad", having a tenuous grasp on reality (especially on accurate memory), evincing an insatiable hunger for publicity, able to deny passionately and baldly the most obvious facts (that she was, for example, a nude-posing sex worker before her great kidnap adventure), she is nevertheless engaging, charming, amusing, and a consummate confabulator, able to tell her story in convincing fashion and to pull out the tears when all else fails: kooky but a great performer. She presents herself as "the all-American kid" and the ultimate romantic, who would "ski nude down Mt. Everest with a carnation in her nostril" for the man she loves, with whom she would rather spend a few weeks of bliss than live a lifetime of aloneness without him. She insists that by taking her friend "manacled" to the cottage in Devonshire, she did him no harm, but was just trying to deprogram him from his cultist Mormon masters. In contrast to Morris' earlier films, this one is light-hearted and teasing, often making use of animations (one very amusing one illustrates Mormon theology), newsreel footage and TV tapes to illustrate his current point; as usual, the filmmaker is invisible, although one sometimes hear his flat-accented American voice asking questions in interviews. The film is often funny, e.g., in pointing out the tensions between her version of her story and more probably ones, in depicting the fight-to-the-death competition of the two newspapers for the story of her previous life, in her rank foolishness about her beloved dog and its five cloned successors. Thought-provoking and entertaining. (2013)

Take Shelter 2011 Jeff Nichols 3.5 Michael Shannon delivers a strong performance as an affectionate family man, understated, taciturn, anxious, reluctant to speak his mind; Jessica Chastain in another intense acting role as his worried, though supportive wife; Tova Stewart plays his deaf six-year-old daughter; Shea Whigham plays Shannon's co-worker and best friend. Slow moving film about a man having premonitions of disaster, but who can't decide whether they are indications of real events or just

figments of his imagination as he gradually falls victim to paranoid schizophrenia. The initial shot of the film is striking – past the worried face of Shannon to a threatening, dark cloud on the horizon with a dark outline of what appears to be a woman's (goddess'?) face. The film follows the eternally anxious Shannon step-by-step through various phases of his increasing Angst. Aside from the lowering storms, being pelted with raindrops with the consistency of motor oil, and observing huge flocks of black birds cart wheeling in the air, he has periodic horror visions of men threatening him and his wife and daughter (with whom he is tightly bonded) and once of his living-room furniture being lifted off the floor and then crashing back down. The viewer also learns that Shannon's mother had been diagnosed with paranoid schizophrenia at about her son's age (mid-30s). This leads Shannon to begin seeing a counselor (he can't afford a psychiatrist) and crystallizes in the viewer the fundamental uncertainty: Are the visions objective and thus signs of some impending catastrophe? Or are they subjective indications of Shannon's developing psychosis? The film ratchets up the suspense by having Shannon confine the family dog to an outside pen (he had a dream of the dog attacking him), lose his temper in front of the simple townsfolk of his community, and take out a large loan to install a storm shelter in his backyard (his friends and brother-in-law think that he is losing his mind). The tension peaks when Shannon takes his family into the shelter when his community is hit by a violent storm (sirens wailing loudly), where he makes everyone wear gas masks. After the storm is over, Chastain convinces him to open the door, which he does reluctantly and emerges into the calm sunlight; the viewer is now convinced that the film has been about mental illness, and that Shannon has succeeded in conquering his paranoia with the help of his wife. This interpretation is belied however by the final scene on the beach in South Carolina, where his wife and daughter gaze horrified at an enormous black storm cloud with several funnel spouts moving toward them and the motor oil raindrops fall on Chastain's hand. The conclusion would seem to be that the visions are objective, since now not only Shannon but his wife and daughter see the apocalyptic storm; the catastrophe is going to be national or worldwide (the collapse of the global economy or the disastrous impact of global warning?). (Or does it mean that the three are now tightly bonded since wife and daughter share the same illusions as Shannon?) The dilemma posed by the film is intriguing, and the ambiguous ending keeps the viewer puzzling over the meaning of the film. The evolution of Shannon's point of view is sometimes laborious (one gets tired of looking at the blankly pained expression on his face) and the impact of the film depends perhaps too much on the ending. Nevertheless, a film that makes a lasting impression. (2012)

Talk of the Town 1942 George Stevens (Columbia) 3.5 Superior mixed-genre studio film blending comedy, romance, and drama. Jean Arthur as her usual sensible, lively self, renting her suburban house to...; Ronald Coleman, stuffy, ivory tower, and illustrious law academic is the focus of the film as he looks for a place to write a book on the history of law; Cary Grant often non-plussed as innocent guy accused of torching a local factory and causing the death of a man; Edgar Buchan, the writer of the film, as Grant's lawyer and partisan; Charles Dingle as local corrupt politician; Lloyd Bridges has brief cameo role. Both Grant and Coleman show up at the same time in Arthur's house, thus creating the potential romantic triangle that will carry the film through. The film focuses mainly on clearing Grant of a crime he did not commit: at first hidden in Arthur's attic, he soon emerges disguised as her gardener (comically incredible since he behaves like a guest or intimate friend). Arthur aims to change Coleman's character from his stuffy, by-the-book insistence on returning Grant to the courtroom to a more relaxed and humane behavior; he must learn to lie and manipulate in order to serve a higher standard of justice. His transformation is signaled by shaving off his beard, going to a baseball game, and his obsession with eating some borscht made in a local shop. Justice of course finally emerges on top: despite the interference of crooked politicians, bumbling police officers (scene with hounds mistakenly chasing Coleman is very funny), and a not-very-convincing lynch mob, Grant is finally cleared. All ends happily with the incrimination of local politicians and businessmen (ferreting out civic corruption seems to be a favorite subject of the early 1940s) and the nomination of Coleman to the US Supreme Court. The romantic triangle angle heats up at the end. The screenplay drops ambiguous hints that keep the audience guessing as to who will get Arthur; Grant of course is the favorite because of his romantic credentials (the stuffy Coleman had not made a film since 1937). The ending that takes place in the Supreme Court building is enjoyably manipulative. Coleman makes an offer of marriage in his office, but it turns out that

Grant is also present at the ceremony. He approaches Arthur as she leaves the hearing room; he teasingly encourages her to return to Coleman and live happily ever after in DC; he then exits the frame leaving an indecisive Arthur behind; reentering the frame, he then takes her hand, and the two race off joyously to rousing music. Film is well written with several amusing scenes: thinking that he is the only guest in the house, Coleman attributes Grant's snoring (in the attic) to Arthur; when hounds arrive at the house following Grant's scent, they corner Coleman up a tree since he is wearing Grant's slippers; when Arthur is cooking bacon and eggs for Coleman, Grant, who is trapped in hiding, suffers grievously. A lot of good-humored fighting and slugging. Very entertaining. (2015)

Talk to Her 2002 Pedro Almodovar (Spain) 4.0 Lenor Watling as Alicia, an intensely beautiful young woman often nude in a coma, Javier Camara as the male nurse who lovingly takes care of her, Rosario Flores as young female bullfighter who also ends up in a coma, Dario Grandinetti as her lover who watches over her and comes to friendship with Javier. Sometimes curious and offbeat, but interesting and moving picture of devoted, romantic love and attachment growing up out of four characters' different versions of loneliness. Camara is excellent as the somewhat bizarre Benigno, who has never known life (he is a virgin), is desperately in love with Watling (he tells Grandinetti to "talk to her" and that she understands him although she is unconscious and according to science will never come out of her coma), and forms a deep and affectionate friendship with Grandinetti; he is like a smiling angel of kindness who asks only to minister lovingly to the needs of another. Watling moves the viewer because of her extreme beauty (alabaster skin, perfectly formed breasts, etc.). Grandinetti's and Flores' story is perhaps more conventional, but the former generates sympathy in the audience for his fidelity to Flores and then to Camara at the end. Plot shock is that Watling is found pregnant, and Benigno is sent to prison as a result of his 'crime.' A little silent fantasy movie inserted in the film (Alicia loved silent movies) shows the protagonist entering the vagina of his beloved never to reemerge – obviously symbolizing Benigno's acute romantic desire to be lost in his beloved. Despite the father's condemnation of Benigno's act, the viewer is tempted to see the 'rape' as an act of love since the baby's birth (he is stillborn) brings Watling back to consciousness. She walks with a limp, but she is as beautiful as ever, and after Benigno commits suicide out of loneliness, Grandinetti observes her and decides to take her under his wing; the author announces it to the audience by flashing their names on the screen – "___ y Alicia." Thus the movie has a happy ending: Grandinetti has fulfilled his relationship and friendship with Benigno by joining himself to his beloved. Despite its off-beat color, the viewer never loses interest; interesting off-beat characters and situations, a beautiful quiet contemplative atmosphere with pale colors; an eloquent sense of romanticism and devotion. (2006)

Tango 1998 Carlos Saura (Argentina) 2.5 Miguel Angel Sola as director who is creating and rehearsing a giant tango dance production in a huge sound stage in Buenos Aires; Mia Maestro as chiseled beautiful lithe young dancer with whom he falls in love; Vittorio Storaro is the cinematographer. The film celebrates the tango: it is a series of expertly choreographed and performed ballet numbers derived from the tango and held together by the thinnest of plot threads. Sola, whose face appears constantly in close-up, is rehearsing a series of tango dances – some in solo couples, some in large company – celebrating important events in Argentine history and the importance of tango to his own life. One recognizes the arrival of immigrants in Buenos Aires, the terror imposed by the military (soldiers tromping around, dancers being thrown into a mass grave), and perhaps Sola's experience with tango as a child (?). The director appears to be going through a personal crisis, probably romantic in nature: his wife leaves him for another man, and Sola, who feels the pressure of aging and decline, falls in love with the very young Mia Maestro. One supposes his fears and needs are played out in the dancing, but the viewer is often unsure about whether the dance scenes are part of the show or whether they reflect Sola's internal state. One's reaction to the film hinges on one's evaluation of the mise-en-scene and the dancing: everything is bathed in a reddish-yellowish light; the camera fluidly and poetically follows the dancers, who are sometimes filmed in silhouette; the dancing is expert, poetic, and expressive of the passionate tango style. But for a two-hour film, one needs some compelling frame to handle the dancing: perhaps a stronger narrative thread or a focus on Argentine history. (2007)

Tant qu'on a la santé 1966 Pierre Etaix (France) Four independent short films connected by the personage of Pierre Etaix. (2014)

L'insomnie. 2.5 Not particularly funny sketch of a man (Etaix) with insomnia reading a book about a vampire in bed as the man's wife sleeps next to him. In the about ten episodes Etaix reads, the editing depicts the gloomy scene of a Dracula-style castle, a vampire (again Etaix) that rises from his coffin at night (the opening of the lid and the emergence of the scrawny hand reminiscent of the 1931 'Dracula'), he pursues a young woman in the dark, she is rescued by a prince charming, daytime returns, the vampire is killed by the light, and the couple walks slowly through the door. Obviously satirizes vampire movies. The most amusing aspect is the mutual effect the reader and the fictional story have on one another: when the vampire's hand emerges, the reader is startled by the hand of his wife on his arm; when the savior carries the rescued girl upside down, the reader is shown reading his book upside down; when the reader mistakenly reads the same page twice, the action in the castle repeats the action too. The last shot has the wife in the bed opening her eyes and mouth to show that she now has vampire teeth – such is the power of fiction!

Le Cinématographe. 3.5 Amusing sketch about the experience of going to the movies. The first part satirizes through exaggeration the inconveniences and discomforts of attending a movie in a crowded theater. People around you are making a lot of noise – snoring, talking, fussing, and the usherettes in the back are gossiping. Very difficult to find a seat; usherettes constantly shining their flashlight in your face, and insisting on a tip every time poor, bemused schmuck Etaix changes his seat. Most of the seats have poor views – the extreme upward angle in the front row, the horizontally compressed side angle from the side seat, the bar cutting through the middle of the view of the screen in the first row of the balcony. Second half satirizes the world of movie (TV?) commercials: surrealistic exaggeration of the exaggerations of commercials – play on different meanings of "huile", e.g., included in cooking; everyday female characters wearing girdles and bras just like the posters on the street; "invisible" eyeglasses are, it turns out, non-existent; the "bombe universelle" is used to produce runaway bubbles in the bathtub, etc. Etaix uses the "bombe" as a grenade to blow up the whole damn thing.

Tant qu'on a la santé. 3.5 Apocalyptic indictment of the city and the clueless people that live in it. "Everyone's nerves are completely shot." As usual, very meticulous observation of small movements and gestures; often recalls Tati in its satire of modernity; often Keaton in his deadpan puzzlement (and sometimes wearing the porkpie hat). Three chapters connected by Etaix's apparently intense dislike of the city. Construction noise and vibration cause Etaix's girlfriend to break up with him and drive a doctor to distraction, becoming even more frazzled than his patients. Driving in the streets means exposure to massive exhaust pollution (but everyone maintains a forced smile [who tells them to do so?]). And Etaix, who is trying to have lunch and take his prescribed medications in a very crowded restaurant, transfers it all to a man seated beside him (medicine in the mustard, medication in a wine glass traded for a glass of red wine, etc.), who is barely able to stumble out of the restaurant. Would seem very few city dwellers would have good health! Etaix would come across as a real misanthrope if so many of the sketches weren't so funny.

Nous n'irons plus aux bois. 2.5 Scene is rural scene – fields and woods – contested by three parties: Etaix incompetently stalking with his shotgun; a taciturn peasant trying to construct a fence; a foolish middle-aged urban couple out for a picnic; all of them in one another's way. The peasant is a study in stoic frustration, as the (poorly constructed) fence he is trying to install keeps falling down as a result of the incompetence of Etaix and the couple. Matters begin slowly, then pick up momentum toward the end. Etaix, who rarely fires his gun, resembles Tati in his walk and stiff bow, the way he takes off his hat, etc. The couple is perhaps the most amusing since they are the most clueless: the business as they cross the stream, leaving their picnic case behind (then they have to go back and get it); the husband sinking into the mud as he tries to carry his wife; as their radio plays pop music, the two watching impassively as the peasant twitches (dances!) when he grabs hold of an electrified wire on the fence. Sketch lacks the satirical punch of his best.

The Temptress 1926 Fred Niblo 2.5 Greta Garbo in her second MGM feature, the dashing mustachioed Antonio Moreno as her serious minded lover, Lionel Barrymore looking thin and fit in a supporting role in Argentina, Roy d'Arcy as extremely melodramatic bad man gaucho in Argentina. MGM melodrama notable mainly for understanding Garbo's image early in her silent career. Usual full MGM treatment with lavish sets (especially the carnivale scene and the banquet scene in Paris at the beginning), extras, beautiful costumes, latest fashions of Garbo's dress and hairstyle, etc. Begins in corrupt Paris where already Garbo has driven one man to destruction and Moreno falls in love with her in fantasy-like dinner and garden scene (the two are mismatched since she is a "free" woman and he demands fidelity), then to Argentina (where men go to WORK, i.e., build a great dam) where Moreno escapes only to have Garbo show up and cause the deaths of two more men, and then back to Paris, where many years later Moreno re-encounters Garbo, who is now a drunk and perhaps something of a prostitute. Film is punctuated with exciting episodes, e.g., the toast and suicide scene of the banker in Paris, the fight scenes in Argentina that end in the death of two protagonists, the dynamiting of the dam followed by Moreno's heroics to save the city and to try to save the dam. Argentina is a bit silly, looking like the American Wild West except that men wear flat brimmed hats. Garbo is a *femme fatale*, a thoroughly self-indulgent and no-good woman who wreaks destruction all around her; she is more a textbook vamp in this period than compared to even a year later when her behavior in 'The Devil and the Flesh' was more realistic. She does however show that she has a conscience – she loves a child that befriends her, and in the extremely maudlin finale she donates her remaining ruby ring to a man that appears to be a haloed Jesus in an act of contrition for her bad life. Film continues the tradition of presenting dramas in faraway, more or less exotic places, where female misbehavior is more easily palatable for American audiences (we wait for impatience for the transition to more realistic contemporary dramas that came in with sound). See 5:00 for the initial unveiling of our protagonist, always performed with great care, and 38:30 for a classic entrance of a villain. (2009)

La Terra trema 1948 Luchino Visconti (Italy) 3.5 A cast of unknown amateurs, including several attractive ones, e.g., Lucia, the teenager who is seduced by the predatory police sergeant; N'toli, the oldest brother in the fatherless family; Cola, the younger brother, who at the end goes off to become a smuggler. Famous neo-realist film about the struggles of desperately poor fishermen living in a town in eastern Sicily; under N'toni they decide to branch out on their own and free themselves of the exploitative "wholesalers"; bad weather dashes their hopes, and when the wholesalers take their revenge and forbid N'toli employment, the family falls into the depths of hopeless poverty; Lucia dishonors herself by having sex with the police sergeant; the grandfather falls sick and takes off to the hospital; they have to leave their house and live in a true slum, etc. Shot in neo-realist fashion – long takes, slow pace, minimum of editing; amateur actors; much attention to visual detail in environment; analysis of the everyday lives and activities of common people. Film is narrated in Italian (voiceover is uncommon in neo-realist films), but the characters seem always to speak in Sicilian. Film seems to have a critical edge – the Catholic Church and public services of the state are nowhere apparent; the hammer and sickle appear several times on the wall (as does one slogan in favor of Mussolini behind the faces of the evil wholesalers); in the end, the narrator intones that the people will have to learn to band together and support one another, and in the meantime N'toni's family will have to start again at the bottom – which they do with the three remaining boys hiring themselves out for fishing. The lack of fellow feeling in the community is striking: despite the family's long life in Trezza, no one comes to help them when they are down and out; the bank officers march to repossess their house, and the neighbors look on in curiosity. Physical surroundings are quite depressing – mud, bare dirt, unpainted walls, no automobiles, dirty babies playing on the bare floor, incredibly ragged clothes, especially the rags the three boys go to work in at the end. Despite reserved style, the film generates a lot of sympathy for the suffering poor, primarily because we get to know all the members of N'toni's family so well and we suffer for them when they suffer: when appropriate the director is not loathe to hold the camera on a pretty face (Lucia thinking about becoming the police sergeant's girlfriend), a dignified older one; or shoot Cola from below sitting on a rock with the rugged coastline and glowering sky in the background. Shows how an understated cinematic style can generate feeling. (2007)

Terribly Happy 2008 Henrik Ruben Genz (Denmark) 2.5 Jakob Cedergren as Copenhagen cop, Robert, who has been exiled to South Jutland village after he pulled a gun on his wife and her lover; Lene Maria Christensen as battered woman in the village who comes to Robert for protection and then falls for him; Kim Bodnia as the violent, alcoholic abusive husband of Lene. Slow-moving, unpredictable, and often heavy-handed story about a neurotic guy who takes up an exile police post in a small Jutland village, does not fit in with local society, and eventually murders the woman that he loves (or at least lusts after), and then murders her husband. It is never explained why he is so quick to commit murder, but it is apparent that he has some deep-seated problem in his past life. The most interesting part of the story is the landscape of the film -- flat, desolate, barren, heavy clouded skies with roads straight as arrow pointing toward the horizon, and streets in the village deserted with the exception of the daughter of Bodnia who pushes her baby carriage and dolls up and down the streets. Another is the society of locals that greets him. The small group of men hang out in the local bar, drink beer, and look suspiciously at Robert whenever he walks in; they make it clear that they take care of their own problems and do not appreciate outside interference -- they bury their problems, human or otherwise, in the barren and deserted bog just outside of town. For most of the film, Robert is treated with suspicion and hostility by the locals, but when he kills Bodnia, whom they think killed his wife (and not Robert), they spring to Robert's defense: when the police bigshots from the neighboring town arrive to investigate the murder(s), the locals clean up the crime scene without telling Robert, and the film ends with Robert resigned to become a loyal member of local society. He has gotten away with the two crimes he committed, but he has paid the price with his freedom. A study in abnormal psychology; the actions of almost all the characters are difficult to fathom. What with the bog and the locals staring at intruders in the bar, the film sometimes seems like a horror film. (2011)

Terror by Night 1946 Roy William Neill 3.0 Basil Rathbone, Nigel Bruce, Alan Mowbray, Renée Godfrey. Whodunit starring Rathbone and Nigel; the relation to the Holmes stories is completely coincidental. Set in 1940s, Holmes doesn't wear deerstalker and cape, Godfrey very beautiful and glamorous; nothing looks like 1890s. Holmes hired to protect the Star of Rhodesia; but he isn't so successful, since he presides over two murders. Takes place entirely on train (depicted by an obvious model) racing from London to Scotland; more like Agatha Christie than Conan Doyle, as we introduce several rather colorful passenger suspects to audience and then Holmes has to uncover the guilty one. Bruce as particularly thick-headed Watson, who stumbles and bumbles and acts like a complete fool; Holmes is just amused. Mowbray is good as old India chum of Watson; turns out in tricky surprise ending that he is the infernally clever Colonel Sebastian Moran, the successor to the even more diabolical Professor Moriarty; Holmes is very happy to apprehend Moran at the end. (2005)

Terror by Night 1946 Roy William Neill (Britain) 2.5 Rather predictable, TV-like, Holmes whodunit taking place on a train in England and Scotland. Basil Rathbone perhaps less dominating and intrusive than usual as the suave, observant Sherlock Holmes; Nigel Bruce as the rather dim-witted Watson, although he does manage to disarm the suspect at the end; Alan Mowbray as an India friend of Watson, who turns out to be the famous arch-criminal, Col. Sebastian Moran; Dennis Hoey as the stolid Inspector Lestrade of Scotland Yard, on the train to protect the huge diamond, the Star of Rhodesia, which is owned by Lady Carstairs (Mary Forbes); Renée Godfrey very beautiful suspect on the train, but she can't act. Almost the entire narrative (not quite an hour) takes place on an overnight train heading from London to Edinburgh; a good departure sequence in London, but the frequent views of the exterior of the train en route are obviously an inferior model with sound effects added; the interior shots however suggest the atmosphere of a first-class carriage. The narrative follows the efforts of Holmes, who has been commissioned by Lady Carstairs to protect the diamond, to find out who is trying to steal the diamond and who killed Lady Carstairs' nephew with a minuscule poison dart in the neck. Many little surprises along the way: Holmes takes the precaution of exchanging a fake for the real diamond, keeping the latter on his person; the murderer (lower-class, cockney guy) is smuggled onto the train in a false bottom of a coffin; the guilty person turns out to be Mowbray, much to the consternation of Watson, who protests that Mowbray is a member of his club; the arrest of Moran (Mowbray) at the Scottish border

turns out to be a final wrinkle, since the so-called police are associates of the arch-fiend – Holmes of course foils the final plot. The film is only moderately entertaining suggesting that it is time to end the series. (2017)

Tess 1979 Roman Polanski (Britain) 4.0 Nastassia Kinsky gives controlled affecting performance as beautiful, sensitive, innocent, and resourceful young woman who suffers tragedy; Leigh Lawson as Tess' first seducer, who is after all not such a bad sort; Peter Firth as Tess' true love, Angel Clare, who has a hard time making up his mind. Beautiful and effective film adaptation of Thomas Hardy's novel. Setting is impeccable: the English countryside (actually filmed in France, it seems) is lovely in the summer and hard, bitter, muddy and icy in the winter. The costumes and movements of the characters in the landscape – from laborers toiling in rags in the fields, to smart carriages of the gentlefolk prancing down the roads, to worshipers emerging slowly from the quaint village kirks, to bobby-hatted policemen riding on their horses through the villages, to the humble interiors of the huts of the common people, to the elegant and airy manses of the upper classes, and to the absurd bustles on the dresses of upper class English women: all give us a vivid impression in the widescreen format of Hardy's English countryside and provincial society of the 1880s. The film seems less driven by fate than the book: the climax in Stonehenge thus seems a little out of place. The focus is on bad choices and the oppressive vanity of men: Tess' father sends her off to the fake d'Urbervilles to take advantage of their supposed relations (vanity); Alex's sexual vanity gets Tess pregnant; Angel shows that he is more tied to Victorian respectability than he thought when he cannot accept that Tess has already had a baby; Angel blindly returns to reclaim Tess after spending a while in Brazil, thus setting off the tragic climax in which Tess murders her husband (Alex, who turns out to have a sympathetic side since he is taking care of Tess' family), and then is captured in the confines of Stonehenge, to be hanged later for the murder. The film focuses perhaps more realistically on the psychology and motivations of the characters than the novel, which seems driven by a pagan, prehistoric fate. It is a delight to follow sympathetically the beautiful visage and the loving heart of Tess through the movie; and even when she is lost in the end, one gets the feeling that she is grateful for having had a little bit of happiness. Hard to imagine a better literary adaptation. (2008)

Das Testament des Dr. Mabuse 1933 Fritz Lang (Germany) 4.0 Otto Wernicke as Chief Inspector Lohmann, impulsive, intuitive, persistent, humorous, ineluctable tracker of Dr. Mabuse; Gustav Diessl as Kent, an ex-associate of Mabuse, who is in love with Lilli; Wera Liessem as Lilli, one of the most stilted and hackneyed of faithful lovers; Rudolf Klein-Rogge as the insane, cadaverous, and then dead Dr. Mabuse; Oscar Beregi Sr. as Dr. Baum, doctor in Mabuse's mental hospital – through the migration of Mabuse's ghost he takes on his character after his death. Fabulous Lang film that combines science fiction (the spiritual power of Mabuse), police procedural (Lohmann methodically figuring out what is going on and pursuing the guilty), and thriller (the long and suspenseful ending as Lohmann chases Baum back to the mental hospital); the film is very completely entertaining. The film, which was released just as Hitler came to power, was forbidden by Goebbels; after refusing an offer to make films for the Nazis, Lang escaped abroad, eventually to land in Hollywood, where he had a distinguished career. The film picks up after Mabuse has been in a mental hospital for ten years; although apparently insane and dying, he continues to direct his terrorist campaign against industrial German society; when he dies, he infiltrates Dr. Baum's body and soul, who continues the campaign until Lohmann tracks him down and stops the nonsense. Mabuse may be seen as a terrorist, since his aim is to cement the reign of crime through chaos and confusion in Germany – he is not seeking wealth and power, but pure destruction and mayhem. The film also appears to be a parable about the threat posed by Hitler and the Nazis to Germany – Mabuse has no rational aim, complete power over his subordinates, and the effect of his victory would be destruction and anarchy. Except for the stilted and absurd love interest between Diessl and Liessem, the film's individual scenes are a triumph. The din of auto horns at a traffic signal gives the assassins the opportunity to kill a man, and when the light turns green and the other cars move on, the dead man's car is immobile, attracting the attention of a policeman (cf. the first scene on the Nantucket ferry in Polanski's film, 'The Ghost Writer'). The scene in which Diessl and Liessem are trapped in a sealed room by Mabuse/Baum is extremely suspenseful, as they await a fatal explosion

planted by the evil one (they escape death by flooding the room with water). The final ten minutes as Lohmann pursues Baum/Mabuse through the tree-lined suburban streets of Berlin is evocative – ghost-like trees projected in white as Lohmann overcomes several obstacles (railroad crossing, horse cart in the road, etc.) to catch up with the culprit in the hospital. Much imaginative editing that includes an inventive use of sound – e.g., establishing connections between scenes by having Lohmann’s voice provide a sound bridge to a following scene; also frequent close-up photography of desk surfaces to make a point about the characters. Enormously entertaining film showing Lang adapting in rapid and expert fashion to sound in film. (2010)

Testament of Youth 2014 James Kent (Britain) 3.5 Classic adaptation of Vera Brittain’s coming-of-age memoir (1933) that focuses on the devastating impact of World War on Britain. Alicia Vikander pretty and slight as proto-feminist young woman, who insists on going to Oxford against her family’s wishes; Taron Egerton as her beloved, good-humored brother, Edward; Colin Morgan as friend, Victor, who has a secret passion for Vera; Kit Harington as fiancé Roland; Dominic West as Vera’s traditional, but sensitive father; Emily Watson looking surprisingly mature as Vera’s mother; Miranda Richardson with wild hair as rather forbidding don at Somerville College. Film is beautifully photographed: sumptuous photos of lakes, hills, the lovely manor house, rocky crags of Buxton nestled amidst the Peak District (but where did the seaside cliffs come from?); extensive scenes of a traditional college in Oxford (not apparently Somerville) where Vera is studying; hospitals where Vera is working as a volunteer nurse; shots of horrifying World War I battlefields – soldiers shocked and alienated, mud and barbed wire, bloody, maimed dying men in the field hospitals. Film starts as feminist coming-of-age film, in which Vera insists successfully on being permitted to attend Oxford – not common in 1914; sharp scene in which she reacts very angrily that her parents buy a grand piano as a temptation to stay home like a proper young lady. Despite her academic dedication, she develops affection for Roland and is angry when he doesn’t write her. The film however soon switches to a focus on World War I. Its impact on Vera is devastating. With the men in her life off to France, she quits university and volunteers as a war nurse. Her friend Victor soon dies from a head wound. Even more shattering is the death of her beloved Roland: he returns shell-shocked on leave and the two agree to get married on his Christmas leave, but he is killed first on patrol. Even worse for Vera is the fate of her brother: while serving as a nurse near the front, Vera finds Edward severely wounded and nurses him back to health; he then departs jauntily for a supposedly less dangerous assignment on the Italian front, but he is also killed: when the messenger comes to the family home with the news, the father breaks down in uncontrollable sobs. The film begins with Vera pushing inconsolably through the crowds celebrating the 1918 Armistice and then flashes back to the bulk of the story. The scene is repeated toward the end: having lost three men in her life, Vera is heartbroken and abandoned; however instead of demanding revenge, she rises in front of a crowd and preaches forgiveness for the Germans, who had been victims of the same cruel stupidity as the British. The film then mentions that she married in 1925 and became a lifelong pacifist (she died in 1970). A heartbreakingly faithful adaptation of Brittain’s book, distilling an anti-war message out of the calamitous personal experiences of the author. (2017)

La Teta Asustada 2009 Claudia Llosa (Peru) 2.5 Magaly Solier persistently impassive as woman obsessed by the fear of being raped. Long, flat film about a young woman who since she was a fetus in her mother’s belly when she was brutalized and raped, is obsessed that the same would happen to her. She has drunk “the milk of sorrow” from her mother’s breast (“la teta asustada”); she even goes to the extreme of inserting a potato in her vagina to prevent rape. The film is essentially about her struggle to gain feeling and to live like any other member of the human race: when her mother dies, she does not have the money to bury her; so she and her friends embalm (?) her mother, and Magaly goes to work for a rich Limeña pianist, who agrees to give her a pearl from a broken necklace for every song Magaly sings her; after virtually endless dead ends, Magaly finally has two experiences that suggest that she is breaking through – she befriends a kind gardener and accepts help from him, and she has the operation in the hospital to remove the potato from her body; the film ends quietly on a moderately hopeful note. A frustrating film despite the careful, arty cinematography (shots always carefully balanced and static and held for a long time) and the long ethnographic observations of especially the wedding customs of the

Peruvian poor that are presented in a matter-of-fact, often humorous tone (Magaly's cousin is apparently a wedding planner). The film plods along at a snail's pace – long scenes illustrating Magaly's shyness and refusal to engage seem to follow one another ad infinitum. There is little progress or change; Magaly's mother never does get buried (and what is keeping her body from decomposing?), and when there finally is some movement toward the end of the film, it is small and tentative. Solier appears to be a good actress, but her downcast eyes, the turning of her back, rapid gait meant to avoid human contact or conversation – all become repetitive and boring after a few scenes. Much is made of the sometimes touching, recitative-like prose songs that Magaly makes up to express her feelings. The potato business perhaps strains credibility – the matter of fact attitude of the doctor, the shoots the viewer sees falling on the floor when Magaly bends down to cut them off. Very much like a slow-moving European art film. (2010)

Tetro 2009 Francis Ford Coppola 2.5 Vincent Gallo as Tetro, an angry, alienated man hiding from his father in Buenos Aires; Alden Ehrenreich as Bernie, his adolescent, innocent-faced younger brother who arrives to discover his family heritage; Maribel Verdu as Tetro's live-in girlfriend. Rather mystifying, beautifully photographed black and white family drama set in Buenos Aires but with a minimum of local color despite the shots of the streets and the Patagonian landscape; it could have been shot almost anywhere. Film deals with the scars inflicted by the father of Tetro and Bernie, an egotistical, dominating orchestral conductor: Bernie knows almost nothing about his family background (credible that he is so ignorant?) and Tetro is so filled with anger and even hatred toward his father that he wants nothing to do with his little brother and he won't even talk about his background (even his spouse doesn't know). Gallo dominates the film with his angry, often raging, glowering presence; the film has several angry scenes usually involving Tetro's fights with his brother and his girlfriend. The narrative seems to come apart in the last half hour: in flashbacks filmed in color the viewer discovers that the father stole Tetro's girlfriend from him (for no particular reason); and in a highly melodramatic scene in the middle of heavy traffic in a Buenos Aires street Tetro reveals that he is the father and not the brother (!) of Bernie, and the two embrace with the fade-out. It is difficult for the viewer to make sense of such a vast generational misunderstanding. Throughout the film the viewer has to deal with Coppola's ruminations about art – there is an arty striptease, everyone wanting to be successful in the theater, lots of kowtowing to a powerful theater critic, Bernie taking Tetro's unfinished play, adding an ending, and then having it produced in order to save Tetro from himself! Bernie has a salutary effect on his brother /father, since not only does he get the latter to come clean about his paternity, but he has moved through his writer's block (depicted graphically through photographing pages with lots of words x-ed out). Perhaps the best part of the film is the moody, arty, fluid black and white photography and the evocative Astor Piazzolla-like score that takes advantage of tango strains. The film suffers seriously from the lack of narrative coherence and the self-consciously arty visual style. (2010)

Thank You for Smoking 2006 Jason Reitman 3.0 Aaron Eckhart as super smooth-talking pro-tobacco lobbyist who thrives in his job (and he has to pay the mortgage), Katie Holmes rather over her head as a newspaper reporter who sleeps with Eckhart and turns the tables on him to get the scoop she was looking for, Rob Lowe hilarious in cameo as fast-talking Hollywood agent who concocts a plan to have two movie stars light up cigarettes after sex while floating in space (to make cigarettes glamorous again), William H. Macy as moralizing Vermont senator with the habit of blinking at the wrong time, Sam Elliot as the Marlboro Man who now has lung cancer and who is bribed by Eckhart to remain quiet about his plight, Robert Duvall in cameo as Winston-Salem cigarette baron who has a humorous slant on hypocrisy and immorality, Maria Bello pretty smashing as alcohol lobbyist, who is chagrined that her vice doesn't kill as many Americans as Eckhart's cigarettes. Amusing, although a long side this side of hilarious, satire about the tobacco industry and the lobbyists (Eckhart works for the Academy of Tobacco Studies) who defend it – their tack is to inject doubt in the minds of the public and pretend they are libertarians – what makes America great is our freedom – supporting freedom of choice. Film does not really go for the jugular: perhaps because it has to make the protagonist more or less sympathetic, his misconduct is constantly undercut by caveats – he does stand for freedom of choice (but this film is not a libertarian film), and he is good humored, and he is a good father who is attached to his son and who

strives to get more time with him in negotiation with his divorced mother, and the opposition – Macy's senator from Vermont – is made to look foolish, etc. The humor of the film comes primarily from slams against the oily hypocrisy of the tobacco industry and its hired guns (Duvall's good ol' boy cigarette baron, the mission to the Marlboro Man, the cynical statements of the three members of the Mod Squad ('Merchants of Death'), who argue about which of their vices causes the most deaths, etc.). The ending is confusing – before a congressional hearing Eckhart says he would buy his son's first pack of cigarettes, if he really wanted to smoke (libertarian freedom of choice matters?), but then he resigns his post from Tobacco Studies in front of the cameras. The movie's slant is not clear; but there are plenty of amusing moments and amusing performances. (2006)

That Hamilton Woman 1941 Alexander Korda (Brtain) 3.5 Vivien Leigh pert, stylish, beautiful, and expressive as the wife of the English ambassador in Naples – she falls in love with Horatio Nelson; Laurence Olivier stoic, dutiful, a bit wan after he loses his arm, as the famous English admiral that wins one naval engagement after another; Alan Mowbray as the stiff-upper-lip English ambassador and art lover who doesn't mind too much that his wife has a long affair with Nelson; Gladys Cooper forbidding, condemning, and yet somehow sympathetic as Nelson's jilted wife. Outstanding romance with great star power and a first class production that doubles as a patriotic resistance film against Hitler in the first (alone) years of World War II. J The romance is between Leigh, married to Mowbray and with a checkered past, with the married but rising star, Horatio Nelson; they live openly together when he is in Naples – Leigh's husband doesn't mind much so long as he has access to his paintings and statues; after some icy confrontations with Nelson's wife, the two lovers are separated for a while when Nelson goes to sink the Danish fleet at Copenhagen, but he then returns to live with her in an impressive country house (they have a daughter that we never see) until Nelson is called to fight the French fleet at Trafalgar, where he is killed in the midst of victory. The romantic connection/chemistry between the two lovers is always convincing (after all, they were actually lovers at the time): Olivier sometimes seems a bit depressed and fatalistic as a lover, but Leigh positively glows when declaring love or sorrow in her close-ups, particularly in her confrontations with Nelson's wife and in her final scene as she waits for the messenger officer to tell her that Nelson has been killed. The producers manage to finesse the Hayes Code by having Leigh declare on several occasions that their adulterous affair is "wrong" (followed however by a period in which the two live openly together!), and by placing the story in a flashback frame that has a slovenly, haggard Leigh state at the end of the film that she has no future. The romantic story fits perfectly into the patriotic one. Both Mowbray and Olivier state on several occasions that Napoleon (i.e., Hitler) is a mad tyrant who will never stop until he has disrupted the wonderful empire the British have built, that he cannot be trusted when he says he wants peace, that peace agreements made with him in the past were illusory (vide Munich), that every Englishman and Englishwoman must do their duty (as Nelson says of course just before the beginning of the final battle) even if it costs them their life. The only naval engagement in the film is Trafalgar at the end, which is portrayed impressively with large scale-model ships and special effects. An excellent pro-British propaganda-romance film emanating from Hollywood in Britain's hour of need. (2008)

That Old Feeling 1997 Carl Reiner 3.0 Dennis Farina hilariously obnoxious and verbal as ex-husband of Midler; Midler sassy and equally obnoxious as ex-wife of Farina (she screams that she is not neurotic, she is a bitch!); Paula Marshall as moderately entertaining daughter of the two; David Rasche also hilarious as jargon-talking psychologist husband of Midler (the two seem completely mismatched); Gail O'Grady also very funny as Farina's wife – an interior decorator who uses lots of Greek statues and has lifted and remade almost every part of her body. Very amusing film about Farina and Midler brought back together for the wedding of their daughter (very respectable and formal, since she is marrying a fellow who is moving into politics). They had been married to one another, but are now separated and married to other spouses. The fireworks begins when they meet one another. They have an intensely neurotic love-hate relationship, and on several occasions they have donnybrook fights that begin quietly with civil conversations that escalate over several minutes to shrieking confrontations that are intensely comic in their witty put-downs and insults; and then they can return to hot sex (a bird's eye view of the sports car shaking and vibrating with their gyrations). Film ends in complete improbability with

the two principals abandoning their spouses and getting back together (no doubt that they love one another, they are just going to have to put up with a lot of conflict!), and Paula abandoning her stupid and priggish boyfriend to run off with the rather unattractive paparazzi (Danny Nucci). Film suffers from a bad script and some so-so performances (Marshall is rarely convincing), but the pyrotechnics of the Farina-Midler relationship is very entertaining. (2009)

That Touch of Mink 1962 Delbert Mann 2.0 Doris Day as unemployed “poor” girl that is still guarding her virginity (Day was 38 when she made the film) – she is however always perfectly dressed and coiffed; Cary Grant looks bored as very wealthy, unmarried executive attracted to Day; Gig Young as Grant’s self-doubting, wise-cracking assistant, who stands up for female virtue; Audrey Meadows as Day’s roommate – forever cynical, suspicious of men, helping Day protect her maidenhood. Will-she, won’t-she Day film about a girl that wants to wait until marriage, but is tempted by the handsomest (Grant!), richest (reserves all the seats in a 707 to fly her to Bermuda), most charming (Grant), and thoughtful (courts her but doesn’t pressure her to have sex) man in New York. Terminally boring, culturally outdated, rarely funny romantic comedy toward the end of the Doris Day epoch. Most of the film is taken up with Day’s hesitations about going abroad (always Bermuda) with Grant and with Meadows’ cynical admonitions that the only thing a man cares about is getting you into bed, and before you accede to his demands, you better have that ring on your finger. A lot of extremely corny humor, e.g., Day, and then Grant, breaking out with a fake rash on their faces whenever the subject of having sex comes up; or Young’s psychiatrist misunderstanding his patient’s story to think that Young fell in love with a guy, married him, and then had a baby with him (smutty and stupid). Day’s reluctance however is overcome by her attraction to such a nice (and handsome) man, but probably even more by his fabulous wealth – extreme luxury all the way. Grant never touches her (sexually) in the film until the Hollywood kiss in the closing scene. Grant is pretty Buddha-like throughout the film, but Gig Young is lively and funny; Day is just annoying. Some reasonably funny slapstick humor in the last ten minutes. A good example of how cultural changes make a movie difficult to watch (what girl in 2016 cares about her “virtue” when pursuing a billionaire?). Doris Day movies were old hat by the following year. (2016)

That Uncertain Feeling 1942 Ernst Lubitsch 2.5 Barely amusing drawing room comedy about a young wife that suffers from hiccups. Merle Oberon as the very pretty, glamorous, and quietly sexy young woman (unfortunately she is not very funny); Melvyn Douglas as her somewhat older husband, who wants to win her back from her infatuation with...; Burgess Meredith as irritating eccentric pianist, who pursues married woman Oberon and shouts “Phooey” whenever he sees something (especially paintings) he doesn’t like; Alan Mowbray actually amusing as a psychiatrist; Eve Arden in small but effective role as a secretary that dates Douglas after his divorce. Film takes place in upper middle class venues in New York. Narrative has Douglas treating his beautiful young wife with indifference, which leads her to be attracted to Meredith. Douglas has a very slow-moving plan to win her back by agreeing to a divorce and rendering her hopelessly jealous (a dangerous strategy!). Most of the second half of the film consists of Lubitsch-style set pieces that don’t gel. The exception is the scene where Douglas and Oberon cooperating try to get Douglas to hit his wife with Arden watching as the witness (to provide an excuse for divorce); Douglas’ inability to hit her even when she provokes him colorfully, the stilted nature of their line delivery, the other lawyer’s repeated attempts to get Arden to read back part of the letter he is dictating – all make for a hilarious, screwball-type of scene, whose success unfortunately is not repeated in any of the other long scenes (e.g., the bedroom farce scene with Douglas, Oberon and Arden). The ending fails to sparkle: Douglas maneuvers Meredith into leaving his apartment, whereupon Douglas locks the door, springs over a footstool, and goes back into his bedroom. Perhaps the older Lubitsch is losing his zip? (But his next film was ‘To Be or not to Be’.) Perhaps more significant is that the Hays Code makes it almost difficult to pull off a sex comedy; how can you devise a Lubitsch Touch without having human sex foibles as a target? Nevertheless, fun to watch the master at work with the help of first-rank stars. (2016)

Theeb 2014 Naji Abu Nowar (Jordan) 3.0 Adventure desert drama about the coming-of-age of a nine-year-old boy In Jordan during World War 1. Nominated for Academy Award for best foreign

language film in 2016; produced by numerous Middle Eastern parties including King Abdullah II of Jordan. All the roles played by untrained native Bedouins including Jacir Edi Al-Hwietat, who plays the shy boy Theeb in an inexpressive way. The film is set during the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire (the same period as ‘Lawrence of Arabia’); all the characters are native Bedouins except for an English officer that is killed by Ottoman sympathizers. Theeb leaves his family tent with his brother to escort the English officer to the “iron donkey” (the railroad); along the way all of Theeb’s party are killed; Theeb is rescued by a Bedouin pilgrim guide (but he must have been fighting since he is wearing a bandolero replete with bullets); at the end Theeb kills his rescuer, explaining to the Ottoman officer present that he is taking revenge for the death of his brother; Theeb is then released by the Ottomans and rides toward the horizon on a camel. The inexpressive acting is redeemed by the lovely desert scenery – sand, scrubby plants, blue skies, sheer rocks and mountains jutting out of the desert; the cadavers strewn on the ground and the ubiquitous flies buzzing around everyone’s head are not so lovely. The viewer supposes that Theeb is maturing in the course of the film – learning about the outside world represented by the Ottomans, the Englishman, and the railroad, coming into intimate contact with death and loss, learning to fend for himself in a hostile environment after the death of his brother. But the ending isn’t clear about what he has learned. He kills the man that helped him and who has told the Ottoman officer that Theeb is his son, thus showing the persistence of tribal loyalty and justice even when gratitude and a more open appreciation of protective strangers might have prevailed; then he rides off into the desert, leaving the viewer wondering about the impact of the experience on him. Jacir is an attractive little boy and the locales and tribal culture of the area is exotic. The film is more interesting than gripping. (2016)

Thelma and Louise 1991 Ridley Scott 4.0 Susan Sarandon as Louise, a waitress in an Arkansas restaurant who persuades Thelma to take off with her on a girls’ weekend out; Geena Davis beautiful, sexy, charming and engaging as Thelma, the classic bored housewife who has more than a little wild streak in her; Brad Pitt as JD, charming six-pack abbed footloose drifter and ex-con, who seduces Thelma and creates a crisis running off with the girls’ nest egg; Harvey Keitel as Arkansas State Police investigator, the only male who sympathizes with the girls and who tries to keep the FBI from gunning them down; Christopher McDonald as hilarious dim-witted husband to Thelma, whom he calls a “nutcase”. Completely charming and engaging girls’ road movie about two women who are unconsciously wishing to bust out (especially Thelma), and get more than they bargained for when Thelma is almost raped in a country bar and Louise, irritated with the way the potential rapist is talking to them, shoots him dead through the chest. The chase takes them across Oklahoma into New Mexico and Arizona and ends up, it seems, in magnificent American scenery in Monument Valley and the Grand Canyon (although I wondered whether it might be Big Bend National Park). After the encounter with JD, Thelma robs a country store and the pursuit picks up, ending in the famous conclusion where, cornered by dozens of police officers, Susan and Thelma exchange their last deep bonding words, and drive off the cliff into nothingness: the car soars into the air (suggesting a spiritual flight), and we cut to the credits before it starts to fall (the alternate ending has it disappear far below in a dizzying fall). Terrifically funny humor mostly at the expense of men, who – with the exception of Keitel – are usually ego-afflicted, braggart fools: the stuck up would-be rapist in the Arkansas honky-tonk; Brad Pitt, who although charming and a great boy toy, turns out to be an inveterate thief; McDonald’s husband who is clueless, worries whether the investigation of his wife’s disappearance is going to cost him some money, and is mocked mercilessly by Pitt; the poor police office in New Mexico, who is tough so long as he is in charge with his hat on but turns into a trembling whiner when tough Thelma turns the tables on him and locks him in the trunk of his cruiser; the obscene tanker truck driver, who is made a fool of by the girls, and when (like all men) he mouths off at them (even though they are holding a gun on him!), the women shoot out the tires of his truck, and then blow it up in a huge fireball. The performances of both women are terrific; most striking is the growth of their personal bond, which reaches an epiphany and fulfillment in their magnificent suicide over the edge of the cliff. The film is very hard on men – Sarandon’s hard feelings may be traced back to a rape she suffered some time ago in Texas (and she thus refuses to drive through that state), and of course if the husband wasn’t such a fool and the bastard in the club had not tried to rape her, Thelma would never have turned to crime! American women love the movie: they have

a vicarious chance to do what they would never do in reality, break free, get away from the tyranny of men (!), and live free in the American way –“On the Road”. (2009)

Them 1954 Gordon Douglas 3.5 James Whitmore, James Arness (sounds exactly like John Wayne), Edmund Gwenn, Joan Welton. Effective sci fi/monster thriller from 1950s; playing on fear of nuclear energy, postulates large sugar-loving but also carnivorous ants produced by atomic explosion mutation. Science is very accurate: the ants behave just like real ones, and a good part of the danger comes from fears that the queens will escape and start new nests in other parts of the world. Special effects consist of credible constructed semi-robotic ants that wave their antennae and mandibles and then are incinerated by flame throwers. Script is taut and interesting. Cinematography often noirish, and always sharp. Early scenes in the New Mexico desert are particularly good, as we are spooked by the sounds of the ants, the shock of the little girl, and the creepy scene in the Johnson store (a very ‘noir’ scene); we are kept on edge and the threat unfolds bit by bit. The finale confrontation in the sewers of Los Angeles is violent, tense, well directed and exciting. All acting is good, with perhaps exception of Arness sounding a bit too much like John Wayne; Whitmore is engagingly decent as sensitive policeman; Gwenn is avuncular, serious, yet eccentric as all-knowing scientist; Fess Parker does picturesque cameo of pilot who has encountered queen ants that he identifies as ‘flying saucers.’ Characters are developed enough so that audience becomes engaged and cares what happens to them. Welton is daughter of the scientist who knows a lot more about bugs than any of the men; she does not develop a romantic relationship. Typical 50s threat pic. The threat comes from something 50s folk were worried about – atomic energy – and we have to rely on the good ol’ establishment authorities – police, military, politicians cooperate seamlessly under the guidance of the scientists to defeat the threat. There is no possibility of negotiation; the enemy is wiped out by extreme military measures. Excellent edgy, modern score by Bronislau Kaper (‘Red Badge of Courage’). (2006)

The Theory of Everything 2014 James Marsh (Britain) 3.0 Eddie Redmayne almost perfect as the brilliant, engaging, good-humored cosmologist, Stephen Hawking; Felicity Jones as his pretty-as-a-button, faithful, long-suffering wife, Jane, herself a scholar of medieval Iberian poetry; Simon McBurney as Hawking’s father; Harry Lloyd as the organist of the local church – he and Jane fall in love after her relationship with Stephen begins to fray. A feel-good biopic of about the first half of Hawking’s career, focusing on personal issues such as how to maintain his mobility, how to communicate with the outside world (his disease – related to ALS – does not affect the brain), his loving relationship with his wife, Jane, and his children. We first encounter him as a nerdy but charming and lively student at Cambridge University (he had gotten his BA at Oxford), where he becomes a graduate student focusing on cosmology – after much indecision, he decides to do his Ph.D. these on time with emphasis on black holes. At Cambridge he meets the pixie-like Jane, who falls deeply in love with him, and agrees to marry him even after his grim diagnosis is known – the doctors give him only two years to live. The film gives Jane much of the credit for motivating Hawking to put his substantial intellect to good use; she bears him three children (he at one point remarks to his friend that his penis is obviously not affected by his disease), then cares for him, creating an environment in which he can indulge the speculations/theories about the shape and evolution of the universe (did it begin with a black hole and then explode outwards? Or has it always been there and is existing now in a steady state?). He professes atheism as necessary for a physicist, although he sometimes mentions God in his writing and is tempted to make concessions to the Big Bang theory since it pleases his wife, who is a dedicated member of the Church of England. The film ends on a sweet and pretty note. Jane and the organist are waiting for the right moment to get together, and Stephen also falls in love with his nurse, who finds him “funny and brilliant”. When Stephen tells Jane that he has decided to take the nurse with him for a visit to America, they both acknowledge that their relationship is over by sobbing – watching the stricken Stephen cry is very moving. The editing then regresses at high speed through their life together ending at the moment that they first kissed on the bridge in Cambridge; the implication seems to be that he would not have made that journey without his mate. A life well spent so far, and although they might no longer be joined as husband and wife, both are cared for and they will maintain mutual friendship and esteem. Movie is easy to watch – interesting, endearing accompanied by a light orchestral score (Johann Johannson); feel good all the way through. (2015)

There Will Be Blood 2007 Paul Thomas Anderson 3.0 Daniel Day Lewis as small-time sociopathic oil tycoon operating in California in early 20th century; Paul Dano as annoyingly adolescent preacher who is constantly at odds with Lewis; Kevin J. O'Connor dead pan and blank as Lewis' supposed half-brother. Disturbing, violent, unrelentingly pessimistic, overpowering film about oil tycoon and his demons. Film is diverting in the first part with its focus on the outside of Lewis' (Plainview's) personality, the work of the ambitious and ruthless oil tycoon, the blank, forbidding landscape that is set in California but actually filmed in Texas. Focus is unremitting on the character of Plainview – intense, driven, competitive, unforgiving, violent, murderous, internally torn, miserable. He can show humanity – some of the time in his relationship with his adopted son – but (perhaps) his unhappy family background makes it impossible to be normal, happy, satisfied, to get along with other people, to enjoy the fruits of his labor. He murders the man who claims he is his half brother when he finds out that he has lied. He exploits his son as a family values hook to soften the hearts of the people that he is negotiating with; he sends him off to school by a trick; and when later the son marries his childhood sweetheart, Lewis blazes in anger, insults him, and does all in his power to communicate his own despair to him. Most of the emotional violence is associated with Lewis' rivalry with Eli (Dano), the preacher. The two take turns humiliating one another: Lewis refuses to pay him the money he promised, beats him up, and smears him with oil muck; Eli then forces Lewis to go through an orgy of shrieking, violent confession in an evangelical baptism ceremony; and finally Lewis strikes back in the last scene of the film where he forces Eli to denounce himself as a false prophet, and then he murders him in a bowling alley with a bowling pin! The last scene is an epic confrontation between two powerful forces; it is carried out with excessive and lurid violence, another chapter in the obsession of American filmmakers with brutality. Day-Lewis performance is epic and overpowering; the measured, rhythmic, mellifluous tones of his delivery appears to be based on the speaking style of John Huston. The cinematography is memorable in its stark poetry, depicting the hard struggle of the prospectors against an unfriendly environment. The music is also stark, modernist and arresting (dissonant sounds played by chamber groups), although the last movement to Brahms' dramatic violin concerto twice breaks out somewhat inappropriately. The subject matter of the film is hard to grasp: a psychological case study of a psychopath? Or is the author characterizing American businessmen as murderous, aggressive, ambitious and unrelievedly materialistic (atheist) in their campaign to extract wealth from the earth? But then the opposing force – religion – is presented as bogus and hysterical. It seems that everyone in America is mean and bad. Film has the virtue of anti-Hollywood, but some of the conventions of Hollywood might have benefitted it. (2008)

Thérèse 1986 Alain Cavalier (France) 4.0 Catherine Mouchet. Extraordinary, unique film about the spiritual and personal experience of St. Theresa of Lisieux, and of the women in the convent where she lived. A little hard to differentiate among characters, but Mother Superior stands out as a woman of her convictions, overcoming her personal dislikes (for Theresa and her sisters) with Jesus' command to love and share and looking forward to being relieved of her responsibility at the next election; she often says 'no' but then gives in. Mise-en-scene is extraordinary: every scene evokes 17th century French painting (like Philippe de Champaigne's "Mere Angelique") with strong, stony colors, exact, tactile textures, abstracted orientation of arrangements, and textured, though blank, backgrounds; short scenes with carefully pronounced dialogue, and then fade out followed by sudden appearance of next scene; very little sound effects and no soundtrack music. The life of the convent is simple and rather joyous: they have little money and they accept gifts from the community; they perform menial tasks such as washing the laundry, gutting fish (the cat eats the organs); but they are loyal to one another and celebrate Christmas (their lover's birthday) together. They cover their heads when men (doctor, priests) are present. Religious values of 19th century French nuns (Carmelite) emphasized: accept pain and suffering, and love Jesus and your fellow nuns. Quasi erotic nature of their commitment is brought out – nuns talk constantly in lovers' terms about their relationship with Jesus; they wear a wedding dress and virgin's wreath when they enter the convent; they read incessantly the lovers' poems from the 'Song of Solomon'; racy love poem appears to be ok if it is from the Bible. Also apparent that commitment to the convent life is related to human love – Lucy's true bodily love for Theresa feeds Theresa's love for Jesus, but Lucy cannot tolerate the absence of bodily love, and she escapes the convent by climbing down a

knotted rope. They want to be martyrs (die for their faith), and some of them inflict pain on themselves (hair shirts, spiked wristbands, etc.). Theresa is beautiful, joyous, pure, enthusiastic, brimming with faith and love of Jesus, stubborn – she will not be turned back in her determination to enter the convent (she was too young so she visits the pope to get his permission), and to become a saint (but “in secret” since she does not want to be prideful). She misses her papa, who is left by all his daughters, all five of whom have gone to the convent. Pathos when the father dies; and especially at end with impending death of Theresa from tuberculosis – “je souffre! Je souffre!” and then it abates; she has doubts about her eternal destiny on the surface, but makes it clear that underneath her faith is firm and she awaits her union with Jesus. She dies off camera, and film makes clear that she is made a saint a few years later. (2005)

Thérèse Raquin 1953 Marcel Carné (France) 3.5 Simone Signoret with wide forehead as rather passive and fatalistic Lyon housewife; Raf Vallone tall, dark, and handsome as Italian truck driver, Laurent, who rings Thérèse’s bells; Jacques Duby in almost caricatured role as Thérèse’s sickly, wimpy, momma’s boy husband; Sylvie as disturbing mother of the husband – she has a great hate-filled stare that she uses on Thérèse after she is paralyzed; Maria-Pia Casilio as cute-as-a-button Georgette; Roland Lesaffre as handsome, fair-haired, ironic sailor who attempts to blackmail the couple. Excellent postwar film by Carné whose reputation has been maligned by the New Wave. Set in dreary, lower middle class Lyon, the first half of the film is a romantic drama with married Thérèse seduced by Vallone; the second half is a suspense thriller as to whether the unhappy couple will be caught by the police, and how they will deal with the blackmailer. All aspects of the film are of the highest Carné standard with the possible exception of the *deus ex machina* ending, in which the blackmailer is killed by a wayward truck when he is on the way home to prevent Georgette from posting the incriminating letter to the examining magistrate. The switch to the thriller genre in midstream opens up the possibility of a happy Hollywood ending, but Carné carries over his prewar fatalism, invoking an accident to ensure that the three main characters are all destroyed. The visual texture of the film is perfect: crisp, expressive photography, precisely detailed sets that convincingly sketch in the tedious and unexciting existence of the main characters in the fabric shop, in the tight spaces of their apartments, in the fleabaggish hotel; perfect tact in editing (often long shots) that expertly bring out the dramatic and psychological weight of a scene (any scene with the mother, the scene in the train corridor when Thérèse and Laurent realize that they have committed murder, any scene in which the sailor speaks disquietingly to the couple). All the acting is good, although sometimes caricatured (Duby); Signoret is passive and fatalistic; Vallone is handsome, romantic, and determined; Lesaffre is ironic, ingratiating, somewhat effeminate; Sylvie is terrifying as paralyzed Mom who knows that Signoret has murdered her son and who transfixes her with immobile, hate-filled stare (only her eyes follow her across the room). The film reminds one of some American *film noirs* (‘The Postman Always Rings Twice’) and the cynicism and fatalism of other pre-New Wave directors, e.g., Clouzot in ‘Les diaboliques’ or ‘Le corbeau’. An unknown French masterpiece that reminds us of some of the harm done by the prejudices of the New Wave. (2009)

They Live By Night 1949 Nicholas Ray (RKO) 4.0 Farley Granger as improbable innocent who has just escaped from prison; Kathy O’Donnell as equally innocent teenager with no experience of life; Howard da Silva as the one-eyed Chickamaw; Helen Craig as the woman with a bad conscience who betrays the lovers in a (naïve?) bid to free her husband from prison. Deeply emotional and moving first film by Nicholas Ray about star-crossed lovers and, since this is essentially a film noir, their inevitable road to destruction. Before the credits – “This boy ... and this girl ... were never properly introduced to the world we live in,” the story being about pure innocence caught in the trap of the real world, whether criminal or law-abiding. Granger and O’Donnell, neither of whom have the slightest understanding of the compromises of the real world, latch on to one another, Granger because he wants to insulate himself from the criminal world, O’Donnell because she wants to escape her abusive father. With money from a bank heist that Granger was a part of, the two wander and hide from the law that has decided that Granger is the leader of the gang. O’Donnell becomes pregnant and the two dream of escaping to a better place, perhaps Mexico. The viewer knows that they do not have a chance; they are turned in by a friend of the gang, and after Granger is shot down by the police in front of their motel room, O’Donnell picks up a love letter he has written and walks back to the cabin with an uncertain future for her and her baby; she is photographed in sentimental style like a dreamy, faith-filled Madonna whose trust and hope cannot be belied.

The film is packed with powerful near-sentimental emotion throughout. Close-ups are intense, many scenes being shot in the semi-darkness at nighttime. Granger is wide-eyed, unconscious of real-world obstacles, especially when he buys his beloved a watch from a jeweler in the big city or dreams of escaping to Mexico with his wife. O'Donnell is always angelic, sweet-faced, completely devoted to her lover (and as soon as he is dead she transfers her devotion to her baby). The force that drives the pair to destruction is not some mysterious fate (as in 'Double Indemnity' or 'Detour') but the social corruption of the world – thieves, prisons, straight people in the small towns of Texas who don't care about innocence and salvation, the woman who sells them out to the police in a chimerical scheme to get her husband out of prison. While the lovers look on in admiration, the wide-mouthed Marie Bryant reinforces the idea with her pessimistic night-club song "Your Red Wagon" that in effect says that your problems are your own, that no one else cares; and when Granger goes to the preacher to arrange an escape to Mexico, the preacher refuses saying that he cannot be part of a scheme that brings no hope. Movie has been made many times (Fritz Lang, Arthur Penn, Robert Altman), but never with this intensity of feeling, of innocence and goodness betrayed. (2011)

They Were Expendable 1945 John Ford MGM) 3.5 John Wayne, Robert Montgomery, Ward Bond, Donna Reed as Wayne's short-lived love interest, Jack Holt as hard-bitten General Martin, Marshall Thompson as wet behind the ears Ensign "Snake," who has the appearance of a 16-year old. First-class World War II film about the torpedo boat arm of the navy in the early days of the war in the Philippines; at first they are relegated to support duties and running messages, but in a series of exciting combat sequences, they prove their worth by sinking cruisers, destroyers, aircraft carriers, troop barges, etc. Their force is decimated, but, since they have proved the value of the patrol boats, the officers are ordered evacuated to Australia so that they can plan their return (thus echoing Macarthur's famous announcement). Film grounded firmly in history, following the stepwise defeat of the American forces to the surrender on Bataan and the evacuation of key personnel, including Macarthur, a replica of whom we see in a long evacuation sequence. Pathos of film is increased by our awareness that most of the characters in the film are condemned to Japanese prison camps, even if they survive hostilities. Wayne and Montgomery are excellent as top PT boat officers – Montgomery quiet, strong, professional, devoted to his men; Wayne more cocksure (before war begins he wants to transfer to another navy service), impulsive and bluff (in other words, John Wayne); they nicely complement one another. Movie of course focuses on the lives and fates of the men; the non-coms (petty officers) resemble the sergeants in Ford's cavalry – Irish, speaking blarney, good-hearted and bluff, competitive with their fellows but loving them; the officers are very young, inexperienced, but of course respected by everyone. A lot of camaraderie and back-slapping humor: these guys love one another, and are loyal to the last man; they are sad and introspective – they even pray – when one of them dies. They all do their duty, are anxious to get into action and take their toll of the Japs. This is entirely a man's world, with only brief female intrusion from Reed as a dedicated nurse that Wayne uncharacteristically takes a yen to. Most of film seems shot on location. It goes on perhaps a little too long; last scene has the 'Battle Hymn of the Republic' playing as the plane containing Wayne and Montgomery flies off to Australia. First and foremost Ford's emotional tribute to the guys who gave their lives in World War II. (2006)

Thieves' Highway 1949 Jules Dassin 3.0 Richard Conte as lean, impulsive, two-fisted ex-sailor bent on exacting revenge for the crippling of his father; Velentina Cortese as classy-looking San Francisco prostitute whose profession is hidden (by the Hayes Code) from the viewer – she eventually falls in love with Conte; Lee J. Cobb as hard-bitten fruit and vegetable merchant that is not above cheating and roughing up his clients; Jack Oakie as pungent, amusing down-on-his luck truck driver that turns virtuous toward the end of the film; Millard Mitchell as a poor truck driver that is ultimately killed in an accident (on Altamont Pass) trying to get his apples to market in his broken-down truck. Beautifully photographed and composed, realistic, social conscience film of the late 1940s that turns soft in the last ten minutes. First part of the film is set realistically in (apparently) Fresno, down home with the parents, buying apples from simple immigrant farmers (many characters in film have foreign accents), and then struggling with the fruit marketing system in the mean streets of San Francisco. Film is essentially a revenge drama: Conte wants to get even with Cobb for having cheated his dad and then been responsible for an auto accident that left him crippled. It is more convincingly a tribute to the hard-working free-

lance truck drivers in California that struggle to make their living by buying up a crop (of apples), driving it hundreds of miles over crowded roads, dealing with the perils of flat tires and disintegrating universal drives, and then selling their loads to unscrupulous big-city middlemen. The screenplay suffers perhaps from a fuzzy focus – is it about revenge or is it about the guys struggling to survive? It already begins to turn soft when Conte falls for the prostitute with a heart of gold (and good-looking to boot). Just when film noir expectations prepare us for a tragic ending in a violent confrontation between Cobb and Conte, the script delivers a homily on respect for the law, and Conte approaches Cortese in a restaurant with a bunch of guffawing males, he smiles, she smiles, and the two drive off smiling in their army-surplus truck to live happily ever after. Memorable scenes – driving through the apple orchards in search of the prime crop of golden delicious apples, Mitchell losing control of his ancient truck on Altamont Pass and then careening down the slope and cracking up off the road with broken crates of apples scattered over the hillside. Shot beautifully in crisp, detailed, often shadowed black and white. Without the Zanuck-impelled saccharine ending, the film could have been a moving tragedy. (2014)

The Thin Man 1934 W. S. Van Dyke (MGM) 3.5 William Powell, Myrna Loy, Maureen O'Sullivan (very cute!). Beginning of the six-film series with happy husband and wife couple, Nick and Nora Charles. In impeccable black and white print, competently photographed by James Wong Howe. Plot is somewhat clunky, as we move from suspect to suspect without slightest idea who committed the murder (becomes three murders), and then after obligatory group scene at dinner at end, Nick provokes the real murderer into tipping his hand (we are all surprised that it is the disappeared man's lawyer). (Contrast with preferable approach where the audience is convinced that one character is guilty and then a gut-wrenching turnaround.) Social ambiance is smart set in New York, but they seem on the edge of respectability with ties to criminals, cops, reporters and assorted drunks, who speak the standard 30s crime vernacular. Best of the film are the performances of Loy and Powell, their characters (happy together, once even showing their affection, social equals; far too interested in drinking; they drink so much it is hard not to think they are alcoholics), and the wonderful repartee between them – playful bantering, elegance, sexual sparkle: kudos to the writers at MGM! Powell calls Loy a "lanky brunette with a wicked jaw;" he says a "dry martini you must always shake to waltz time." Loy is quite beautiful and classy, and wears wonderful gowns especially in the cocktail party scene in the middle of the movie. She can keep up with Powell's drinking when challenged; her participation in his cases sometimes complicates the investigation. The dog Asta, when photographed, acts cute and cowardly when confronted with a malefactor, and even plays a role in solving the crime (discovery of the buried body in the basement of the lab). A lot of social scenes in a plush New York apartment where everybody is drinking too much; depiction of drinking obviously not politically correct by current (2004) standards. Ends with "adorable" scene in sleeping car on the way back to California, with Asta covering his eyes to keep from seeing what his two proprietors are doing in the lower berth. (2004)

The Thin Man Goes Home 1945 Richard Thorpe 2.5 The fifth in the series with Powell and Loy going to Nick's home for a vacation. William Powell clever and confident, although humorously self-deprecating – he is drinking only cider perhaps as a concession to wartime rules; Myrna Loy looking very attractive (she gets wolf whistles from bar patrons) and participating enthusiastically in the repartee and the comedy – she even conducts her own investigation; genial Lucile Watson and Harry Davenport as Nick's parents speaking Mid-Atlantic; Anne Revere as eccentric, backwoods Crazy Mary, who holds the key to the solution of the mystery; Gloria DeHaven as pretty blond teenager purposely overacting as she puts her acting lessons into practice; Donald Meek befuddled as always; Edward Brophy as town doctor and Powell's former buddy – he is the surprise guilty party; Donald MacBride familiar face as police chief. This installment of the series has a very relaxed feel – there is no hint of mayhem until about one-third of the way through the film, when a man is mysteriously shot dead in the back at the front door of the parents' house. The mystery plot is not particularly well-constructed: there is some interest surrounding paintings that Meek sells to suspects, but the spy plot (this is World War II) and the back story of Crazy Mary and her son only come together in the de rigueur final confrontation (must be ten suspects with suspicious, darting eyes interrogated by Nick in the room), and by that time the viewer doesn't much care who did it; instead of the usual revolver Brophy threatens the assemblage at the end

with a Japanese sniper rifle (another weak reference to the war going on). The comedy however is as good as ever. The first scenes in the big train station and on the train are entertaining, as are the antics of Asta, who seems forever to be stroking the air with his front paws. The teasing one-upmanship between the stars works well, even without the traditional boozing: Nora, e.g., can't figure out how to stabilize a folding lawn chair, and there is a running joke on the collapse of a drop-leaf table that Nick is confident that he has repaired; amusing to watch Nora dance a wild swing with a sailor in a bar. Is it the weak sister of the series; or did this viewer just get tired of it? (March 2018)

The Thin Red Line 1998 Terrence Malick (James Jones novel) 3.0 Nick Nolte excellent "ferocious" performance as ambitious kick-ass, aggressive, ill-tempered, profane colonel; James Caviezel as soldier; Sean Penn as sergeant in charge of raw recruits; Elias Koteas moving as conscientious company commander concerned about his men's well-being ("my sons") – relieved of his command essentially because he can't stand to see his men killed; Adrien Brody plays soldier with southern accent; John Cusack aggressively leads attack on Jap bunker; John C. Reilly as soldier; Woody Harrelson has a beautiful emotional, elegiac death scene; John Travolta miscast as tough, starch-collared brigadier general; George Clooney as replacement who gives pep talk to men at the end. Memorable film – exquisite images of tropical nature, harrowing battle scenes – ostensibly about the attack on Guadalcanal (1942) but really about the director's existential meditation on nature and violence. Exquisite, detailed, bright cinematography of tropical scenes; in combat scenes often camera moving forward through the tall, lush grass. The battle for the hill brilliantly vivid and exciting; particularly the telephone shouting match between Nolte furiously ordering Koteas to execute a frontal attack and the latter's courageous refusal; afterwards an exciting small-unit attack on the Japanese bunker led by Cusack (reminiscent of the famous scenes in 'Private Ryan' and 'Band of Brothers') in which the American kids fight like pros. Under orders from Nolte the Americans move on and overrun the Japanese encampment. Grisly shots of mutilated bodies, men lying mortally wounded on the ground, man stumbling screaming because of a stomach wound; dogs feeding on rotting corpses. Focus on fear and anxiety of men, especially before they go into combat; most of them do not want to kill anyone and do so only when they have no choice; some have remorse after they kill; their anger and terror when they are hit and know they are dying; fear and dejection of the captured Japanese soldiers praying when guarded by men they think will kill them; the panic, confusion, and grief of the Japanese soldiers when they are overrun in their camp by the Americans. Film however is often detached, kind of hovering over the realistic scenes so expertly depicted; as characters speak, the camera wanders around looking at the sky, the ceiling, etc.; poetic, difficult-to-understand philosophic voice-overs with quiet, soothing music and muffled realistic sounds in background; some characters wonder why there is so much violence and killing in the world; what evil power is killing us? How can we return to our loved ones the same as when we left? How and why did we lose all that was beautiful in our lives? What keeps us from reaching out and "touching the glory"? Whether we survive is almost purely a matter of luck. To make an authorial point, there is frequent cutting to primitive tropical culture, to birds mutilated by fire, to the beautiful tropical plants surrounding the men; extensive poetic flashbacks of the soldiers making love with beautiful wives. The scenario is slow-moving as camera explores natural surroundings and waits for characters' responses; the waiting does sometimes generate a lot of suspense, but intervals between battles and self-reflective passages are often long and boring. Film's editing seems slack: it is difficult to follow the characters, all of whom are hidden in helmets and in grime, and who enter and exit the scenes rather randomly; perhaps with more discipline a gripping story could have been made out of all the exquisite, gut-wrenching footage. Film perhaps could have done without the philosophic-poetic layer imposed on the real happenings; nevertheless, few films have such exquisite images or such harrowing action. (2012)

The Thing 1951 Christian Nyby (with Hawks?) 3.5 Kenneth Tobey, Margaret Sheridan, Douglas Spencer. Wr. Lederer (and perhaps Brackett). First monster invasion flick about mysterious plant man that terrorizes military/scientific station at the North Pole. Very Hawksian: overlapping dialogue with fair amount of repartee and arguing; bunch of friends cooperating together to deal with the menace; elements of buddy movie; lots of humor interspersed with action and horror; running ironic commentary from journalist (Spencer) who is looking for a good story; arguments among principals as

they decide what to do; tough as nails woman (who has very little to do in the plot aside from provide romantic subplot) who engages in repartee with Tobey, her romantic target. Obviously an ‘A’ movie with good crackling script, crisp well framed cinematography, and very professional sets stressing wind, ice, snow and cold; DC-3 with skis landing on the ice; all looks highly prepared. Excellent claustrophobic atmosphere as crew (which includes two women) are trapped in by the weather and the monster, who has set up shop in the botany lab to sprout more pods and duplicate self in apparent plot to conquer the world (not explained why he wants to; also note connection to ‘Invasion of the Body Snatchers’). Split between military, who focus on the security problem and good-humoredly and optimistically cooperate under their admired commander Tobey, and the civilian scientists, who insist on study and research of the monster with little regard for the consequences (the lead scientist is temporarily unhinged in his fanaticism but survives the experience); the monster is clearly dangerous and malevolent, and must be dealt with by force and not studied or mollycoddled. Some exciting shocks, as when the dog falls out of the storage cupboard and when the Thing is electrocuted in long, horrifying sequence (recalling an electric chair execution) with smoke streaming out of body. Atmosphere of film seems to come out of the camaraderie of World War II where we know the enemy and know how to deal with him rather than the paranoia of the Cold War. Last moral broadcast by journalist – “Watch the skies!” (2005)

This Happy Breed 1944 David Lean (wr. Noel Coward; Britain) 3.5 Robert Newton as good common sense family head with a warm heart; Celia Johnson as pretty, sensible, respectable wife trying her best to keep things together; Amy Veness as complaining, combative mother of Johnson; Alison Leggatt entertaining as equally combative self-pitying aunt, who eventually converts to Christian Science; Stanley Holloway as good-humored next-door neighbor; John Mills as British sailor in love with Queenie; Kay Walsh as Queenie, sensitive, fun-loving, ambitious, and rebellious daughter of Newton and Johnson. Sentimental, moving Technicolor drama about the ups and downs of a lower middle class family between 1919 and 1939; sensitively directed by David Lean; the film happily does not have the condescension towards the common folk that marred Coward’s ‘In Which We Serve’ (1942). The film begins with the family moving into the run-down house right after the first war and ends with the same couple leaving for another flat right before the beginning of the second. Takes place in lower middle class neighborhood in London; rented row house with very small rooms and unattractive wallpaper on every wall housing a large number of people; no telephone. Follows what a typical family does: childhood, adolescent dating, marriage, daughter leaving the house without parents’ permission, two old friends getting drunk together, the son being killed in an auto accident, elections, sadness at the death of the king (the succession crisis is skipped), argument about religion (Newton is annoyed by Leggatt’s Christian Science). Plot focuses on the fate of the rebellious Queenie, who runs away with a boyfriend, and her mother’s bitter refusal even to speak of her until she returns married to the good-natured next-door neighbor Mills. Everyone seems positive, cheerful, stiff upper lip; they always manage no matter what the crisis. Newton and Johnson have a rather formal relationship in which the husband’s modest expressions of affection are rejected by the wife, but there is much mutual respect and love underneath. As befitting its wartime production, the film is quietly, solidly patriotic. Characters state that Britain is tired, we have to move more slowly, but the country is still capable of much (1945). The film criticizes British disarmament in the 30s, it opposes the General Strike, it rejects fascists as brutal and fanatic, prefers the Conservatives, and when Chamberlain returns to cheers in the streets, Newton denounces appeasement as humiliation. The film is well-acted throughout, particularly the deep emotion that Johnson shows when she denounces Queenie to her husband and promises never to speak of her in the house again. Other moving scenes include the family learning that their son Reg has been killed in an auto accident (the camera tracks sideways slowly in a deserted room and the parents return to stare wordlessly at the camera); and the spot-on scene in which Mills announces that Queenie is back and that he has married her; now Johnson has to melt slowly. Good domestic comedy especially between Veness and Leggatt fussing at one another, although they gradually come to mutual toleration. Nice camera work of camera moving in and out of window to emphasize observation of the family’s life and eloquent close-ups, especially of Johnson, in key moments. Film hits just the right note engendering respect for the courage and persistence of the people of Britain. (2010)

This is the Army 1943 Michael Curtiz (Warners) 3.0 George Murphy energetic, good-humored as one of the organizers of the army variety show; Ronald Reagan equally good-humored and boyish as Murphy's son (doesn't work very well); Joan Leslie as the wholesome sweetheart who more or less forces Reagan to marry her. Very patriotic wartime rouse-'em musical lavishly produced and with many memorable numbers by Irving Berlin (who sings "Oh, how I hate to get up in the morning") and some memorable musical and dance performances. Back stage musical in which guys who had participated in Berlin's World War I musical are recruited by the army to create a variety show to raise morale on the road. Very thin story is the romance between Reagan and Leslie: the latter wants to get married, but Reagan doesn't think it would be right with him going into combat; after several rejections, she confronts him with an army chaplain at the stage door, and Reagan has no choice. Quite a bit of lame comedy: one tires especially of the soldiers performing in drag in the show (men in drag stylize their performances to make sure no one really thinks they are women). But many excellent numbers: the huge soldiers' chorus singing "This is the Army, Mr. Jones"; Irving Berlin appearing in the penultimate number singing "How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning" with his thin voice; excellent tap numbers including especially the beautifully performed minstrel number (in black face), "Mandy" (compulsively watchable despite (because of?) the politically incorrect content), and James Cross tapping exuberantly and singing "That's What the Well-Dressed Man in Harlem will Wear"; and of course Kate Smith belting out "God Bless America" on the radio; Navy and Army Air Corps show up to show their stuff. The print is in terrible condition: lots of scratches, bad seams, and especially very dark lighting that makes it sometimes difficult to decipher what is happening. Only oblique references to what combat would really be like; the army is an organization you might not love, but it is benign enough to care about the men's morale, and in any case we are fighting the good cause for freedom and to make sure we don't have to do it again. (2009)

This is the End 2013 Seth Rogen and Evan Goldberg 3.0 Seth Rogen as narrative center of the film; Jay Baruchel playing himself (as do all the cast) as serious guy with moral standards visiting LA to have fun (hanging out, dope, video games) with his buddy Seth and subjecting the "idiots" at Franco's house to carping criticism; James Franco as narcissistic friend that owns the house where the crisis takes place; Jonah Hill with all his annoying tics turns into a replica of Linda Blair's possessed innocent; Danny McBride perhaps the funniest, way-out-there off-the-wall character in the film; Craig Robinson perhaps less extreme and more endearing; Michael Cera playing against type as doped-out sex fiend; Emma Watson in cameo as ace-wielding woman who means business; Channing Tatum in hilarious cameo as McBride's sex slave on all fours, hopping around with a bare ass for convenient access and trying to lick McBride's dick. Laugh-out-loud film about a bunch of typical Rogen-style LA layabouts (that happen to be actors) gathered for a mindless group grope in Franco's cool modernist house, when suddenly the Rapture/Apocalypse hits; some people are sucked by blue funnels into the clouds, while the rest are subjected to apocalyptic terror; they huddle cluelessly in the house afraid to go outside with the monsters and abysses; after multiple shrieking crises from badly animated apocalypse-style monsters, the film (finally) ends with Seth and Jay sucked by a blue tube into heaven, and all join in a hip-hop dance performed by angels clad in white. The strength of the film lies only in the skits, jokes, and one-liners, many of which will go over the viewer's head if he isn't familiar with American horror movies or with previous Rogen-Goldberg films. Mild-mannered Michael Cera is completely uncontrolled, snorting coke, getting oral sex both front and back (?), and blowing large quantities of coke powder in the face of a party-goer that brags about not doing drugs. Rogen thinks that gluten is just something that is good for you. A five-minute episode is devoted to chipping through a concrete floor to find two jugs of water (reference to the LA mania for water). Danny McBride is wild and off the wall in his discussion of acting; he then joins the forces of darkness, and appears toward the end in a post-apocalyptic costume in the demeaning Channing episode. The ejaculation dispute between Franco and McBride – "I will come like a madman all over you!" "I can drop fuckin' loads in this house like a goddamn dump truck." Jonah Hill making the audience squirm as he threatens to blow his head off in several successive orifices; he also does a hilarious version of Linda Blair's voice and writhing from 'The Exorcist'. All the characters

are played as dumb, clueless, incompetent, cowardly, panic-stricken.... Bottom line is whether it makes you laugh. (2014)

The Thomas Crown Affair 1999 John McTiernan 2.5 Pierce Brosnan subdued and looking bored as filthy rich financial wizard who would rather steal paintings from the Met for kicks; Rene Russo, self-consciously glamorous and passionate as insurance investigator come to find the thief that stole the Monet ‘Sunrise’ from the museum; Denis Leary callow and annoying as police detective that works (with (and against) Russo; Ben Gazzara and Frankie Faisan. Well produced, but dull and unimaginative remake of the original Steve McQueen vehicle. To enhance the cool factor, Crown is an art lover this time – he specializes in Magritte and Monet – instead of the bank robber in the original. The initial action sequence in the Met is pretty intriguing, as are some of the many twists toward the end of the film. But the romance between Brosnan and Russo just never crackles – when they are locked in sexual ecstasy on the stairs of Brosnan’s mansion, one observes the camera angles and the editing instead of the fireworks. The love trysts between them – riding in his private jet, Russo squealing uncontrollably as he takes her in his glider, the two arriving in a hilltop getaway with a sea view located somewhere – perhaps – in the South Pacific – seems an exercise in “The Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous”. It is fairly interesting to wonder whether the two adversaries will be able to fall in love despite their opposing interests; however, Russo’s many changes of heart can be disheartening and one wonders how many more clever tricks Brosnan has up his sleeve. Also improbable is Russo’s infallible intuition that leads her, for example, to the hiding place of the stolen Monet in Brosnan’s mansion without the vaguest clue. Although the ending has several clever twists, the trick of using the museum’s fire sprinklers to wash a cover painting (Pissarro) off to reveal the Monet (My God! It was in the museum the whole time!) is completely incredible to anyone with the slightest understanding of paint media. Using the Magritte man in the bowler hat to confuse the police is clever but tiresome. At the end Brosnan somehow maneuvers Russo into the first class section of an airplane so they can fly off to their happily-ever-after without worrying about their careers and with a clear conscience, since the melting trick has pointed out to the police and the museum bigwigs that the Monet is still there. Sort of fun, but you suspect the whole time that you are being snookered. (2014)

A Thousand Years of Good Prayers 2007 Wayne Wang 2.0 Feihong Yu as attractive young, although lonely and depressive Chinese-American woman living in Spokane, Washington (!); Henry O as quite elderly, but active and inquisitive Chinese father come from China to visit his daughter; Vida Ghahremani as Iranian woman that Henry befriends while sitting in the park; Pasha Lychnikoff quite awkward (and ugly) as Feihong’s ex-husband, who apparently has another wife and a child in Russia. Very slow-moving, low-budget, realist style film that doesn’t go much anywhere; the viewer is delighted to escape from its sluggish and depressive atmosphere when it is over. When the widow Henry arrives in the USA to find out how Feihong doing, one can see immediately that she is unhappy: divorced, childless, living in a barren apartment, she barely speaks to her father, she does not tell him what she does (she apparently works at Gonzaga University doing something), she does not tell him when she is returning at night, she plans to send him off on a several-weeks tour of parts of the USA to get him out of her hair; about all they do together is eat dinner – consuming the delicious-looking meals prepared by the dad (he tells her that he took a cooking class in China). There are some minor emotional sparks when Henry befriends an older Iranian woman in the city park, although their developing relationship is interrupted when Henry is told that she has been put in a retirement home by her children, who don’t want to be bothered with her any more. There is a simulacrum of development toward the end of the film, when Feihong admits to her father that she was the one who left her husband (the viewer says ‘no wonder’ when he sees him), and the father confesses to her in return that he at one point had had an affair with a younger woman in China, which his wife never found out about. After that, the two part, and the film peters out as Henry – unaccompanied by his daughter – looks quietly out of the window of the bus that is taking him to the airport. One has to be prepared for a ‘realist’ movie that is about average people and where nothing much happens, but this film exceeds the bounds of immobility, an impression multiplied by most of the characters peaking unsubtitled foreign languages. For once, this Chinese-American film is not about acculturation of immigrants, but about the distance opened up between two

generations when separated by long distances. It also seems to be commenting quietly on the loneliness, unconnectedness, and superficiality of American society, an observation that wears thin when delivered in such a monotonous way. (2009)

Three Comrades 1938 Frank Borzage (MGM) 3.0 Two-fisted glossy MGM drama examining the male friendship of three World War I veterans and the true love between Robert Taylor and Margaret Sullavan. Robert Taylor straightforward handsome leading man; Robert Young has the hottest head and is killed in street fight; Franchot Tone with short hair, Sullavan's confidante, loves her platonically; Margaret Sullavan smiling and looking like Garbo, although not a pretty profile; Lionel Atwill (the pompous general in 'To Be or not to Be) as Sullavan's former rich lover; Guy Kibbee as tavern owner that anchors us in the decent Germany; Monty Woolley as plainspoken doctor. Acting in the film is of universal high quality. The three comrades are amusing, witty, and eternally loyal to one another: Taylor loves Sullavan and marries her; Franchot also loves her, but deferring to his friend keeps his relationship platonic. Although there are street fights depicted and the sets are realistic, the film does not try to paint a convincing portrait of Weimar Germany: none of the actors speaks a word of German, Nazis and nationalists are not named; the viewer gets the impression that the film is taking place in the USA; American things like jazz and hot dogs are popular; the guys talk like American wise guys. Even though the film is set in the year of Munich, the atmosphere is hopeful for the future (it is true that the two remaining characters – Taylor and Tone – are leaving for South America at the end). Music is extremely corny: we couldn't do without Schubert's 'Ave Maria' at Taylor's and Sullavan's wedding; the revenge scene in which Tone kills Young's murderer is accompanied by the "Alleluia Chorus", and strings soar as at the end the two friends walk toward the clouds with two wraiths by their side. The treatment of male friendship and their postwar difficulties fades about half-way through in favor of the Borzage hyper-romantic treatment. Sullavan, initially smiling and light-hearted, turns out to be sick with tuberculosis; Tone tells her to marry Taylor without telling him about her sickness for fear it would destroy his happiness. A first medical crisis has Sullavan lying quietly in a bed like a child looking trustingly at Taylor and the doctor (Monty Woolley) as they pull her out of her crisis. She eventually gets worse after she is sent to a sanitarium in the mountains (snow and blue skies all around), and she dies after several speeches about the ineffable beauty and eternity of her love for Taylor that will not be undermined by her death. No doubt that Borzage pulls out the stops with lighting, caressing close-ups, sensitive kisses to make the death scenes moving; Gore Vidal's quote about Sullavan's incredibly noble deaths is right on target, even if the extreme MGM gloss drains the story of much of its credibility. Film misses the analysis of male bonding or the struggle for the future in Germany, but its picture of eternal romantic love is moving. (2017)

Three Days of the Condor 1975 Sydney Pollack 3.0 Robert Redford as scruffy low-level employee (code name "Condor") in a CIA research office in New York, who turns into a can-do-anything hero; Faye Dunaway subdued as random woman Redford kidnaps, but who then turns into Hitchcock-style female supporter of the hero; Cliff Robertson in ambiguous (good guy or bad guy?) role as head of Redford's research office; Max Von Sydow remarkable as philosophical, completely amoral, and yet somehow sympathetic assassin that apologizes to his employer when he misses a target, and is willing to change sides when the money is right. Entertaining paranoid thriller that exposes the skullduggery of the CIA and includes a romance between the two main actors to take advantage of their star status (the debt to 'The Thirty-Nine Steps' is obvious). The premise is famous and compelling -- when Redford returns to his office with lunch for everyone, he finds that all the employees have been murdered, including the secretary and the security guard. Realizing that the assassins will be looking for him, he kidnaps Dunaway, they fall for one another and have a night of love (very soft core), and Redford sets out with the help of Dunaway to find out what is going on, save himself, and expose the inner workings of the spy agency. It turns out that an inner CIA is operating within the legal one: while the latter conducts contingency studies about possible crises in the US petroleum supply, the bad guys are planning actually to take over Middle Eastern and Venezuelan oil fields, and when one of Redford's studies happen upon their plans, they decide to eliminate the whole research office (Why kill everyone? Wouldn't that attract a lot of undesirable attention?). Dunaway is underutilized, Redford has compelling star qualities, and the

plot is full of entertaining puzzles and twists: the viewer is usually uncertain about the status of different CIA administrators (John Houseman being one), and even at the end one is not entirely sure....

Entertaining scenes include Redford foiling the assassination attempt of the mailman assassin whose pen doesn't work. Even better is the surprising scene in the plot ring leader's house, where Redford plays loud music to draw him downstairs in his bathrobe, Von Sydow enters making us think that he is going to kill Redford in behalf of his employer, but instead shoots the latter in the head, explaining that he has changed jobs -- now he is working for the mainstream CIA, which wants to make sure that the author of the plot is eliminated; he then offers Redford a lift. The narrative ends with Redford delivering his story to the New York Times (just like Watergate or the Pentagon Papers) hopefully to protect himself and inform the public; there is no assurance at the end however that Redford will survive, since the agency might very well hire Von Sydow for another hit -- "You can walk," says Robertson, "but can you be sure they will print it?" Film is prophetic about the US's treatment of the Middle East, except that when the invasion actually happens, the White House is behind it, not the CIA. Devastating on the erosion of trust in 1970s America. (2015)

The Three Faces of Eve 1957 Nunnally Johnson 3.5 Joanne Woodward, Lee Cobb, David Wayne. Arresting film about the multiple personalities of Eve. She manifests as dowdy young Southern mom (Georgia), who has blackouts, when unbeknownst to her, a slutty personality "comes out." She goes to avuncular, sympathetic, psychiatric hero, Lee J. Cobb, who although at first unsuccessful, labors to cure her. Movie suppresses reality that husband David Wayne is a violent man who abuses her physically (his boring befuddled character disappears -- happily -- about halfway through film). Movie follows Freudian model still dominant in psychiatry in the 1950s: Eve White appears to be the superego, Eve Black the id, and then when pretty, attractive, sensible Jane emerges toward the end, she appears to the ego, who has come to resolve the conflict between the other two; when she emerges (surprise!), we know that Doctor Luther's faithful efforts have paid off. It also turns out that it was a suppressed childhood trauma (dealing with having to kiss a corpse, and not sex) that caused the split in Eve's personality. Movie is riveting -- holds one's attention from beginning to end -- primarily because of Woodward's performance: she manages to make three distinct characters come alive on the screen (even though we are a bit annoyed by her having to lower her head like Jekyll and Hyde to effect transitions from one personality to another), and to enroll the viewer's sympathy. Film is psychiatric melodrama, as we root for the poor girl and her faithful doctor, and we go home smiling when she writes him saying that she and her new husband finally felt confident enough to go pick up daughter Bonnie from the grandparents. Suspense added since for 3/4s of film, we have only two "faces" of Eve and we wonder when the third will show up, and we are gratified when Jane finally appears. Alistair Cooke's portentous introduction and voiceover much criticized, but he adds serious element to film. (2005)

Three Kings 1999 David O. Russell 3.0 George Clooney in early film as take-charge media liaison officer in US Army who decides to steal gold bullion that Saddam has removed from Kuwait; Mark Wahlberg as impressionable non-com who accompanies him; Ice Cube as solid and sensible African-American luggage handler who also goes along; Spike Jonze as Dallas high-school drop-out who is the fourth man -- he is killed in the adventure; Cliff Curtis as noble anti-Saddam Iraqi freedom fighter; Nora Dunn as in-your-face reporter whose filming in the key moment of crisis helps the good guys emerge unscathed. Energetic, entertaining adventure film about four men that set off in the wake of the Gulf War to steal tens of millions of dollars' worth of gold bullion stashed in an Iraqi bunker. The guys survive challenge after challenge -- Jonze dies in a firefight, and Wahlberg is severely wounded but manages to survive thanks to Clooney's medical expertise (where did he learn how to relieve the pressure on a lung with a needle valve?). (The film twice emphasizes the harm inflicted on the human body by soft modeling the trajectory of a bullet through the internal organs of a man.) The tense standoffs with Iraqi soldiers, the dissolving of the standoffs into gunfire, and the vicious firefights -- helicopter crashing to the ground, rocket-propelled grenades rushing toward their targets -- are realistic and exciting. The film early takes a political point of view: when arriving in Iraq the Americans had told the anti-Saddam Iraqis (all of whom are more or less brave saints standing up to their oppressors) to rise up against their tyrant, but as soon as the Iraqi army is defeated, the Americans (often described as "President Bush") abandon

their clients; as a result the Clooney group encounters large groups of imprisoned, tortured, and pursued Iraqis that they are morally obligated to assist to escape over the Iranian border. Since our heroes commandeer stolen Kuwaiti limousines, it is amusing to see long lines of luxury cars pressing across the desert loaded with Iraqi refugees. The interchange with the Iraqi soldiers is always interesting and surprising – they fear Saddam but are willing to abandon him; one never knows whether they will bow to the macho superiority of their American victors or fire on them or torture them. The rapacious little group of Americans, initially interested only in loot, soon – according to Hollywood conventions – undergo a moral conversion that leads them to deliver their Iraqi clients to the Iranian border and to return what remains of the bullion to the Army and the Kuwaitis. In a postscript the three guys return to the states happy to have survived their adventure. Entertaining and often interesting film; often unfocussed and unpredictable. (2014)

The Three Musketeers 1973 Richard Lester 2.0 Michael York adequate as the quick-tempered, quick learner d'Artagnan; Oliver Red, Richard Chamberlain, and Frank Finlay as the three musketeers , very difficult to distinguish one from the other; Raquel Welch pretty smashing (and young) as d'Artagnan's luscious girlfriend; Geraldine Chaplin barely batting an eyelash as the adulterous queen, Anne of Austria; Jean-Pierre Cassel fairly amusing as the foppish and clueless king Louis XIII; Simon Ward as the handsome Duke of Buckingham, the queen's squeeze; Faye Dunaway barely touching her acting prowess as Milady, the associate of Cardinal Richelieu; Charlton Heston reserved and barely menacing as Cardinal Richelieu, bent on destroying the reputation of the queen; Christopher Lee mildly alarming as the one-eyed Rochefort. Unexciting, tongue-in-cheek jokester adaptation of the famous Dumas story. Follows the first part of the novel fairly closely (the second part is covered in a subsequent film), but transforms the panache, adventure, and suspense of the Dumas piece into a pratfall-filled slapstick romp. Lots of research into the pastimes of European aristocracy in the 17th century – falconing, playing chess outdoors using undisciplined animals as the chess pieces(!), lots of court occasions including formal balls where the guests are dressed in fanciful costumes. The film is so obviously made in Spain (countryside, palace architecture, central squares of towns) that it is distracting. The fun-at-all-costs robs the film of character definition (still no idea of which actor played each of the three musketeers) and any drama or suspense – it is difficult to care whether d'Artagnan recovers the jewels from Buckingham and gets them back to the queen in time to keep her from getting into trouble with the king. The epee fights are well directed and performed (York's best bit), but they become repetitive when there is little to no context of character or drama. Some amusing gags – the scene in passing in which a woman is having a tooth pulled without anesthesia; the fight scene in which one of the musketeers is hooked on to a water wheel and lifted off the ground, numerous swordplay gags, etc. This viewer had a hard time watching the film to the end. (2006)

Three on a Match 1932 (Warners) 3.0 Ann Dvorak as wealthy young woman speaking with a stilted accent – she leaves her husband and pays the price; Joan Blondell a pretty, toothy, vivacious blond friend who starts off bad in reform school but who seems to learn her lesson; Bette Davis also blond (!) in minor supporting role as third friend, a stenographer also with good sense; Warren William in colorless role as Dvorak's highly respectable lawyer husband; Lyle Talbot good-looking as good-hearted but weak gigolo that tempts the straying Dvorak from her husband. Well-restored Depression drama on the fate of pretty, young, generally unattached women making their way through the world. Film begins with the three girls in school in the 1910s: Dvorak is the wealthy girl, who however makes the mistake of marrying too early and not for love; Blondell starts off in reform school for theft, but – with the help of Davis – later becomes a support to Dvorak's family when she goes off the tracks. Much screen time is occupied by the overly cute, four-year-old son of Dvorak, who constantly charms the viewer with his precocious observations. When Dvorak runs off with Talbot, she takes the kid with her, and since the trio is living in disreputable circumstances drinking and carousing, Blondell and Davis have to come to his rescue; the final wrinkle comes when criminal friends of Talbot (including Humphrey Bogart in a bit role) decide to kidnap the kid and Dvorak for ransom; Dvorak eventually pays the price for her misbehavior when she throws herself out the window of a cheap hotel in despair. Even in pre-Code Hollywood

women who betray their husbands and break up their families do so at their peril. Film moves fast and is fun to watch. The passage of time in the 1920s and early 1930s is depicted by quick bursts of newspaper headlines and newsreel footage. Dvorak is perhaps over her head in the starring role, but the rest of the all-star cast is effective and fun to watch. Cinematography is crisp and clear. (2012)

The Three Stooges. Came to Hollywood about 1930, first making mostly short films that were reproductions of their vaudeville act with Ted Haley; within a year or so they started making short films from original screenplays. Shemp was teamed at first with Moe and Larry, but Curly soon replaced Shemp; when Shemp had to leave in the 40s, he was replaced for a while by Shemp. The Stooges continued into at least the late 1950s. Their movies are mostly two-reelers with a few feature-length movies. Some of them are very good, some not so interesting. The masters of vulgar, low slapstick humor; they spend most of their time getting in (and occasionally out) of difficult situations, and bopping each other on the head, tweaking each other on the nose, poking fingers in each other's eyes to the accompaniment of piquant sound effects. Sometimes very funny in sort of low life way. (2006)

Tie Me Up! Tie Me Down! 1990 Pedro Almodovar (Spain) 2.0 Victoria Abril as sexy actress with prominent teeth and a past as a porno actress; Antonio Banderas with short hair – a romantic guy who thinks the best way to win the woman he loves is to kidnap her and tie her up. Irritating, rather dull, and improbable film that – incredibly – won Almodovar critical accolades when it came out in 1990. In essence the film is a romantic comedy. While still in a mental institution Banderas is in love with Abril from afar; when he is released (it is made clear that he has been sexually servicing most of the women in the institution), he decides to kidnap Abril and imprison her in her apartment until she breaks down and falls in love, marries him, and has at least two children with him; aside from slapping her around and tying her up or handcuffing her every time he leaves the apartment, the romantic Banderas treats the woman well; when however on one of his missions of mercy he is severely beaten by a gang of thugs (all of whom wearing tight-fitting, cool-looking jeans perhaps designed by the director), Abril is overcome by pity-lust for him, and they make passionate love on the bed (admittedly a sexy scene); soon we move to the final shot, which has the happy couple riding in a car with Abril's sister, all three of them smiling, pleased to be part of this happy family. The film has some pleasant and interesting aspects: the director's color schemes are as usual bright, varied and imaginative; Abril plays well the beautiful (her skin!), passionate Spanish woman, and her sex scene with Banderas is one of the few convincing scenes in the film – she positively beams happiness and pleasure. But the film is absurdly improbable: Could Abril be missing for so many days and not be missed, except by her sister who doesn't seem to care? Could Banderas really believe that violence and bondage is an acceptable way to win his woman? Are we really to believe that a spitfire like Abril will fall in love – passionately – with the man who has thus abused her? Is the Stockholm Syndrome so powerful and so real? The film is above all morally objectionable. Its romantic vision seems to take us back to the caveman scenario where the male bangs the female over her head and carries her back to his cave, or to the rape seduction of Enlightenment erotica. The director seems to be playing on the erotic overtones of bondage and violence, but his idea falls flat in this film. (2009)

Till the Clouds Roll By 1946 Several directors including Richard Whorf 3.0 -- on the strength of music and musical performances. EP speed that cuts into quality of picture and sound. Biopic about Jerome Kern rises and falls on the Kern melodies. Cast includes practically everyone on the MGM lot who could sing including Angela Lansbury singing 'How'd you like to Spoon with Me?'; Dinah Shore; 'Till the Clouds Roll By' (with production dance routine) from 'Oh Boy,' June Allyson performing 'Cleopaterer' (pseudo-Egyptian moves, cute, sprightly personality, flat voice) in 'Leave it to Jane,' Judy Garland as Marilyn Miller sings 'unremarkable 'Silver Lining,' and then 'Who Stole My Heart Away' (big production number); 'Smoke Gets in Your Eyes' from "Roberta;" Dinah Shore sings 'The Last Time I saw Paris;' Tony Martin sings "You Are the Promised Kiss of Springtime". Dramatic leads are Robert Walker as Jerome Kern; Van Heflin as James Hessler. Starts with condensed version of tunes from 'Showboat' (Lena Horne, Kathryn Grayson); then flashes back to Kern's early struggling years, his friendship with Hessler (Heflin), who arranges his songs, trying to break in to the song composition

scene, falling in love with Eva (Dorothy Patrick) and getting her to marry her ("Isn't she sensational?"), his big break in New York, his continued success and happiness; marriage with Eva is rewarding and satisfying; Heflin's daughter, Sally (Lucille Bremer with good ballet dancing style), has trouble in school and turns into a stage brat, especially unpleasant when she has to give up big performance number to Garland, whereupon she runs away to work in nightclubs ('One More' and with Van Johnson a good swing routine in 'I Won't Dance'); but even then she turns out to be mature and a reasonable success. Cheerful, treacly tone; everybody is aspiring to bigger things and remain cheerful and plucky despite difficulties, audiences always applauding enthusiastically. Exception is decline and death of a principal: when Sally runs away, Hessler is ill; with heartstring-tugging deathbed scene – he is so weak (and humming chorus in background as Kern gives hollow reassurance). After death, Kern loses heart and can't write music any more! But of course he comes back to write the score of 'Show Boat.' Ends with elaborately staged montage of his songs – Lena Horne, Dinal Shore, and Frank. Moralizes that you have to submit yourself to 'the good of the show,' no matter how deep the disappointment; you can't take advantages of others; you have to respect others in order to be respected yourself! Kern music seems to reflect shallow entertainment value of film. Obviously modeled on biopic layout of 'The Great Ziegfeld' – only music numbers are realistic, i.e., on stage. (2006)

Timbuktu 2014 Abderrahmane Sissako (Mauretania) 3.0 Ibrahim Ahmed as the kind, "normal" cattle herder living outside Timbuktu and thus the authority of the Islamic extremists that dominate the city; Abel Jafri as Arab leader of the Islamist occupiers of the city. Sometimes languid, sometimes puzzling, but picturesque and compelling treatment of the Islamist domination of the Malian city of Timbuktu beginning in 2012 (the French army drove them out in 2014). The script focuses on the fate of the moderate cowherd Ahmed and his family -- all he wants is to stay out of trouble and enjoy his family. However he kills another Malian man in a dispute at the local river; he is soon arrested by the Islamist authorities, who try him, and then kill him in a confusing hail of gunfire, when a mysterious man on a motorcycle tries to rescue him; the film ends with the guards chasing the would-be rescuer, Ahmed's daughter and stepson running hopelessly across the sand dunes, and a shot of a gazelle racing full bore through the landscape. The French cinematographer, Sofian El Fani, picturesquely photographs the sand-besieged, dried walls of Timbuktu and the brightly lit desert landscape (the film was actually made in Mauretania). The theme is the tyrannical oppression of the population by the Islamists, who strut about the town with their automatic rifles slung over their shoulders: they are still capable of kindness in the beginning of the film, but their behavior worsens as the story progresses: they force women to wear socks and gloves in the marketplace (one woman objects loudly); arresting teenagers for singing some lovely Malian songs, they beat a young girl with a strap until she cries from pain and shame; in a pair of quick shots, they are shown burying an adulterous couple up to their necks in sand and stoning their bloody, exposed heads to death. The Islamists are shown as arrogant, interested more in the exercise of power than the practice of religion, and quite hypocritical -- the leader Jafri flirts with Ahmed's wife and then hides behind a sand dune to smoke a forbidden cigarette. When the thugs penetrate into a mosque with their weapons, the imam reproves them for profaning the house of God and for their perverted ideas of jihad, which he explains is more about moral self-improvement than conquest and the exercise of power. Especially toward the end, the film can be confusing, perhaps from sloppy editing: it is not made clear that the stoned couple has been accused of adultery; the numerous trips of the mysterious man through the town on a motorcycle mystifies rather than intrigues; the attempted rescue of Ahmed and the gunfire at the end seem jumbled. The story remains gripping, though, largely because Ahmed is such an eloquent proponent of common decency and individuality. (2015)

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy 2011 Tomas Alfredson (Britain) 2.5 Gary Oldman as the immortal George Smiley, low-key ex-bigwig in the British intelligence service called back to uncover a supposed mole at the top of the organization; Mark Strong as an operative shot and supposedly killed in Budapest; John Hurt very rugged looking as the director Control – he dies after the beginning of the film; Toby Jones, David Dencik, Ciarán Hines (played Julius Caesar in 'Rome'), Colin Firth as Bill Haydon, Kathy Burke, Benedict Cumberbatch as members of the top 'Circus' committee that meets several times around a plain table in a plain room. Very confusing and elliptical film version of the famous Le Carré

spy novel. Smiley, who always seems a bit depressed, presumably because of marital troubles, works doggedly to uncover the culprit, assuming there is one since the Russians might be suggesting it as a ploy to confuse the Circus. Most of the narrative is carried on in desultory conversation among the principals (be sure to turn on the closed captioning); the numerous accounts of past events (the shooting in Budapest, the kidnapping and torture of an operative by the Soviets in Istanbul, the ongoing relations between the top committee and a Russian agent in London, etc.) are depicted in extended flashbacks, which however are difficult to distinguish from present-day events (no wavy lines). At the end Smiley, who apparently guessed the culprit all along, sets a trap, and Haydon is caught in it; in postscripts Haydon is shot and killed by his former lover (we think), and Smiley takes a seat at the head of the Circus committee's table to indicate that he has been restored to employment as director. The film leaves the viewer constantly scratching his head and guessing what is happening; probably only viewers who have read the book would be able to follow the labyrinths of intrigue, the hints, the spy talk, and the arcane references present in virtually every scene. As makers of thrillers demonstrate, a little bit of confusion draws in the viewer, but too much of it creates impatience and alienation from the film. Mise-en-scène features dark, color-drained rooms set in the dingy Circus office or in threadbare flats and homes of the principals, a kind of misty, indistinct atmosphere. The film is in part a study of how different characters react to the situational stresses, but even more a treatise on the culture of the spy profession: relationships are guarded, life is filled with uncertainty and ambiguity, since you and your adversary are both trying to pull the wool over the other's eyes and you are never sure whether you are the successful deceiver or the one being deceived. Essentially a great opportunity wasted by trying to include too much in too short a time; one needs either a multi-part series, something like the 1979 BBC miniseries, or a much simplified narrative that includes enough signposts to keep the interested viewer attentive. (2012)

To Be or Not To Be 1942 Ernst Lubitsch 4.0 Jack Benny as "that great, great Polish actor, Joseph Tura"; Carole Lombard breezy and cheerful as his seemingly wayward wife; Sig Ruman clowning hilariously as Colonel "Concentration Camp Ehrhardt"; Robert Stack in early role as Polish flyer who may be having an affair with Lombard. Totally hilarious spook of Nazis occupying Warsaw early in World War II. Very witty script. Based on anti-Nazi shenanigans of troupe of Polish actors who run circles around the incompetent Gestapo; a comedy of disguises and mistaken identities. Carole Lombard very fetching as Maria Tura, she of ambiguous morals who uses her beauty and wiles to get what she wants from the Gestapo. Jack Benny as the *pièce de résistance* with his trademark wistful sideways glance: "that great Polish actor," Joseph Tura, with a huge ego, who is mocked frequently as ham actor; he loves to do 'Hamlet', the only problem being that every time (three times) he recites soliloquy, his wife's lover walks out of the theater! (a different lover walks out of the London theater at the end.) Benny also gets mileage as the (rightfully) jealous husband. Lubitsch gets away with a lot of marital infidelity in 1942! Many at the time of release thought the movie made too much light of a very serious subject, e.g., Benny: "They call me Concentration Camp Ehrhardt! We do the concentrating, and the Poles do the camping!" The film was mostly ignored by audiences and critics complained of its bad taste, wondering what had happened to Lubitsch's fine-tuned wit. Sig Ruman overwhelmingly funny as hypersensitive Gestapo colonel with the bulging eyes and the pugnacious relationship with his assistant, Capt. Schulz, whom he constantly accuses of trying to shift blame for errors on his boss! Ehrhardt is a fool, with an ego and a desire for the good things in life, including Mrs. Tura. Great scenes and gags: "So they call me Concentration Camp Ehrhardt!", repeated three times by Benny when he is trying to stall the real Prof. Solinski, and then twice more by the real Ehrhardt; Ehrhardt's expression when he thinks Maria is having an affair with Hitler; at the end; the fake Hitler commands two pilots to jump out of the plane, and of course they do giving the Nazi salute and saying "Heil, Hitler!"; the last soliloquy scene – we expect Stack to walk out, but another lover does, and both Benny and Stack are outraged! Much mocking of German subservience to authority and fear of their superiors, and fear by Germans that they will be cashiered for some imagined offense or for repeating an anti-Hitler joke. One of the classic comedies. (2006)

To Be or Not to Be 1983 Alan Johnson 3.0 Mel Brooks as the cowardly, ego-dominated head of the Bronski theater in Warsaw; Anne Bancroft as his wife; Tim Matheson as the ardent, fresh-

faced Lieutenant Sobinski; Charles Durning as the real Erhardt, following Ruman's performance but adding infantile touches, such as sucking his hand; Jose Ferrer as the German agent posing as a Polish patriot, Professor Siletski; Christopher Lloyd as the impossibly stiff and clueless Captain Schultz. Good remake of the Lubitsch classic (but why would anyone want to make a remake of that film?). The film has the same characters and follows the same plot. The tone however is farcical, off the wall, with unhistorical bits of Jewish humor. Brooks of course overplays the part with facial mugging compared to Benny's classic deadpan underplaying. This version adds some music, e.g., Hitler singing "a little piece of Poland, a little piece of France...." A rendition of 'Heart and Soul'. A lot of New York Jewish characters and comments; e.g., "Without Jews, fags and gypsies, there is no theater." Someone makes a reference to Sondheim, "Bring in the clowns...." Bancroft's assistant is a flaming gay. Also corny sex jokes, e.g., Sobinski describing to Bancroft what it is like to fly his bomber – "Would you like to see my bomber?" Some strong moments, e.g., the marvelous, tongue-in-cheek interchange between Bancroft and Ferrer. Film rates as perhaps one of Brooks' better films, but lacks the sly wit and creativity of Lubitsch. (2009)

To Be or Not to Be 1983 Alan Johnson 3.0 Mel Brooks as the cowardly, ego-dominated head of the Bronski theater in Warsaw; Anne Bancroft as his wife, one of his actresses; Tim Matheson as the ardent, fresh-faced Lieutenant Sobinski; Charles Durning as the real Erhardt, following Sig Ruman's performance but adding infantile touches, such as sucking his hand; Jose Ferrer as the German agent posing as a Polish patriot, Professor Siletski; Christopher Lloyd amusing as the impossibly stiff and clueless Captain Schultz. Acceptable, very-Brooks remake of the immortal Lubitsch classic of 1941. The tone here is farcical, off-the-wall, and in bad taste (typical Brooks) in comparison with the dry, poised satirical approach of Lubitsch. Brooks of course seriously overplays his role compared to Jack Benny's slow-burn, quietly vain underplaying. Brooks incorporates a lot of Jewish characters and comments – "Without Jews, fags and gypsies, there is no theater", whereas Lubitsch's characters are first and foremost human (e.g., Bronski's famous recital of Shylock's monologue). Brooks adds absurdist music: Hitler -- "A little piece of Poland, a little piece of France...." And a rendition of "Heart and Soul". Bancroft's assistant is a flaming gay (no such character in Lubitsch version). More in-show-biz references – e.g., on stage someone says "Bring in the clowns"; subsequently the clowns are fooling around on stage. Sex jokes abound, e.g., Sobinski describing what it is like to fly his bomber – "Would you like to see my bomber?" There is a marvelous tongue-in-cheek interchange between Bancroft and Ferrer. After "The Producers" one can understand why Brooks is attracted to Nazi stories, but why remake the marvelous Lubitsch original? (second review)

To Have and Have Not 1944 Howard Hawks (writer William Faulkner) 3.0 Humphrey Bogart rather slight and ordinary looking as independent, highly masculine, laconic fishing boat captain in Martinique in 1940; Lauren Bacall in her first film as thin, wide-mouthed, sultry, husky-voiced, outspoken, cigarette-smoking young American woman looking for meaning in life; Walter Brennan as foolish, amiable drunk sidekick of Bogart; Hoagy Carmichael as pleasant pianist/singer in the bar of Fort de France; Marcel Dalio as good-natured owner of bar – he is a partisan of the Free French; Dan Seymour sporting a not-so-genuine French accent, imitating Sidney Greenstreet as the rotund police captain; Dolores Moran glamorous as the wife of a Free French activist. Rather thin adventure yarn enlivened by the shadow of 'Casablanca' and the romantic star power of Baby and Bogie. The plot is pretty forgettable – like in 'Casablanca' macho guy Bogart takes a long time to fall in with the Free French against the Vichy authorities and ultimately to hook up with Bacall; the adventure sequences – e.g., Bogie taking his fishing boat to pick up some Free French operatives – are long-winded; and the film seems longer than its 100 minutes or so. Themes are pretty scarce, but it is entertaining watching the rather slight but decidedly masculine Bogart defy the police, move over to the side of the angels, and to court Bacall in his commanding, but reserved way. Brennan is present in most scenes, saying foolish but lovable things and always cadging money from Bogart for a drink (typical traditional Hollywood that forbids reference to sex or drugs but allows drunkenness as its concession to vice). References to 'Casablanca' abound: action in an exotic place, a lot of scenes in smoke- and booze-filled bars with women flirting, guys playing cards, and a musician (Carmichael) playing the piano (Bacall also sings), and the ham-fisted

police barging in to make a menace of themselves. The entertainment core of the film is Bacall coming on to a somewhat reluctant Bogart: standing in the doorway and asking if anyone has a light; the famous line when she tells Bogart to whistle if he wants her, i.e., “purse your lips and blow”; appearing in the bar in a slinky, low-cut, black dress to sing with Carmichael. A sort of innocent melodrama: the police never seem very smart or dangerous (when Bogart’s boat is approached by a well-armed patrol boat, Bogie has no trouble escaping by shooting out the Vichy boat’s searchlight); the ending has the good guys pull a gun on the three policemen, tie them up, and then Bogart and Bacall trip off together to get on their boat and escape to a neighboring island – seems pretty simple. Not an outstanding film, but great stars and great Hollywood lore. (2013)

To Live and Die in LA 1985 William Friedkin 3.5 William Petersen as obsessive, violent Treasury cop pursuing counterfeiters; John Pankow as his faithful second partner Vukovich; Willem Dafoe menacing as the ruthless counterfeiter, who has transferred his skills as an artist to artfully making false bills; John Turturro as Dafoe’s slippery collaborator. Compelling, exciting, kinetic, obsessive cop movie about Petersen’s relentless pursuit of Dafoe, the killer of his first partner. Petersen, who is an emotional loose cannon operating at the fringe of the law (he gets a huge thrill out of bungee jumping with flaky equipment), stops at nothing to get his man, including robbery in order to get money for access to Dafoe’s production site. Posing as customers of Dafoe’s counterfeit bills (apparently \$200,000 cash for \$1,000,000), Petersen and Vukovich have a showdown in a locker room, wherein – in a needless plot twist – Petersen is gunned down by one of Dafoe’s hoods; Dafoe is then liquidated by in a fiery showdown at Dafoe’s production site. Instead of the mountains, beaches, and swimming pools of Beverly Hills and Santa Monica, the film is set against the backdrop of the southern industrial part of LA – San Pedro, the bridges over the port, oil derricks pumping away, ramshackle warehouses, dirt and gravel alleys crowded with parked trucks, broken down fences, power lines, ticky tack apartment houses. The film has ultra high-energy momentum. The ten-minute chase through the back alleys and freeways of the region is memorable, the best since Friedkin’s elevated train sequence in ‘The French Connection’: pursued by several cars full of trigger-happy hoods (they might have been FBI agents upset at losing some of their funds...), Petersen and Vukovich careen through alleys choked with trucks, and when apparently corralled, they launch onto a freeway in a hair-raising sequence driving the wrong way through rush hour traffic. The film is a meditation (!) on the values of policemen, who living on the edge of the law are often not able to resist illegal means and violence to get their man. Petersen does not hesitate to use very means at his disposal to get revenge for the death of his first partner; once Petersen is killed, his second partner sets out grimly to get Dafoe, who is killed by a hail of bullets while burning like a torch; Vukovich then goes to Petersen’s apartment to claim his girlfriend as his, making it clear that he has left behind his conformist, law-abiding self to embrace the aggressive, in-your-face persona of his ex-partner. Such is the nature of cops, Treasury guys just as much as the LAPD. (2015)

To Rome With Love 2012 Woody Allen 2.5 Judy David, wife of e3d – she gets a few laughs from her running critique of her husband (interpreting all his actions as manifestations of his fear of death); Woody Allen, supposed avant garde opera impresario, bores his audience with repetitive obsessive, pessimistic Allenesque shticks; Alison Pill as indistinguishable, pleasant, young American visiting Rome and finding romance with ...; Flavio Parenti, handsome, pleasant, and sympathetic young Italian; Roberto Benigni as “typical middle class” Roman who also tires out the viewer with his overexposed, familiar antics when he is (inexplicably) treated by the press corps as a celebrity; Penelope Cruz bursting out of her dress as a prostitute who is mistaken for the respectable wife of a young Italian businessman (Alessandro Tiberi); Jesse Eisenberg forgettable as an American architectural student living with his girlfriend (Greta Gerwig in a low-key role), but he ramps up the romantic tension when he falls for...; Ellen Page perhaps the best thing in the film as ditzy American student obsessed with sex and relationships, but also an accomplished name dropper and confabulator; Alec Baldwin looking a bit tired as American who serves as Eisenberg’s alter ego doling out cynical advice about relationships; Fabio Armiliato (a well-known Italian tenor) as an undertaker (father of Parenti), who has a fabulous voice but can sing only in the shower. Sporadically entertaining, generally pointless, chaotic compendium of the experiences of a bunch of Americans visiting Rome. Since not a single one of them speaks a word of

Italian, they blabber away in English and expect everyone they meet to speak their language. Film is quirky – e.g., Allen, who is obsessively determined to sponsor Armiliato in singing roles, produces ‘Pagliacci’ with the tenor singing nude in a portable shower (often washing his hair and scrubbing his armpits) and even stabbing his antagonist from the stall; the pretty Alessandra Mastronardi spends the first half of the film roaming through Rome’s picturesque streets trying to find a hair salon. It is consistently cheerful and upbeat, and appears to have no point except 1) the typical Allen-esque focus on confusion ensuing from sexual and romantic obsession and the advantages of sticking with a reliable spouse (Eisenberg returning to Gerwig and Tiberi and Mastronardi reunite faithfully after both have casual sex with other partners); 2) Rome is a pretty city with fabulous sites for visiting American tourists (‘Three Coins in a Fountain’, ‘Roman Holiday’); 3) the perils of being a celebrity – Benigni is ruthlessly pursued by photographers when he somehow is muted into a celebrity (“Did you have one or two pieces of toast for breakfast?”), and Mastronardi falls for an unattractive Italian actor because she is so star-struck. It is hard not to see autobiographical parallels, some of them a bit disingenuous – Allen wants to escape from the paparazzi (and yet doesn’t he thrive in the limelight?); by staying faithful to his spouse Allen seeks to avoid further disturbances in his life (but is he admitting that he has strayed on occasion and then regretted it?). A frothy, high calorie concoction with an entertaining all-star cast, but without soul or even the usual existentialist posturing. (2012)

Tokyo Sonata 2008 Kiyoshi Kurosawa (Japan) 2.5 Teruyuki Kagawa as middle management guy who is downsized, goes on unemployment, but doesn’t tell his wife; Kyoko Koizumi as his patient, long-suffering, passive wife; Yu Koyanagi as disaffected older son of the couple -- he joins the U.S. military as a sort of way out of his impasse; Inowaki Kai as younger son, who develops a fondness for Debussy despite the father’s impassioned opposition. A kind of existentialist family drama that has almost no narrative direction. All the four members of the family are more or less silent and suffering, passive in confronting their challenges (Kagawa and Koizumi) or confused (Koyanagi joins the US military to find a way out, but then in the end of the film tells his parents that he no longer has such faith in the wisdom of American foreign policy to save the world, and that he has decided to stay in his Middle Eastern country (Iraq?) to fight for the native peoples and presumably now against the Americans. The texture and movement of the film reminds one of Ozu -- a lot of household scenes, revolving around the family, people leaving or entering the house (everyone says “I am home!” when they go through the front door), apparently empty conversation and silences around the dinner table. Husband and wife are equally passive and clueless: Kagawa drifts aimlessly, refuses a job as a night watchman, but then accepts one cleaning toilets (awfully dirty ones) in a shopping mall; the mother tries to keep peace in the family by, e.g., telling her husband not to yell at his sons, but until the end, she does not confront him and even when the two collect Kai after his triumphant performance of ‘Clair de lune’, she still walks a couple of paces behind him. The two are subjected to stresses that come more or less out of the blue: e.g., Koizumi is tied up like a package by a crazed intruder (the popular Kanji Tsuda) at knife point, kidnapped, and then abandoned when the criminal drives his car into the sea. Meanwhile, the little boy saves the day: he uses his lunch money to buy piano lessons from the melancholy and beautiful Haruka Igawa despite the tyrannical ravings of his father, who whacks him over the head, pushes him across the room, and then slaps him. But in the final scene he renders an expert and triumphant performance of ‘Clair de lune’ (after how many months of practicing?), and his parents walk up to him and then off screen to a better life, one presumes. (2010)

Tokyo Story 1953 Yasujiro Ozu (Japan) 4.0 Setsuko Hara as daughter-in-law Noriko with the kind, open smile and a generous heart – her husband was killed in the war; Chishu Ryu as Noriko’s soft-spoken father; Haruko Sugimura as practical, sour, selfish daughter Shige, who makes her mom wear old sandals but weeps when she dies; Sô Yamamura as son Koichi, who is a handsome, taciturn neighborhood doctor. Famous poetic, emotionally affecting movie by master Ozu dealing with cross-generational relationships among family members in the immediate postwar period. The very simple narrative deals with the visit of a retired couple from a southern seaside city to their busy children in Tokyo. They are received rather indifferently, and on their way back home, the mother is taken ill on the train; she later dies at home just after the arrival of the three children. Events recorded in the frame

involve exclusively family matters: small talk predominates – how was the train ride, what has happened to the air cushion, what do you think of the grandchildren, should we return home right away, what do you think of the grandchildren. But just under the surface the main themes develop inexorably: the loneliness of the elderly, the superficial relationships with life-long partners, the growing gap between parents and children, the disappointment experienced by the older generation at the emotional distance of their children and their mediocre professional success (e.g., Koichi is just a neighborhood family doctor), the basic sadness of human life. Ozu's filming and editing techniques add greatly to the poetic atmosphere: the camera is always stationary filming scenes and conversations a few feet above the ground; the camera focuses on interior spaces that are often empty – especially before and after a conversation; beautiful, carefully chosen close-ups, especially effective when showing Noriko's glowing face. The chapters in the narrative are separated by “pillow shots” that promote the poetic flow of the film – clothes hanging on a clothesline, a view of traditional monuments, a quiet view of the sea, a long shot of a small boat putt-putting up the river like the ticking of a clock. Key scenes in the narrative (e.g., the mother falling sick on the train) are not given screen time but are subjects of conversation afterwards (the decision of the children to journey to see her). Ozu rarely uses music except in the pillow shots which are usually accompanied by quiet, meditative western-style selections. The ending of the film is resigned sadness: the mom is gone, Ryu is resigned to living out the remainder of his life lonely and far from his children, Noriko connects to her younger sister, but returns to Tokyo with an uncertain future (the mother had told her daughter-in-law that she would never be happy unless she remarries), and the film ends with Ryu tended to his garden and the sound and visual of the putt-putt boat going by. Sad and poetic. (2014)

The Toll Gate 1920 Lambert Hillyer 3.5 William S. Hart, Anna Q. Nilsson. Very good silent western with interesting psychological study, moral dilemmas, and dramatic poetry. AN very pretty and compelling; who wouldn't want to be married to her? Hart stickler for realistic period detail. WSH is chiseled, fit, medium dark hair, taciturn, serious, has *gravitas*, does not smile or laugh; kind of existentialist who wants to be good and to have meaning in his life. Plot line is moral story of man undergoing redemption; a good man who wants to stop robbing trains; everyone can see he is a good man; wants to marry AN and be father to her child; hands himself over to the law, but can't stop himself from exacting revenge on the despicable Jordan. Ends like ‘Shane’ with him leaving his woman (how could he stay with her after murdering her husband?) and staying south of border so he won't be arrested. Print is ok (although too dark in night shots) about 2/3s and then half disintegrates with yellows in bizarre places. Music is mostly early Romantic orchestral pieces. Full of all the clichés of the western, but usually done in good taste and in interesting ways. Theme = can you trust other human beings? Yes, even if you have never in your life had reason to think so! You have to stay on the course set by your moral compass. Titles written on paintings, and are usually interesting and some-times poetic. Nb. Quite racist despite absence of Blacks: e.g., to be ‘white’ is to be a good man. (2004)

Tom and Viv 1994 Brian Gilbert (Britain) 2.5 Willem Dafoe laboring to speak British as low-key, saintly and patient T.S. Eliot (called ‘Tom’) toward the beginning of his career deeply in love with Viv; Miranda Richardson in strong performance as mentally unstable Vivienne, daughter in an English country family; Rosemary Harris as Vivienne’s kindly, supportive mother; Tim Dutton as equally kind, stable and supportive brother of Viv. Well-made, upper-class English film about Eliot’s love for the eccentric, impulsive Vivienne. He elopes with her at her insistence (swept off her feet by a well-known, up-and-coming poet?); the parents are angry that she would marry a penniless poet, but they soon come to like their emotionally steady son-in-law; through most of the film she is either suffering from menstrual problems or acting as if she were schizophrenic – attacking Virginia Wolff in a taxicab with a knife (actually a toy one) and pouring a large amount of liquid chocolate in Tom’s mail slot when he refuses to see her. In the film’s crisis Tom and her family decide to commit her to a golden-cage mental hospital, where she remains for the rest of her life unvisited by her husband (he is too Anglican to divorce) but apparently cured of her mental afflictions after the onset of menopause; a visiting American doctor suggests that she could have been cured by hormone therapy, but no one is interested in her release, not even Vivienne, who remains faithful to Tom’s will even in extremis. Although the cinematographer, the

acting, the vicarious experiencing of the life of a gentle English family are all pleasant, the film is quite frustrating. One learns little about what makes Eliot a great poet, aside from his hunger to become an upper-class Englishman (even converting to the Church of England); through both Vivienne and Tom the film asserts that Viv was Tom's muse, something which is probably not true. Tom manifests repeatedly his undying love for Vivienne in all her imperfections, but it is difficult to understand why he would commit her to an asylum for just eccentric behavior; and if he loves her so, why would he neglect to contact her, much less have her released, for the twelve years or so she was there. Viv's family also fails to stand up for her: perhaps her mother is just tired of bearing the burden of supporting her; her brother Maurice seems an emotionally happy-go-lucky fellow who goes along with the rest of the family. The film's dialogue keenly demonstrates the tendency of the English upper classes to hide their emotions through vague expressions ("Of course") and indirect statements. No family member actively confronts the faulty medical diagnoses (pituitary gland?!) to stand up for Vivienne. Too many distracting questions in the film. (2013)

The Tomb of Ligeia 1964 Roger Corman (AIP) 2.5 Vincent Price as more handsome in his Regency costume playing a mourning lover; Elizabeth Shepherd playing both the apparently dead Lady Ligeia and Price's new squeeze Lad Rowena; John Westbrook impeccably dressed with handsome sideburns as Rowena's previous suitor; Derek France suitably blustering as Squire Weston-like lord living in the neighborhood. The last of the Corman-price AIP riffs on Poe stories takes advantage of actual locations in Norfolk, especially a ruined abbey that has a Gothic house attached where Price lives. The raven-haired Ligeia is apparently dead at the beginning of the film (although her eyes pop open while she is lying in her coffin), but she has expressed her will to stay alive and throughout the film she continues to haunt the widower Price in the guise of a black cat, especially after he falls in love with the blonde Rowena and marries her. Much of the film is set outdoors, often in the abbey grounds, and in the interior of the attached house, which is decorated in gothic style with dark draperies, mummy- or gargoyle-like images set along the walls, huge fires burning in the grate in the middle of the room. Ligeia, who was apparently a pagan much taken with Egyptian mythology, makes it clear that she intends to overcome death by the exercise of pure will (as expressed by Schopenhauer about the same time) and that she will maintain possession of her husband at all costs. Despite intimations of incoherence – why would Price defy his dead wife when he fears her? Why would Rowena marry Price when she was courted by the wealthy and dashing Westbrook? – the film maintains tension through the attacks (and screechings) of the black cat, and builds to a conclusion worthy of the genre. In the final sequence Ligeia and Rowena become more or less interchangeable: when Price goes behind the black curtain he cannot be certain which of his spouses he will find; a nice chill when a veiled figure presumed to be Rowena emerges into the great room covered with a veil, and when Price removes it he discovers – Legeia! When in a frenzy he grabs her by the throat and strangles her, she turns into Rowena and dies. Westbrook removes his secret love, and after the abbey house goes up in flames (footage borrowed from a previous film), Rowena wakes up in bed in Westbrook's house, smiles; and one supposes they will live happily ever after. A pretty good chiller pic if perhaps seen by itself, but the film seems repetitive if the viewer has seen some of the previous Corman-Price films. Probably good that the series was laid to the rest after this one. (2010)

Toni Erdmann 2016 Maren Ade (Germany) 3.0 Overly long, often hilarious comedy about the relationship between a surrealistically practical joker father and his serious, business-only daughter. Peter Simonischek as the grizzled, disheveled German Winfried who takes on the Toni Erdmann identity (a life coach) when he goes to Bucharest to reestablish relations with his daughter; Sandra Hüller as his almost emaciated workaholic daughter, who however maintains a vestigial affection for her father. The serious undercurrent of the film is the importance of relaxing, enjoying your life, and not allowing yourself to be monopolized by the work world: with her severely pinned back hair and humorless demeanor Hüller of course represents the latter; with his comically shaggy brown wig and his arsenal of props – handcuffs, fart cushions, an unforgettable set of false teeth – Simonischek represents the laid-back Aquarian world. In the core comic scenes in Bucharest, Simonischek plays his immortal cheese grater jokes, he rattles on indefinitely about turtles, and proclaims himself the best egg painter in Germany (egg

painting is apparently important for Rumanians). People around him – mostly Hüller's business associates – look on bemused, not sure whether to take him seriously. It is not clear to the viewer what the father is up to – simply be obnoxious and embarrass his daughter, or to harass her back into a relationship with him. Hüller is at first befuddled and annoyed with her disconcerting father, but she doesn't get really angry – just exasperated. Perhaps to show that she is coming around, toward the end of the film she improvises a hilarious nude dinner party, where everyone is embarrassed. The final scene back in Germany shows Hüller, who has quit her Romanian job and is soon off to China, standing deadpan in front of the camera with a silly hat on. It appears that her dad has won the contest. The film is often very funny and has heart-warming moments; it also professes a bitter edge toward Euro businessmen, who are seen exploiting Rumanian common folk. It is however too long, a condition that often attenuates the viewer's good humor. (2017)

Top Five 2014 Chris Rock (also wrote) 2.5 Chris Rock his usual droll, raunchy, irreverent self as ex-movie star in an absurd comedy series ‘Hammy the Bear’ trying to turn over a new leaf by making an (equally bad) historical film about the slave uprising in Haiti; Rosario Dawson as beautiful, intelligent, romantic ‘New York Times’ film reviewer (credibility in the role close to zero), who spends most of the film interviewing the principal; a bunch of cameos that entertain when they appear unexpectedly – Cedric the Entertainer completely outrageous as loud, lustful comedy impresario in New Orleans, Tracy Morgan funny as overweight old friend, Charlie Rose, Whoopi Goldberg, Jerry Seinfeld, Adam Sandler, a bunch of veterans of Saturday Night Live that the viewer has never heard of. Mildly amusing presentation of Rock that would have been a lot funnier if the viewer were more closely tied to popular culture. Rock's humor seems to get diffused when he puts himself on film – when his camera is cutting back and forth among different characters in a film, you just don't have the same intense, white-toothed smile and concentrated look. Some effectively funny scenes: replay of excerpt from a ‘Hammy’ movie, in which Rock's voice emanates from an obviously fake bear's head with no moving mouth; flashback to Rosario's former white boyfriend, who insists constantly that Rosario put her finger in his ass; Cedric the Entertainer shouting repeatedly to Rock, “I am the big New Orleans motherfucker, Dawg!” as he ejaculates all over Rock's bed; Seinfeld and Goldberg in a nightclub giving Rock marriage advice – don't even think about cheating, just play with yourself; if you cheat, she will know! Dawson is a charming person, but her attempt to play a ‘Times’ movie critic and to build rapport with Rock consistently falls flat; the two fall for one another (the situation is complicated by Rock's commitment to marry a TV reality show star on television), and the understanding in the limousine at the end implies that they will be getting together. Some good moments stranded in the middle of long, dull stretches. If you don't know hip-hop or contemporary comedy, you should pass up this film. (2015)

Topper 1937 Norman McLeod (Hal Roach) 3.0 Cary Grant effectively comic as laid-back rich guy George without an apparent job; Constance Bennett as his spoiled, good-humored, free-wheeling wife – the two are almost always seen together; Roland Young as meek, whiney, stuffy banker Cosmo Topper – he is the comic and dramatic center of the film; Billie Burke as his tyrannical, bossy, sometimes hysterical wife; Alan Mowbray as an uptight, but humorous butler, who shows only the most reluctant respect for mistress Burke; gravelly-voiced Eugene Pallette as portly hotel detective struggling with the disappearing couple and trying to nail Topper. Hoagy Carmichael plays a piano song. Entertaining screwball comedy by Hal Roach – one of the first playing with mid-level death in typical upper middle-class Connecticut society of stately homes with cool art deco interiors. Playpersons Grant and Bennett are killed in their fabulous custom finned Buick Century sports car; they haunt Grant's uncle Topper and teach him a thing or two about enjoying life. Film is amusing but is too superficial to achieve classic status. Grant and Bennett (latter is top-billed) are often inebriated; fun-loving, light-hearted, insouciant, devoted to one another, reminding the viewer of Nick and Nora in ‘The Thin Man’ series (Grant has stopped drinking by the end of the film). The couple is often wraithy; special effects are effective – animation of things happening of themselves – changing the tire and driving the sports car (steering wheel often turns of itself). The couple loves to play tricks on Topper, embarrassing him in front of people, making it appear that he is talking to himself. A lot of slapstick screwball business that depends on the couple appearing and disappearing at will: e.g., in and out of the elevator with Topper supported by the

invisible couple throughout the hotel lobby, followed by a screwball fight in the street in which Topper slugs a cabby, and Topper's trip to the court, where he pays a \$100 fine. Toward the end an amusing scene of hotel dicks looking for Bennett in Topper's room and of course not finding him since she has disappeared herself. The film's idea of death is benign: our couple is caught in a halfway house awaiting the transfer to the beyond: personalities, clothes, appearance and behavior almost exactly the same – “Funny, I don't feel any different.” – until in the final scene their mission (?) seems complete and their relocation to the afterlife is begun. Topper and Burke are the only ones to change in the film. Topper is hounded by his butler's time pressure and his wife's controlling shrewishness – keeps him on a schedule and makes him eat lamb every Sunday. The Question is get more out of life, learn to be carefree, play together, dance and sing, drink a little, “look at knees” and steal wives (enjoy flirtation and sex with your wife). Film ends with Burke following Mowbray's advice, putting on a pair of frilly, sexy underpants, and showing them to Topper (hidden from the viewer by the edge of the bed); he, of course, is delighted, and the two kiss at the fade-out. (2016)

Topsy-Turvy 1999 Mike Leigh (Britain) 4.0+ Jim Broadbent as the stubborn, grouchy, misanthropic librettist, who is however witty and authoritative during rehearsals; Alan Corduner as equally stubborn but far more convivial and fun-loving composer; Lesley Manville as Gilbert's persistent, long-suffering wife; Ron Cook as dapper D'Oyly Carte, who is constantly beset with production and cast problems; Timothy Spall as the amusingly grandiloquent Mikado – especially moving when dejected about his song being cut; Wendy Nottingham as the highly competent Helen Lenoir, Carte's assistant; Martin Savage as dandy, neurasthenic George Grossmith, who plays Ko-Ko; Kevin McKidd as the equally dandyesque Lely (plays Nanki-Poo); Shirley Henderson as the mannered Leonora (Yum-Yum), who has a little “weakness” of lesbianism. Splendid film that paints the world and characters of Gilbert and Sullivan, charts the crisis in their collaboration after the relative failure of ‘Princess Ida’ (Sullivan wants to write serious works and can no longer stand to deal with Gilbert's ‘topsy-turvydom,’ the wildly improbably plots that he has used up to then), and then details the genesis, preparation and production of ‘The Mikado;’ the second half of film is devoted to preparation of the production. Absolute attention to historical detail – Victorian interiors, impeccable dress, etc. – and to all the steps that you have to go through to create a comic opera – rehearsing the lines (lengthy and amusing scene with Gilbert directing), designing and fitting the costumes (various objections of actors to wearing bathrobes, etc.), blocking the action, trying to get the advice of Japanese visitors while speaking only English (!), inventing and perfecting the fan business, rehearsing the orchestra, etc. Broadbent perfect as Gilbert – timid, cut off from people around him (script appears to attribute this to his very difficult parents, particularly his bizarre mother, whom he professes to despise), married to Kitty but they never touch nor sleep together, sarcastic, cynical, very funny, and finally very unsure of himself – the night of the first performance, he cannot bear to be in the audience, but roams around the nether parts of London to reappear in the theater only for his bow with Sullivan (pessimistic, “I am ready for what, the gibbet?”). Sullivan, on the other hand, is fun-loving and womanizing (although not in good health), and very positive and supportive in dealing with the show's cast. Film focuses on personal issues of all the characters – Grossmith's reliance on injecting drugs just before the performance, D'Oyly Carte's problems in negotiating contracts with his actors, Tim Spall's thunderstruck depression at having the Mikado's song cut by Gilbert (he later somewhat uncharacteristically gives into the remonstrances of the chorus and restores it), Leonora's little secret (lesbianism) and D'Oyly Carte's instructions that she is not to disturb the cohesion of the company by continuing it, Nanki-Poo's refusal (at first) to perform without his corset, which he says gives him the singing power to shine (one of the women also demurs saying that not wearing a corset is indecent). Script is obviously written out: full of funny lines, especially the sarcastic, cynical ones attributed to Gilbert. Film ends with touching moments: final interview between Kitty and his wife, when she tells Gilbert quite poetically that she is lonely and would like affection and a baby (but he is deaf to her, of course), and Leonora delivers quirky, self-indulgent soliloquy to the mirror (“I am beautiful”), and then sings it in her beautiful aria at the beginning of Act II. Obviously Leigh's loving tribute to the theater, the poetry of music, and particularly to the ‘Mikado’, from which he excerpts several numbers; and he shows his cinematic expertise and sensitivity in the process. Has to be one of the best movies ever made! (2012)

Touchez pas au grisbi 1954 Jacques Becker (France) 4.0 Jean Gabin in convincing performance as Max, aging nice gangster who thinks it time to retire, René Dary as his passive, dim-witted, more or less clueless sidekick, Riton, that Max carries through the movie to tragic results, Jeanne Moreau as venal showgirl looking for richer life than old guy Riton has been able to offer her, Lino Ventura as Angelo, gangster who tries to get hold of Max's loot, Gaby Basset as Max's stunningly glamorous girlfriend. Outstanding French gangster film in the 50s heyday – Max lifts gold bars from Orly Airport, and he wants to retire on the proceeds (35 million francs [only \$70,000!]), but he runs into serious trouble when Moreau learns from Riton that Max has a big stash, and she spills the beans to Angelo. Texture of film is amazingly realistic – true, Max and Riton wear terrific tailored suits, and two of the girls are beautiful (Max's girlfriend is glamorous), but all takes place in tightly framed interiors in everyday scenes in Paris; many sequences detail everyday actions (brushing teeth, opening and closing elevator doors), the showgirl show in the nightclub is amateurish and cheesy (just as you would expect in a place appealing to bourgeois and gangsters), characters spend a lot of times driving in Paris streets. Scenario is amazingly disciplined and structured – a lot of short shots edited together to present crisp action scenes: e.g., the scene where the two men in ambulances come to Max's apartment to kidnap him, he turns the tables on them, and makes them flee with the help of the concierge – complex and exact. The cinematography is in crisp, shadowed black and white, beautifully restore in the Criterion print. Max has had a lot of girlfriends, and he still flirts and visits the glamour girl for sex, but his real love is for his friend Riton, who often gets him into trouble: he spontaneously shares his loot with him, he calls him on the phone to keep him out of trouble, and in one of the film's most famous scenes he puts Riton up for the night in his secret apartment, giving him pajamas, a toothbrush, and towels, and offering to give him his bed and to sleep on the couch – all the dull domestic details shows that he sees Riton as a wayward son that he has to take care of. This is definitely a man's movie: all the female characters are superficial, dependent, and marginal, decoration on the exterior; what matters is the interaction among the men. The ending is gripping. The two bands meet on a deserted road outside of Paris (really shot near Nice) and have an on-going gun battle including grenades thrown at Max's car (Marco is killed); all of Angelo's men are killed, and Riton is badly wounded, Max is unable to recover his loot. In last scene, Max enters his brightly lit favorite restaurant with Basset on his arm evoking the admiration of his friends who are talking about the accident; a phone call reveals that Riton has just died from his wounds, and Max returns to his table next to his beautiful woman – he has an impassive look on his face. His life will go on, but his future is uncertain since he now has no money, and his beloved Riton is dead. (2006)

Touching the Void 2003 Kevin MacDonald 2.5 Joe Simpson, Simon Yates, and two actors playing them in the action sequences. Partially reenacted docudrama about the life-threatening crisis of two young British climbers when climbing in the Peruvian Andes. Climbing the daring “Alpine style”, the two attack the dangerous face of the mountain alone; and on the way down Simpson has a fall and breaks his leg. Simon tries to lower him down the mountain with their climbing ropes, but Simpson loses his hold and dangles over an ice ridge; with literally no alternative Simon cuts the rope, and Joe falls into a huge ice crevasse, from which he emerges by dint of enormous courage and perseverance. The two are reunited at their tent, and Simon carries Joe to safety on the back of a mule and eventually to six healing operations. The controversy is of course whether Simon, the younger and more inexperienced climber, should have cut the rope, or whether he should have hung on and come up with an ingenious solution to save his climbing partner; Joe always insists that he would have done the same thing. Film oscillates between detailed interviews with Joe and Simon and reenacted scenes with actors somewhere in the French Alps. The scenery is beautiful, and the action sometimes harrowing, but the film is way too long. The viewer is subjected to long descriptions of the often redundant feelings of the principals – what Joe, who confesses that he is an atheist, thinks when he believes he is going to die; why Simon cut the rope and how he deals with the guilt. The suspense is “ruined” by the viewer’s knowledge at the beginning of the film that the two escape alive. Mountaineering enthusiasts are in the best position to enjoy the film. (2007)

Tracks 2013 John Curran (Australia) 3.0 Mia Wasikowska the focus of every scene in the film as the footloose young Australian woman that decides to walk across the Western Desert from Alice

Springs to the Indian Ocean; Adam Driver as Rick, the National Geographic photographer that accompanies and facilitates her on part of her journey. Dramatically flat, but beautiful and often interesting film depicting the trek of Robyn Davidson as originally depicted in her best-selling book of the late 1970s. The film is scenically exquisite painting the desert landscape – few salient features, dry, dusty, almost treeless with bushes, very little water, lovely sunrises and sunsets. Robyn's interaction with her four camels and her dog Diggity is light-hearted and endearing; a true animal lover that seems to have a minimal need for human interaction, she has the animals as her usual companions in the desert waste. The monotony of trekking is broken by small incidents – being charged by three bull camels in rut (very dangerous), two of which she drops with well-aimed shots from her rifle (she had been instructed by an Outbacksman in Alice Springs to shoot without hesitation if charged); happening upon a gentle and generous elderly couple that renews her with food, a bath, and rest (how can western people survive in such a setting?); getting lost in the featureless landscape and relying upon Diggity's homing instinct to lead her back to the camels; encountering Aboriginals and teaming up with Uncle Eddy, who guides her across sacred grounds where women are not supposed to tread; Rick racing ahead in his jeep to put down tins of water at intervals so she won't die of thirst; having to put down Diggity when she is poisoned by strychnine (one assumes laid down by ranchers against predators); Robyn becoming progressively more haggard and exhausted in the latter parts of her journey. The viewer does not learn much about Robyn: flashbacks show that she had an unhappy childhood including the suicide of her mother; she prefers animals to human company; she has intermittent romantic feelings for Rick including a single nuit d'amour (we know because they kiss and then wake up the next morning naked in their sleeping bags), but she seems opposed to permanent attachments. When asked why she wants to walk across the desert, she just responds "Why not?" A slow-moving, dramatically flat, lovely film that like 'Walkabout' and 'Picnic at Hanging Rock' confronts the Outback but without the dark overtones. Wasikowska's persona and performance help maintain the attention of the viewer. (2015)

The Train 1964 John Frankenheimer 4.0 Burt Lancaster as French rail inspector who also is a commander in the French Resistance; Paul Scofield as his nemesis, a fanatic German colonel whose job is to get the contents of the *Jeu de Paume* out of France ahead of the Allies; Jeanne Moreau as French war widow who has very jaundiced view of male behavior in war; Michel Simon very picturesque as jowly engineer Papa Boule whose pride gets him executed by the ruthless Germans; Albert Rémy, another classic French actor who is a fireman and Resistance fighter; Wolfgang Preiss energetic and sensible (plays off Scofield) German officer. Outstanding action war movie about the attempt of the Germans to get priceless paintings out of France as the Allies were on the verge of taking Paris. Wonderful use of geography as the viewer follows the action up and down the rail lines between Paris and Metz. The film appears to have been filmed on location in France, on French railroad right of way and with French steam locomotives and freight cars (that the SNCF must have been discarding in the early 1960s). The action shots along the tracks are outstanding: no miniatures used, but real trains racing along the tracks through stations, actual locomotives derailed and crashing violently into one another; bombing raids by the British in rail yards with hundreds of real explosions; shots from helicopters as a British Spitfire strafes Lancaster's locomotive while he races toward the safety of a tunnel, and then reverses the wheels violently to keep from emerging from the other side; railroad textures – rails, ties and tie screws, greasy and steaming in the ramshackle repair shops, the typical marginal and slightly seedy 'Hotel de la Gare' next to the station – all done with impeccable detail. The plot is exciting and never lets up – the Resistance heroes come up with three separate tactics to keep the train from escaping over the German border – the most elaborate involves rerouting the German train back to where it started by surreptitiously throwing switches and changing signs on the stations . We really get to know Rive-Reine! Most performances excellent: Lancaster lean, minimalist, frowning, pursuing his campaign behind a mask of cooperation, incredibly acrobatic and active, doing all his own stunts; Scofield, an art lover acting under orders from Goering, and a fanatic who shoots French hostages and railroad workers without compunction when he senses sabotage; the two act well off one another, and have an especially intense confrontation at the end of the film, when Lancaster closes the action by executing Scofield. The film has an antiwar subtext that clashes somewhat with its extreme action enthusiasm. In view of the high casualties among the French, the question is often asked if it is all worth it: after all, the stake of the

whole operation is not to win the war or to save human lives, but just to keep a bunch of paintings in France; Moreau does save Lancaster's life a couple of times, but she is constantly criticizing the male taste for blood and glory. The film ends in devastation: the train has been stopped single-handedly by Lancaster's sabotaging of the track, but the Germans escape in a truck convoy despite the ravings of their commander, a couple of dozen hostages are shot, Scofield is executed by Lancaster, the boxed paintings are left lying next to the abandoned train, while Lancaster, the sole Resistance survivor of the adventure, walks quietly away from the camera down the road. The price was so high.... Still, hard to imagine a better adventure film that brings so many elements so successfully together. (2008)

Training Day 2001 Antoine Fuqua 3.5 Denzel Washington in AA-winning role as Alonzo, a vicious police detective who is morally inferior to the gang-bangers he is supposed to be policing; Ethan Hawke as fresh-faced, idealistic new cop who thinks he would like to work in Alonzo's detail; Scot Glen; Tom Berenger; Snoop Dog effective as wheelchair-bound street snitch. Wall-to-wall gripping police drama chronicling Hawkes' training day he must undergo to prove to Alonzo that he has the stuff to be part of his narcotics team on the streets of LA. It is early apparent that the incredibly aggressive and trash-talking Alonzo has his own way of dealing with street crime in his district – ignore the little stuff (the scene in which he refuses to arrest two would-be crack head rapists) and go after the big fish, using tactics that would make a gang-banger blush. Hawke is increasingly dumbfounded by what he sees, the turning point being the murder of Alonzo's supposed friend in order to get his hands on the \$4 million buried under the kitchen floor. Apparently convinced that Hawke knows too much for a guy who is not fully committed to the group, Alonzo leads him with his usual lies and blandishments into an Hispanic house populated by the most detestable sneering hoods; he escapes only through the most improbable of coincidences (the girl he saved from being raped turns out to be the head hit man's niece). The film then crashes through several climaxes. He walks with his gun hanging at his side to the hermetic ghetto where Alonzo is getting it on with his girlfriend to arrest him according to correct police procedures; a slam-bang extended combat with Alonzo ends in the survival and victory of Hawke due largely to the refusal of the locals to defend the arrogant bastard who has humiliated them all these years. Since Hawke now knows that Alonzo owes the Russian mafia \$1 million for having killed a boss in Las Vegas, he takes the money from him and leaves him to his fate; Alonzo is gunned down in the darkened streets by mafia avengers sporting automatic weapons. A postscript has a radio announcement from the LAPD presenting Alonzo's death as heroic and mentioning only his wife and four sons surviving him; they will never acknowledge their problems. The plot is taut and very compelling: we accompany the guys into the friend's house without knowing what Alonzo has up his sleeve – which turns out to be to kill him and take his money to pay off the Russians; we walk into the Hispanic house with them thinking that the two are on a mission of mercy, only to discover that Alonzo has abandoned Hawke there with instructions to drown him in the bathtub (there had been an enticing mention of "cleaning the bathtub" in an earlier scene). Washington's performance is dynamic, multi-faceted, even baroque: arrogant, smooth-talkingly persuasive, lying and manipulative (Hawke has a hard time learning to distrust the bastard), dispensing wisdom about the métier of police work making it seem that his primary purposes is ridding the streets of drug pushers, turning to desperate fear and pleading in the end when he realizes that he is perhaps hated more than he is feared. The viewer cannot take his eyes off him. Not a flattering picture of the LAPD, where the best you get is a bunch of guffawing, probably corrupt higher-ups seated at a table in a restaurant telling dirty jokes and mocking the justice system. With its honest, idealistic cops, "End of the Watch" seems to have been made to atone for this insult to LA's finest. (2013)

Trainspotting 1996 Danny Boyle (Britain) 3.0 Ewan Bremner. Pretty honest look at heroin drug culture in Scotland. Camera style is very kinetic; editing is aggressive and moves; surrealistic episodes such as the dive into the dirtiest toilet in Scotland. Tone is fairly straightforward. Heroin is very pleasurable – better than your best orgasm multiplied by a 100 – and the users form a close knit band of brothers who experience it all together and support one another – until end when Mark Renton steals all their money and takes off for safety! Also the users see themselves as rejecting mainstream values and social comforts and doing something alternative that is valid. But drug use is a disaster in the long run. The only thing that matters is getting the next fix. It is possible to get off heroin, but it takes a huge

effort, and once done one's lifestyle and values are empty, since you have been trained to exist only for the drug and to have orgasmic experiences one after the other. So you decide to return to using, and it is a relief since you are psychologically "home." The drug deal at the end seems a bit off focus; and Rents absconding with the money is very ambiguous – making a play for a normal life and yet done by a criminal act and in betrayal of one's friends, thus violating the only moral principle held by drug users. Movie is entertaining with good sense of humor – a bit off-putting for a movie about heroin use. (2005)

Trainwreck 2015 Judd Apatow (writer Amy Shumer) 3.0 Amy Shumer as vulnerable, alcoholic, promiscuous young woman working in New York; John Cena very funny as clueless, muscle-bound early boyfriend; Bill Hader as mild-mannered sports surgeon that teaches (eventually) Amy the virtues of commitment and affection ; Colin Quinn hilarious as Amy's sharp-tongued, misanthropic father; Tilda Swinton completely unrecognizable as lowlife editor of the sexually exploitative magazine that Amy works for; Brie Larson as Amy's sister, sensible and devoted to monogamy and family life; LeBron James with surprisingly good comic timing as Hader's good friend and defender; Amar'e Stoudemire as Hader's surgery patient. Sharply written, mostly engrossing romantic comedy about the taming of an unhappy, promiscuous woman. This raunchy film is often very funny due to Shumer's writing and incisive performances from Shumer, Cena, Quinn, and Hader. The theme is fairly touching – a woman lonely and vulnerable in her abuse of alcohol and relationships finds the beginnings of love and belonging after a lengthy struggle; Shumer and Hader end up hugging on a basketball court with accompanying applause from a swarm of cheerleaders. The film has many funny moments usually relating to sex and other raunchy subjects. Colin Quinn's initial diatribe to his two young (prepubescent) daughters is perhaps the best thing in the film (Would you like it if you could play with only one doll for the rest of your life?) and he makes them repeat after him "Monogamy is not practical". Cena's attempt to talk dirty with Shumer during sex fails hilariously – his only subjects are energy supplements and body-building. He has a funny verbal confrontation with another guy in a movie theater. Amy gags behind a glass screen while she watches Hader perform a knee operation. LeBron James is impatient with friend Hader because he doesn't want to watch 'Downton Abbey' with him. After she has sex with Hader, relationship-averse Amy insists that they sleep with a pillow between them since she hates to spoon. When Hader calls Amy to tell her how much he enjoyed their date the previous night, her friend tells her to hang up and call the police (we never expect affection). When she feels herself getting close to Hader, Amy worries what his reaction will be when he sees one of her hyper-used tampons in the toilet; and when she worries that her sex with him is not the best she has ever had, her friend reminds her that the guy she had the best sex with is in prison. Raunchy-sex-obsessed film that is actually heart-warming: even this lost soul can find love. (2016)

Transsiberian 2008 Brad Anderson 4.0 Interesting, tightly constructed train thriller about couple that takes the Transsiberian Express from Beijing to Moscow and gets mixed up in the transportation of drugs. Woody Harrelson as naïve American small shop owner who after completing a church-sponsored mission in China, takes the Transsiberian Express; Emily Mortimer in terrific performance as woman with a bad girl past who has married Harrelson to try to lead a normal life; Eduardo Noriega, a Spanish hunk, who plays charming playboy type courting Mortimer and who may or may not be involved in drugs; Kate Mara as Noriega's young innocent American companion who has dreams about settling quietly on a lake near Vancouver; Ben Kingsley as looming, threatening Russian police detective who seems also to be in drugs. Much of the film seems to have been filmed on location, since Russian textures and environment are very realistic; shot in shaky, handheld, hyper close-up fashion that is effective in conveying the lived experience, although it sometimes gives the viewer a headache. Some beautiful shots of the train cutting thought the snowy wooded wilderness (filmed in Lithuania), seemingly distant from civilization, providing an ironic contrast between the beauty and purity of the wild with the dirty business of the drug trade. The film is divided into basically two parts: the first part (before Mortimer gets off the train) has the viewer riding on the train with the principals, getting to know them and casting hints of suspense; the scene in which Noriega leads Mortimer to a ruined Orthodox church lost in the snow-covered woods is beautiful and horrifying, when she kills him in self-defense and leaves his body frozen under the snow; then in the second part, despite Mortimer's attempts to hide the truth,

things clarify and the question becomes whether the protagonists will escape from the Russian drug thugs. Noriega is very effective – smiling, handsome, charming when he first meets Mortimer, but he talks too much about his matryushka dolls (it turns out they are made out of cocaine – a Hitchcockian McGuffin) and the viewer wonders what he and his sidekick are about; we squirm as his seduction of Mortimer progresses (he is tapping into her bad girl past). Mortimer effectively carries the emotional weight in the film – the Noriega temptation happens when she is struggling in her marriage with a rather clueless husband; her anxiety and guilt, although sometimes a bit drawn out, are real and affecting. Nice wrap-up happy ending: Harrelson and Mortimer have escaped and are on the plane back to the USA and a normal life; we find out that Mortimer has told Mara where Noriega's body is lying (he has large amounts of cash on him); and in the final scene she brushes the snow off the body, pulls out the enormous quantities of money, and walks away from the ruin toward the trees – presumably to buy that little house on the lake. Wonderful optimistic, safe thriller. (2009)

The Treasure 2015 Corneliu Porumboiu (Romania) 2.5 Quirky, slow-moving kind-of comedy about two men that set out to find a supposed buried treasure in the garden of an abandoned house. Toma Cuzin as quiet, seemingly sensible family man, who enjoys hanging out with his wife and son in their Bucarest apartment; Adrian Păcărescu as neighbor in apartment building, who approaches Cuzin about searching for the treasure; Corneliu Cozmei as unauthorized operator of the metal detector used in the search. The film, set in contemporary Romania, is divided into three parts: Cuzin and Băcarescu conceiving the treasure hunt and procuring the money and the metal detector for the search; the long sequence in the garden with the half-clueless Cozmei operating the squealing metal detector back and forth across the terrain, ending with Cuzin digging a deep hole in search of whatever caused the machine to squeal; the final flurry of unexpected plot reversals that end the film in a series of (perhaps) humorous question marks. Almost all the film consists of long takes with a stationary camera featuring desultory conversation about everyday subjects, establishing the quiet lifestyle of Cuzin, his intimate relationship with his son, to whom he reads fairy tales about Robin Hood and Maid Marion, the lengthy, repetitive, and sometimes amusing passing of the lie detector over the garden surface, the frustrating interchange with the operator, etc. There is no music on the soundtrack. The screenplay has a lot of detours: Cuzin's boss accuses him of having an affair with another office employee, the two men hire an unofficial operator, who borrows the company equipment without telling his boss, the guys theorize about the best way to exterminate the “vicious” gaggle of crows established in the attic of the abandoned house, the metal box found in the ground contains paper certificates of Mercedes shares, the guys are briefly detained by the local Police (who told them about the digging?) to verify whether they have discovered some national treasure (they haven't). Inexplicable surprises multiply at the end: the certificates turn out to be worth a lot more than originally thought (15,000 Euros a piece instead of 100!), Cuzin uses his money to buy a large amount of expensive jewelry (What in the world is he up to? A safe investment?), he takes it to his son's playground and gives it all to children delighted to get hold of real “ruby” treasure; the camera then pans up to the sun as a loud cheesy song – the first music in the film – plays on the soundtrack. The director is aiming at dead pan absurdist humor, but many viewers will find the film just dull (admittedly the spectacle of Cuzin's shovel appearing rhythmically from the deep hole he has dug is droll, if not laugh out loud). References to Romania's sad history – Communists and the Revolution of 1848 – which is being metaphorically uncovered layer by layer? The final sequences invoke a rejection of riches and materialism? One virtue of the film is that it keeps you guessing. (2016)

Treasure of the Sierra Madre 1948 John Huston (also writer): Warners 4.0 Humphrey Bogart playing against type as psychotic, greed ridden Howard Dobbs (“You have to get up awful early to pull one over on Howard Dobbs”), Walter Huston (AA) as grizzled old prospector who tells the two tenderfeet what to do, Tim Holt as more idealistic and decent Curtin, Alfonso Bedoya in scene-stealing role as Gold Hat, leering and sneering chief of the bandidos, Bruce Bennett as pushy American prospector killed by Dobbs (but he does have a devoted woman waiting for him back home in Texas). Correct quote by Gold Hat: “We don't need no badges. I don't have to show you any stinkin' badges.” Sui generis tragic drama by John Huston; it has elements of a western (although set in the 1920s), but it is really a tragic drama with a strong theme (destructive effects of gold/greed) and the destruction of an originally

decent character – Dobbs. Set in Mexico and much of it shot in Mexico (the seams between the on location scenes and the studio scenes are a bit obvious); much of the cast are actually Mexicans, who speak Mexican slowly but without subtitles (Walter often translates for us). Mexican peasants are sometimes presented sentimentally (e.g., Walter's healing scene in the Mexican village, where he is treated like a god/magician), but then Huston undercuts it with biting wit when he is back with his buddies. Location shots of Mexican mountains are wonderful – panoramic, atmospheric, etc. Performances of the principals are outstanding: Holt rather retiring and decent; Huston irascible, humorous, good-natured, full of blarney, and philosophic – don't expect too much out of life; if things turn bad (lose all your "goods"), then roll with the punches; Bedoya thrusts his ugly mug into the camera and he lisps, sneers, wheedles, insinuates showing his big teeth; Bogart plays against his tough man heroic image to play a down-and-out beggar in Tampico who goes to pieces under the influence of gold (greed), becoming paranoid, compulsive, violent (almost killing Curtin) and finally getting killed by the bandidos for his shoes and the pelts hiding the \$105,000 in the burros' packs. Bogart's journey is almost worthy of Shakespeare. Striking picture of being a Mexican bandit – constantly chased by the Federales, whom they fear for good reason, since they execute you summarily if they catch you; often without guns, as when they kill Dobbs with a rock and (apparently) cut his head off with a machete. End is reasonably upbeat – Huston and Holt go off to continue their lives and neither seems to care too much about having lost their gold. Irony is strong at the end – the bandits break open the bags, and heedlessly spread the gold around on the ground thinking it was just something to make the pelts appear to weigh more; when the gringos return to scrape it off the ground, the wind has blown it away, and Huston begins to laugh, followed soon by Holt: the mountain gave us the gold to begin with (they had thanked the mountain when they first left it), and now the mountain is taking it back. No female characters, and only one reference to a romantic connection (Bennett's wife back home), which does bring tears to our eyes. Huston at his best in a tale about men working together and then splitting apart under the impact of greed. (2006)

A Tree Grows in Brooklyn 1945 Elia Kazan (AA for Dunn and Garner) 3.5 Kazan's first film about the trials and coming of age of Francie (Peggy Ann Garner), 12-year old daughter of Irish immigrants growing up in early 20th century Brooklyn; Dorothy McGuire as her stern mother, Katie, working herself ragged trying to keep the family afloat; James Dunn as lovable and charismatic Irish dad, a ne'er-do-well, alcoholic singing waiter that has close relationship with Francie; Joan Blondell as Sissy, her mother's sister, more free-spirited but ready to settle down when she finds a good husband and has a baby; Lloyd Nolan as shy, attentive beat cop, who turns out to be in love with Katie and provides the happy ending after the death of Francie's dad. Nostalgic, often sentimental, but genuine piece of Americana about the decent folk from immigrant stock making their way in the New World despite economic deprivation. Film focuses on Francie, her tender love for her dad (he calls her "prima donna"), and her love for reading and writing; sensing her academic gifts, her dad is able to get her transferred to a more challenging school, where she prospers and is encouraged by her teacher to become a writer; when her dad dies from alcoholism, Francie is angry and lost, even blaming her mother; but all ends on a positive note when Officer McShane shyly but firmly proposes marriage to Katie, who with the consent of her daughter accepts since the officer is a "decent man" (and promises more economic security for her family). All the acting is genuine and believable, particularly the big-hearted Dunn and the sensitive Garner. Much of the screenplay is a tribute to the power of words with remarkable speeches from the grandmother, Dunn, Garner, McGuire when she is anxious about the birth of her baby, and McShane when he is proposing to McGuire; not a television, radio, computer or i-phone in sight. The tree is symbolic of Francie, a weed that grows out of the cracks in the pavement, and when you cut it down (as events often do to Francie), it just grows back. The film fits well into the nostalgic war films such as 'Meet Me in Saint Louis', which by praising the virtues of American culture give Americans the incentive to make wartime sacrifices – "this is what we are fighting for". Film can drag in places, but it enlists the viewer's sympathy. (2016)

The Tree of Life 2011 Terrence Malick 3.0 Brad Pitt in memorable role as disciplinarian, sometimes abusive father (and husband) in 1950s Waco, Texas; Jessica Chastain beautiful and ethereal as mom that teaches gentleness, love, and forgiveness in contrast to her husband; Hunter McCracken as

gangly 11-year-old son Jack, who is the focus of the film; Sean Penn in thankless role as the grown Jack, forever wandering and musing amidst glass encased skyscrapers in an unnamed city (actually Dallas and Houston). Often stunningly beautiful, sometimes moving, Christian (I think) theological film by Malick that seeks to elucidate God's purpose in the universe and to understand God's purpose in his treatment of the human race. The heart of the film is in the center 90 minutes. In an elliptical, semi-narrative style it recounts the evolution of Pitts' and Chastain's family from their falling in love, through the birth of their children, through the boyhoods of the three sons, and ending sometime after the death of one of Jack's younger brothers in a swimming pool accident. The environment is an idealized, almost Edenesque picture of what it was like to live in a small American city in a bygone golden age – green, garden-like suburb, well-tended wood frame houses whose doors are not locked, kids playing in the streets, sparkling clean interiors, etc. The focus is on the everyday activities of the family, with emphasis on Jack's attempt to understand the world and God through the contrasting personas of his mother, who tells (and shows) him that he must approach people with love and tenderness (she represents Grace and spirit), and his father, who tells him that his mother is naïve, and that to get ahead in this world – to be a success – you have to be tough and not always be good (he represents matter and sin). Pitt is the dominating personality: he has given up a life devoted to music (he still plays the piano sensitively) for the world of business and getting ahead; seemingly frustrated and unhappy, he often loses his temper, manhandles (but doesn't really beat) his boys and is aggressive and abusive to his wife. Constant through this section, the author includes voice-overs from the main characters asking God to show his face, to explain his ways, to illuminate the paradoxes of human existence (e.g., Why does He allow so much suffering among the just?). In the narrative the questioners remain perplexed. The film has an abstract religio-philosophical frame designed to place the central narrative in a cosmic context. It begins with stunning abstract pictures depicting the emergence of the human race – the heavens, the interstellar nebula, ancient volcanos, the origins of cellular life, cutesy dinosaurs wandering around in nature, etc. The film ends with what appears to be a picture of heaven – on a beautiful beach members of the family wander somewhat aimlessly in their adult guise greeting one another; suffering, uncertainty, questioning seem to have passed. The seriousness and weightiness of the quest is emphasized by the use of classical music in the soundtrack, most notably Brahms' 'Requiem'. The film is beautiful, but often pretentious and portentous. I can't help but think that the film would have worked better by eliminating the abstract religious frame and reworking the narrative center in a more narrative and less arty style. (2014)

Los Tres Entierros de Melquiades Estrada 2006 Tommy Lee Jones 3.5 Tommy Lee Jones as Pete, placid, relaxed and yet brutal cowboy/rancher in Southwest Texas near the border with Mexico; Julio Cedillo as Melquiades Estrada, a gentle illegal alien in the USA and a devoted friend of Pete; Barry Pepper as high-strung, immature, violent Border Patrolman who can't control his impulses; January Jones as his pretty, naïve wife who has a one-time fling with Melquiades; Melissa Leo as waitress who has flings with both Pete and Belmont; Dwight Yoakam as Belmont, the local sheriff, who doesn't want anything to do with the murder of a wetback. Very unusual film about a deep friendship between two men, although one of them is dead through most of the movie. Pepper kills the peaceful Melquiades in an impulse (if you hear shots in the desert, you just shoot back in that direction), and when Pete finds out that he did it, he beats him up, kidnaps him, and forces him to dig up Melquiades' rotting corpse and transport it on mule back to a tiny village in Mexico to give him the proper burial that Pete had promised in a prior conversation. The director extracts a lot of black humor from the presence of the corpse, the obnoxious foolishness of Pepper, and the confusion of the sheriff. Most of the film is taken up by the journey: Pepper has his hands in handcuffs and often has to walk without boots; the men traipse across an incredibly varied and beautiful-colorful desert landscape (presumably southwest Texas and northern Mexico) encountering rattlesnakes, ants, dangerous cliffs, and vengeful healers; when they arrive finally in their destination, none of the locals has ever heard of Melquiades; following a crude map that Melquiades had drawn him, Pete finds an abandoned village, where the two bury him; Pete then allows Pepper to leave, and Pete walks away from the camera – now an exile from his own country; he asks Leo to come and join him, but she tells him it is impossible and she hangs up. Film moves slowly in quiet conversations with locals (one of them an old hermit who asks Pete to kill him since his son has abandoned him) and in slow, though picturesque processions across the landscape. The viewer's attention

is maintained and the drama works because of the beautiful cinematography, the quietly affecting performance of Jones, the irritating and immature behavior of Pepper, and authentic performances from the rest of the cast. The film is a morality tale: Since Pepper has broken the laws of decency and hospitality, he must pay the price – he is dragged through the sufferings of hell; only at the end when he kneels before Melquiades' grave and begs for genuine forgiveness does Pete let him go. A wonderful small film; a tribute to the fine cinematic touch of Tommy Lee Jones. (2010)

Trinity and Beyond: the Atomic Bomb Movie 1995 Peter Kuran 3.0 A visually focused account of nuclear bomb testing in the atmosphere from Trinity (1945) until the signing of the Test Ban Treaty by a handsome John Kennedy in 1963. The films of the tests were heavily restored by the filmmakers. The USA conducted 331 atmospheric tests; the first are in black and white and the latter ones in sometimes brilliant color. The narration -- delivered by William Shatner -- is quite neutral, just sticking to the facts with the exception of the post-Test Ban sequence that has the Chinese setting off their bomb and then charging through the nuclear battle field (?) with gas masks on giving the impression that the world is at the mercy of rogue atomists. Fairly extensive interviews with Teller, who justifies his decision to develop the h-bomb (we have to do since the adversary will do it anyway). The visuals of the h-bomb blasts are unforgettable -- a bright white and yellow half-dome with curious bumps on it, followed by the inevitable foreboding but aesthetically pleasing mushroom cloud; the hydrogen bombs are brighter and visually much more impressive than the a-bomb blasts. The progression is from the early 20-kiloton bombs; to the boosted bombs twice the power; to the h-bombs, and the transition from bomber testing to missile launching; and after the temporary failure of the late 1950s atmospheric testing moratorium, the final burst of American testing on Christmas Island (northwest coast of Australia), much of which was circular explosions in the upper atmosphere. Excellent footage of the Russian bomber and its crew delivering the Tsar Bomba (the largest explosion ever at 57 megatons compared to the American maximum of about 25 kilotons) over Novya Zemlya in 1960 and distant pictures of the enormous fireball; the bomb, which was completely impractical since it weighed 26 tons, gave rise to the methodical propaganda speech of Adlai Stevenson in the United Nations. Also memorable are pictures of the actual weapons -- weighty bomb-shaped behemoths attached to parachutes when they are dropped. Visually mesmerizing and a shocking recall of humanity on the verge of self-extinction during this 15-year period. (2010)

The Trip 2010 Michael Winterbottom (Britain) 3.0 Steve Coogan as bushy-haired, womanizing reporter/writer commissioned to review some pretentious restaurants in northwest England; Rob Brydon as his Welsh married companion specializing in impressions of British celebrities and quotations from English literature, whom he invites to accompany him. Extremely droll abbreviation of a six-part BBC television series about the two men driving together for about a week mostly through the national parks in northwest England. The film entertains with beautiful scenes of the winding, narrow roads, the mountains, limestone cliffs, fields, and streams of the area. It also makes much ado about dining in high-class restaurants with shots of the chefs preparing often pretentious dishes in the kitchen while the principals trade their usual wisecracks at the dinner table; Coogan and Brydon seem to enjoy their food with only an occasional disparaging remark. The heart of the film is the on-going conversational interchange between the two. Although they share a sense of humor, the men are different enough. Brydon seems happily married to his rather plump little wife, talking vaguely salacious language with her on the telephone while he lies in bed; Coogan is “taking a hiatus” with his girlfriend, who has gone to New York to seek her fortune, and he slides effortlessly into two encounters with pretty hostesses in the hotels where the guys are staying. The film pokes fun especially at Coogan’s professional insecurities – he yearns for a starring role in an American TV series – and his ambiguous attitude toward his girlfriend, whom he calls periodically while hiding from her his *amours* in the English countryside. The two men are very competitive, although they hide it under a cover of banter and impressions of celebrities. They both are excellent mimics, spending a lot of very entertaining screen time trading impressions of Michael Caine (returns at least three times), Sean Connery as Bond, Richard Burton (Brydon’s fellow Welshman), Woody Allen joking mainly about sex, and other British personalities unknown to this viewer. An entertaining sequence in a car has the two declaiming lines about when they

will get up the next morning from an imaginary historical costume drama in formal, bombastic English; another has Coogan in Bolton Abbey giving a funeral elegy of his friend, which of course brings out mainly his faults behind the mask of praise (e.g., he hid from the real problems of life by joking and laughing about everything). The film dwells some on the aloneness of the bachelor Coogan (walking by himself on the moor, having wordless encounters with young women, returning to his empty London flat and looking at photos of him and his former girlfriend on his smart phone), comparing it to the snug, perhaps unadventurous life nexus of Brydon (abstaining from sex with the women, cute conversation with his wife on the phone, eating a very ungourmet meal with his wife after his return, but apparently happy with the companionship). Undramatic film with priceless exchanges between two very funny comedians. (2011)

The Trip to Italy 2014 Michael Winterbottom (Britain) 2.5 The same two principals from the original – Steve Coogan and Rob Brydon. Entertaining, but in the end repetitive, sequel to the original ‘The Trip’, this time following the guys down the coast of Italy from the Italian Riviera to Amalfi. The travelogue is beautiful – sunny skies occasionally touched by fog, hills plunging into the sea, the travelers seated on light-flooded balconies with spectacular views, winding on the precipitous road near Amalfi, etc. Adding to the hedonistic side of the film are scenes of meals consumed in charming restaurants with cool cooks laboring in the kitchen, young women serving our heroes (how many times did we hear “Mille grazie”?), and the two smacking their laps exclaiming over the delicious pasta and seafood. This time Brydon seems to have the upper hand: not only does he take the offensive in the verbal duel with Coogan, but – to the obvious annoyance of the latter –he lands a plum acting job in an American movie and will soon be heading back to Los Angeles. Enjoyment of the film centers on the impressions performed by the two, particularly Rob, but the viewer – especially an American – might be challenged by arcane, inside references to British TV personalities and films embedded in popular culture such as the Batman franchise. Nevertheless, some funny moments – which actor was the least intelligible in ‘Batman’, redux of the competing Michael Caine, Richard Burton, and Anthony Hopkins impressions; Brydon’s repeated imitations of Al Pacino are not particularly good. In place of Wordsworth and Coleridge references in the first film, Coogan and Brydon pay repeated homage to Byron and Shelley; the former’s death and funeral on an Italian beach give rise to ruminations about mortality. Some puzzling moments: Brydon beds a couple of willing young women, while maintaining a relationship with his (admittedly somewhat inattentive) wife over the phone; Brydon has a completely off-the-wall pretended conversation with the plaster mold of a dead man killed in the Vesuvius eruption, while Coogan wanders off in apparent embarrassment; and the film ends suddenly without explanation but with just a view of the sea off the Amalfi coast. Pleasant, unchallenging film. Hope there will not be another sequel. (2015)

The Trip to Bountiful 1985 Peter Masterson (Indie); written by Horton Foote from his successful 1960s play of the same name. 3.5 Geraldine Page in the film role of her life as Carrie Watts, elderly, cantankerous woman who has to return to her birthplace, John Heard as her somewhat befuddled son who is caught between mother and daughter-in-law, Rebecca DeMornay as very sweet-tempered girl that Mother Watts meets on the bus on the way to Bountiful, Richard Bradford as kind, attentive sheriff who takes Page under his wing at the end of the movie. Wonderful small movie set in 1947 Texas about growing old and what one does to come to terms with it. Whole movie revolves around Page, who received Academy Award for her performance – almost one-woman show! She is about 65, has no focus to her life except to survive in the Houston household of her son and his wife; there is much bickering with Jessie Mae, the daughter-in-law, who is annoyed by her singing hymns and her “pouting.”. Eccentric Mother Watts has obsession to return to Bountiful, her birthplace; she escapes from the watchful eyes of her children, catches the bus, reveals her life in the presence of DeMornay (who plays the role of the innocent, open-eared confidant wonderfully), and when she arrives in a town near Bountiful, she finds it entirely abandoned. With the help of the sheriff, she visits her family house anyhow, and she somehow becomes resigned to her lot. When children show up, she makes peace even with Jessie Mae; the latter, although she is “laying down the law” with preconditions for getting back together, is accepting. The bottom line is that the family has decided to live together in relative harmony, and that Mother Watts has accepted her condition – implication seems to be that she has at least her

family. The journey is through the empty countryside of Texas and through abandoned towns at night, a bit like a dream – perhaps metaphors for a journey into memory in the unconscious; what she has found at the end of the road is satisfying and calming. Low-budget movie (two or three old 50s cars and only a few characters); tries very hard to revive the 50s with its “coke-colas,” etc. Extreme simplicity on the visual surface and in the dialogue, but the script and the acting evoke strong feelings and build to something moving and perhaps profound about people, their relationships, growing old. Cf. ‘Tender Mercies’ and ‘To Kill a Mockingbird,’ AA winning scripts also by writer Horton Foote. (2006)

Triple Agent 2004 Eric Rohmer (France) 2.0 Serge Renko as Fyodor, ex-White Russian general who is now working for the White Russian organization in Paris in the 1930s; Katarina Didaskalou as his sickly wife, Arsinoe, who loves to paint. Last Rohmer film masquerading as a spy thriller that takes place in Paris in the 1930s. The viewer experiences the film from the point of view of the wife, who starts off thinking her husband is a fonctionnaire but becomes increasingly aware that he is (apparently) a kind of spy with dealings with the Germans (he goes secretly to Berlin to (apparently) secure funds from the Nazis) and the Soviets, who he claims are considering hiring him as a senior officer. The main part of the film ends with the kidnapping of Fyodor’s superior, and then...he himself disappears; Arsinoe is arrested by the French, thrown into prison, where she dies in a year or two. It soon becomes evident, however, that in the midst of endless conversations about French politics and international relations, the film is really about the personal relationship between the two principals – the willingness of Fyodor to tell his wife what he is doing and to be honest about it. The film consists primarily of almost endless conversations between Fyodor and his wife; the viewer cannot be sure whether Fyodor is taking great pains to explain to her the complex ins and outs of his job or whether he resorts to this flood of words to hide his actions and his embarrassment; he loves to talk to his wife, but is does he really love her? The conversations often start with Arsinoe’s discomfiture – she is angry, sad, feeling bad – and ends with their reconciliation, a pattern that becomes dull after a couple of times. The dramatic portions of the film are framed by a lot of contemporary newsreels (Blum elected, the Spanish Civil War, the beginning of World War II, the Germans marching into Paris, etc.), as if the film is really about politics or the historical epic. It ends with a scene in 1943 in which a German official tells his French counterparts that Fyodor was actually a Soviet spy operating in Paris, and that he was finally kidnapped by the Soviets (or was it the Germans) and probably murdered in an internment camp in Spain; huh? A film that is difficult to watch, despite the appealing cast and the fame of the director. One comes away with the sense that the point is Rohmer saying – See! I can do the same thing with historical period films what I have always done in my films set in contemporary France! (2011)

Les triplettes de Belleville 2003 Sylvain Chomet (France) 3.0 Unusual, imaginative, unpredictable animated film adventure by maker of the later ‘Illusioniste’. The film is essentially an adventure, chase, and rescue drama about a French cyclist who is kidnapped during the running of the Tour de France; he is transported by the mafia henchman to Belleville (which appears mostly derived from New York, but with some European and Quebecois elements), where he is put to work by a dwarfish, pink-nose mafia chief on a gambling project. Grandma Mme. Souza arrives with her oversized dog, and they are taken in by the “Triplets of Belleville”; the four of them eventually discover the whereabouts of Grandma’s grandson, and they rescue him after a long, difficult and violent chase. The film has a lot of fantasy style. The scenes and characters are drawn with great inventiveness: Mme. Souza’s dumpy body, protruding eyes, and her frequent use of a trainer’s whistle to hurry along her grandson and other subordinates; the beloved dog’s rotund body with spindly legs and just a hint of male sexual parts – he barks wildly from beginning to end at any train that passes by; the grandson Champion’s stick-thin body, gaunt, bird-like, sad, expressionless face, and thighs and lower legs drawn with hypertrophied muscles; the mafia henchmen drawn with blank, square backs that combine into a larger rectangle when they are together and merge over the chief when he is walking with them; the older triplets of Belleville with their heads resembling the Wicked Witch of the West and cackling over their enjoyment of their frog stew, whose ingredients were provided by one of the sisters who used a German

hand grenade to kill frogs in a nearby polluted pond. Locations are charming, especially in the French beginnings of the film: the adorable, cozy, little suburban house where Champion grows up – it is pushed aside by the railway viaduct by the time he is grown up; the colorful scenes during the bicycle race that include a toothy German Fräulein playing the accordion; the tall, razor-like steamship that takes Champion and the other two cyclists to Belleville (Mme. Souza pursues it in a pedal boat that she rents in Marseilles). The lack of intelligible dialogue (one hears voices but few distinguishable words) and the use of regular sound effects recall the films of Jacques Tati; the forlorn expressions of Champion make one think of Buster Keaton. The film is very effective in telling a story in a visual manner virtually without dialogue. Very little personal character development, and what there is is rather disturbing: while completely devoted to her grandson, Mme. Souza is tyrannical and unforgiving; and Champion is merely an automaton that does the bidding of his grandmother with no protest other than his quietly pleading eyes. Rather nasty take on Americans (?), most of whom are grotesquely fat. A bag full of charming tricks and surprises. (2012)

Trouble in Paradise 1932 Ernst Lubitsch 4.0 Herbert Marshall, Miriam Hopkins, Kay Francis, Edward Everett Horton, Charlie Ruggles. Classic, very formalistic comedy, and good example of pretty open treatment of sexuality before the Hays Code reorganization. Acting style quite “stilted” due to the director’s insistence. Hopkins and Francis both delicious, with Hopkins using her southern accent, and Francis looking very elegant and sexy with slinky 30s dresses, lots of jewelry and very low cut dresses. Sets are an orgy of early art deco. Dialogue is delicious and constantly suggestive of sex in the wing. Very witty cutting, e.g., of clocks in KF’s house. Lots of visual play with beds. It is obvious that Lubitsch does not want to do anything the regular way. Favorite scene is initial dinner between Hopkins and Marshall, when a series of mutual thefts and pickpocketings serve as sexual foreplay (Lubitsch adds one of his famous “Touches” when Marshall gets up from the table, locks the door, closes the curtains, and then...shakes Hopkins energetically to make her wallet fall out of her dress), and then they rush into one another’s arms; the message is that crime is fun, and that for some people theft is an erotic turn-on. Horton and Ruggles are pretty dull, although Ruggles’ routine about ‘taking his pleasure and leaving it’ is fairly amusing. Movie ends with Marshall taking his leave of Kay Francis, and as he walks out the door, melodramatically tells her that she doesn’t know what she is missing; since she obviously takes it as a sexual remark, Marshall retorts “No, you don’t,” and then extracts the priceless pearl necklace that he has lifted from her (neck?). Marshall and Hopkins then make their getaway in a taxi; they repeat the mutual pickpocketings of the earlier scene, and then embrace laughing. It is apparent that crime does pay, and that the criminal adulterers will go on to other pleasures. Unusual, highly personal blend of brilliant visual touches, suggestive dialogue, and an urbane, “continental” treatment of sexuality (without nudity). (2006)

Troy 2004 Wolfgang Petersen 3.0 Big budget telling of the ‘Iliad’ story that oscillates between CGI enhanced, violent battle scenes and dramatic exchanges among the main characters. Most of the characters are “updated” to please contemporary audiences. Brad Pitt plays Achilles with flowing blond hair and a golden body perhaps too slight for the role; he is snarly and independent, refusing to honor the Greek king Agamemnon and fighting only for himself and his Myrmidons when he feels like it. Brian Cox as the power-hungry Agamemnon, who agrees to lead the Greek army to Troy only for conquest and to enhance his own power. Brendan Gleeson as Menelaos, King of Sparta and the older husband of the absconded Helen – he urges the attack on Troy out of injured pride and honor. Diane Kruger pretty but typical of the film’s female characters in her passive and decorative role – Couldn’t Helen have been a shrew or a schemer instead of a Juliet clone? Orlando Bloom, pretty and androgynous as Helen’s dewy-faced lover, who is not interested much in combat. Couldn’t he have had more compunction about bringing utter destruction on his own city just for a pretty face (OK, maybe body)? Eric Bana, the real hero of the film as Hector, a great warrior but moderate and reflective, a faithful husband, and genuinely concerned about the well-being of his country. Peter O’Toole grave and arresting (despite his bad teeth) as King Priam, who however makes some fateful wrong decisions. Rose Byrne as the captive slave girl Briseis. The battle scenes are impressively rendered: the massive walls of the city, thousands, indeed tens of thousands, of soldiers advancing toward one another, the shock of combat and

its violent and grisly impact on the bodies of the dead reproducing rather well the impact of the ‘Iliad’; the methodical destruction of the city by fire after the successful ruse of the horse (Why did the Trojans fall for the trick?). Relationships between the sexes are much more romantic than in the strictly masculine ‘Iliad’: Hector clearly adores his wife (and of course many shots of her wringing her hands as he loses his battle with Achilles); Paris and Helen are dewy-eyed lovers that seem taken straight out of Zeffirelli’s ‘Romeo and Juliet’. Instead of the sexual prize she represents in Homer’s epic, Briseis becomes Achilles’ true love for the one night they spend together. When lovers are in bed – Paris and Helen, Achilles and Briseis – bodies are tanned, smooth, lovely, fit, obviously tailored to the contemporary younger audience. The gods are virtually left out of the proceedings. A bit of poetry intrudes through the plight of Achilles – knowing that he is not immortal (that heel), he offers his services to Agamemnon so that after his death, future generations will still remember him. Entertaining, spectacle, lots of eye candy. (2015)

True Believer 1989 Joseph Ruben 2.0 Legal thriller set in New York about a low-life lawyer specializing in defending drug dealers – he decides to turn over a new leaf and devote himself to the cause of a man falsely imprisoned for a murder. James Woods grimacing, shouting, baring his fangs (overacting) continuously in his campaign to redeem himself for his past misdeeds; Robert Downey, Jr. looking pretty in decorative role as his sometimes scattered law school graduate volunteering as Woods’ assistant – he has little to do, never even standing in for Woods in court; Margaret Colin as much-abused legal investigator; Yuki Okumoto as tight-lipped, inexpressive prisoner Woods is trying to clear of the murder; Kurtwood Smith as hard-nosed district attorney originally responsible for Okumoto’s framed conviction. The film resembles an expanded TV program with its marginal dialogue, partially developed characters, and beating up of the principals by thugs on stairways or in parking garages. Gritty, mean-street scenes of New York Chinatown that recall the ‘Serpico’-style films of the 70s and 80s. The film begins with a grisly prison murder that turns out to be a mistake. The ensuing thriller plot is serviceable combining the redemption theme with a twisty campaign to discover why the innocent man was framed. A feel-good ending with the two lawyers escorting Okumoto out of the prison gate, where he is met with his artificial-looking, fawning extended Asian family. The main problem is the acting of James Woods, who consistently displays his anger and resolve with in-your-face overacting: he could perhaps have extracted revelations from the ill detective, for example, by not shrieking at him about six inches from his face. Not a good sign when the viewer decides not to look at the screen in order to avoid the main actor’s bared teeth. Climax of the film occurs in an unrealistic Perry-Mason-style courtroom scene, in which Woods uncovers the original frame of his client by extracting key information from a complaisant district attorney in the witness chair, who mysteriously abandons his prosecutor’s role to help the defense clear his client. The film does not take advantage of its two stars. Contemporary (2016) television programs can be better plotted, edited and acted. (2016)

True Confession 1937 Wesley Ruggles (Paramount) 2.5 Carole Lombard ditzy, childlike, spontaneous, impulsive (wants to throw inkwell at prosecutor during trial), awkward, very theatrical, an habitual liar, and wildly in love with her husband – only his pronunciation is entertaining; Fred MacMurray more or less straight man with a Caesar Romero mustache as her husband/lawyer; John Barrymore as Charlie Chaplin-like drunk whose walk is accompanied by a bassoon and who is funny only because of his Shakespearean pronunciation; Porter Hall with weak chin as ridiculously pompous and expressive prosecutor – “ruthless, cold, merciless murder”; Una Merkel cute and lively, Lombard’s best friend; Edgar Kennedy as histrionic, somewhat overplayed dumbbell police detective; Toby Wing as sexy witness (nipples show) in court; Hattie McDaniel – what else? – in one scene as comic servant. The ‘Hands Across the Table’ duo is reunited. Attempted screwball comedy that doesn’t work well. Lombard, who cannot tell the truth, confesses to a murder she did not commit so her husband can have a big case and so she can get off with legitimate self-defense. Absurd comic Barrymore drifts in and out of film, and finally has big scene at end when he tries to blackmail Lombard by revealing that she did not kill the victim! Film has potentially good gimmick about Lombard’s lying – she literally cannot stop; it gets her off the hook legally, and although McMurray almost leaves her at the end, they love each other too much and he carries her inside the vacation house, presumably to make love. Lombard’s ditziness

often seems to me to be artificial and contrived. The script doesn't make a lot of sense – especially the details of the trial and the status of the evidence is ridiculous if you know something about criminal law. A good scene is police inspector Kennedy and Lombard helping each other come up with absurd murder scenarios, each outdoing the other in overplaying and outrageousness. Shows the weakness of screwball comedy? How much absurdity can we stomach? (2008)

True Confessions 1981 Ulu Grosbard (wr. Joan Didion) 3.0 Robert DeNiro in unusual casting as ambitious monsignor (a little young for that?) in the Catholic archdiocese of Los Angeles; Robert Duvall as brother of DeNiro and justice-obsessed LA police sergeant; Charles Durning as very large, despicable crooked businessman in close business relationship with the archdiocese; Cyril Cusack as the rather cynical and worldly wise cardinal archbishop of LA; Burgess Meredith tottering as older priest who is a sort of confessor to DeNiro. Often frustrating film that has excellent performances from every player but with an unfocused narrative. Takes place in a Los Angeles of 1948 that strongly resembles that of 'Chinatown' – perfect late-40s costumes and cars in the street (often passing in front of Union Station) focusing on corruption between the supposedly respectable (the Catholic establishment) and criminals. The main part of the film has two narrative lines that only gradually come together: the story of the overly ambitious, although in no way evil, DeNiro, and his brother; and the part dealing with the murder of a prostitute (her body found cut in half in an abandoned lot) that is investigated by the incorruptible Duvall. Toward the end, Duvall discovers that the girl was murdered by a porno filmmaker (the motive is not disclosed) and that she was sexually connected to the corrupt Durning. The case however is never wrapped up; as the viewer awaits the arrest, the film suddenly switches to the flashback frame in a godforsaken desert parish, where the penitent DeNiro tells an older and greyer Duvall that he is dying, after which the two of them, seemingly happy, stroll through a picturesque graveyard – credits roll. The true focus of the film is justice and conscience as played out by the two principals. Despite a checkered past, Duvall is a straight-arrow cop greatly offended by the sleazeball Durning being declared 'Catholic Layman of the Year'; and Duvall is fanatically determined to bring him to justice even if he didn't kill the prostitute. His brother the priest is more morally nuanced: he is ambitious and would like to be a bishop; he is willing to cooperate with Durning since he performs valuable services for the archdiocese and to do dirty work for the archbishop, such as telling Meredith that he is being relieved of his job as pastor; however through his relationship with Meredith he is beginning to sense his own shortcomings and to wonder whether he should step out of the rat race. The conclusion – his presence in the desert parish (what happened to Meredith?), his chastened attitude, and his willingness to die – is supposed to provide closure for his development, but way too many hurdles were missed. The movie has wonderful individual parts and interesting issues, but the script is too disorganized to create a satisfying whole. (2012)

True Grit 1969 Henry Hathaway 2.5 John Wayne with a eye patch looking a bit heavy and weary as Deputy U.S. Marshal, Rooster Cogburn, ornery old coot who specializes in Indian territory and makes no bones about shooting to kill; Kim Darby as focused, plain spoken, relentless teenager determined to find and punish the man who killed her father; Glen Campbell weak and unconvincing (but with perfect hair) as Texas ranger looking for the same man for a crime he committed in Texas; Robert Duvall amusing as one of the heavies; Dennis Hopper also amusing and acting rather badly as another heavy. Fairly uninteresting and long-winded (2:07) film about chasing the killer of Kim Darby's father into Indian Territory: first part of film has Darby coming to terms with the colorful Rooster, who will take on the job only for cold cash (about \$100); the second part is the pursuit that results in the death of innumerable bad guys (including even Campbell), Kim Darby falling into a pit with threatening rattlesnakes, Darby's return to her home – justice done – and Rooster back to his base with an old Chinaman and his beloved cat, General. Darby is convincing as teenage girl who has never heard the word 'timid' and just will not be deterred from finding her father's murderer. The main reasons to watch the film are two: the brilliantly beautiful and colorful high definition cinematography of the American West around Mammoth Lakes and the Colorado Rockies; and of course the irascible alcoholic Wayne playing an older character in the last years of his career. The film has a disruptive discontinuity between its light, bantering tone and the elevated number of casualties in its second half; it even has as an admiring

tone for a Fort Smith "hanging judge"; when three men are hanged at the same time at the beginning of the film, the town treats the occasion as a town fair. (2010)

True Grit 2010 Joel and Ethan Coen 4.0 Jeff Bridges mumbling his lines almost unintelligibly as old, fat drunkard Deputy Marshall Rooster Cogburn, not known for bringing his men in alive; Hailee Steinfeld cute as a button as starchy, formal, unbending Mattie in her flat-brimmed hat, who is determined to bring to justice the man -- Tom Chaney -- who killed her father; Matt Damon completely unrecognizable in his cowboy accent as La Boeuf, the Texas Ranger also after Chaney for a crime he committed in Texas; Josh Brolin unrecognizably degenerate and scarred as the villain Chaney; Tom Pepper with a mouth of horrible looking teeth as the leader the gang that Chaney takes up with. Memorable, Coenesque western remake of the original John Wayne vehicle, standing head and shoulders above its predecessor; the Coens have now made three outstanding films in a row. It is primarily a revenge drama, as Mattie hires the man with the "true grit" who would do what it takes to find her father's killer. The chase takes the three through Oklahoma (Choctaw) Indian territory, leaving a trail of blood wherever they go; and finally ends with Mattie shooting Chaney in the chest with La Boeuf's carbine just before she falls into a deep pit filled with very nasty rattlesnakes. The texture of the film is perfect: very realistic with rumpled clothes to protect the characters against the winter in Indian territory. Most of the scenes however stand out in bold relief often using the patented Coenesque humor: the introduction to Cogburn lying through his teeth on the witness stand in "Hanging" Judge Parker's court; the three men giving emotional, pitiful speeches before they are hanged in a group; Mattie browbeating the horse trader to get the money back she needs to hire Rooster; the old codger clad in a bearskin (with bear head on top of his own) appears in the snow to offer medical or dental care or to trade the dead body that Mattie had just cut down from a tall tree for something valuable; Mattie confronts Chaney in a river, manages to wound him with her six-shooter, and misses killing him only because her piece misfires; Cogburn, now attached to the snake-wounded Mattie, races horizontally in long shot across the prairie on Blackie in a desperate attempt to get her to a doctor while the orchestra plays "Leaning on His arms" in one of it many guises. The film plays like a revisionist western with its intense revanchism and its piles of dead bodies (does Cogburn ever bring his man back alive?). On the other hand, the film has a sentimental moving side with the pre-teen Mattie being the mover of the story, with her being the one who has true grit, and with Cogburn riding his horse to death in order to save her life; he develops a reluctantly affectionate father-daughter relationship with her, admiring her pluck from the first moment he sees her. The cinematography is picturesque and yet situates the action in a real environment (most of the film was shot in the Santa Fe region); the music, most of which is a variation on the famous Showalter hymn "Leaning on his Arms", underscores the biblical nature of the events. The characters speak in an un-contracted ("I do not"), precisely pronounced formal English that appears to be derived from their familiarity with the King James version of the Bible (the source of much of the literary eloquence of 19th century America) – which gives the film a weight and solemnity and distances it from the present. The film is destined to become an American film classic. (2011)

True Romance 1993 Tony Scott (writer Quentin Tarantino) 4.0 Outstanding Tarantinoesque over-the-top film that features extreme violence, astoundingly colorful caricatures presented by its all-star cameo cast, and a sweet romantic plot involving the two principals. Christian Slater seems posing as tough guy who falls in love with Arquette; Patricia Arquette as pretty, jiggly would-be prostitute – very sweet, naive and faithful – who sets off with Slater; Gary Oldman in outrageous caricature (white, dreadlocks, silken underwear, crazy accent, over-the-top impulsiveness and unpredictability) as Arquette's pimp; Dennis Hopper as security guard and father of Slater whose role starts slow but ends in glory; Christopher Walken as Sicilian mafia tough man who has memorable confrontation with Hopper; Brad Pitt as LA stoner who is so far gone that he is polite and helpful to the hit men on Slater's trail; Michael Rapaport as nice-guy friend of Slater's who is trying to make his way playing terrible TV roles; Saul Rubinek as self-indulgent, arrogant, cocaine-using movie producer; Bronson Pinchot perfect as nerd, cowardly assistant to Rubinek – he will do anything to avoid going to jail. Amazingly entertaining film that combines several disparate elements (see above) and makes them work together. Film is bound together by the sweet, trusting relationship between Slater and Arquette

who are certainly made for one another: in the most trying and dangerous circumstances (especially in the immense final shoot-out) they somehow manage to survive (Slater seems dead in the shoot-out but it appears he has only been grazed next to his eye), remain true to one another, and then escape to Mexico to live happily ever after with their son – the last scene has them playing on a gloriously beautiful beach. It seems that you will be protected (by God, by fate?) if you love truly and are true to the one you love. The film really buys into the Western romantic love tradition. Individual scenes often have little to do with the central plot line, but they are terrifically entertaining. Foremost is the famous confrontation between Walken and Hopper: the former is looking for the kids and interrogates Hopper threateningly; the latter, knowing that he will give them nothing and that his goose is cooked, decides to go out in style (heroically): he insults Walken by saying that Sicilians are descended from “niggers”, and he then rubs it in with a lot of scabrous detail; Walken appreciates the performance, and then shoots him through the head. The final violence in Rubinek’s apartment is classic Tarantino – a ‘Mexican standoff’ (three-way shootout) among the police, Rubinek’s bodyguards, and the Mafiosi who have come to recover their cocaine. The body count is terrific, but never mind, the lovers escape, hop into their pink, enormous, vintage Cadillac, and head for Mexico. Nary a dull moment in the whole film. (2007)

Trumbo 2015 Jay Roach 3.0 Enjoyable biopic of Hollywood screen writer Dalton Trumbo. Bryan Cranston excellent as quirky, intense Trumbo, who, despite belonging to the Communist Party USA, wants success (living like a little aristocrat in the California countryside) perhaps more than justice in the USA; Diane Lane in typical Hollywood female role as his loyal, long-suffering wife; Helen Mirren very entertaining in her outrageous headdresses as aggressive Red-baiting Hollywood gossip columnist, Hedda Hopper – she gets her comeuppance at the end; Michael Stuhlbarg as Edward G. Robinson, who finally names name in order to go back to work; David James Elliott in good impersonation of the Duke, John Wayne; Louis C.K. as true revolutionary, Arlen Hird; Robert Portnow as L.B. Mayer, slightly more moderate in his Red-baiting than Hedda Hopper; Dean O’Gorman does a good version of Kirk Douglas; John Goodman, entertaining as usual as schlock movies producer, Frank King; Elle Fanning sensitive as Trumbo’s elder daughter; Christian Berkel makes an impression as the dominating, Prussian-accented, shaved-head Otto Preminger. Entertaining and informative, if sometimes pedestrian, biographical film about Hollywood Ten member Dalton Trumbo. Clearly espousing the liberal point of view, the film deals with the Hollywood Ten episode and Trumbo’s prison stint, but over half the movie is devoted to the hero’s recovery – his amusing experiences making films for Z-film producer Goodman, his and his family’s move from their picturesque country estate to Los Angeles, his persecution by colleagues and neighbors for being a Red lover, and his final exoneration and victory over the Blacklist when he is recognized by Kirk Douglas (*‘Spartacus’*) and Otto Preminger (*‘the beginnings of ‘Exodus’*) around 1960. A friendly biopic about a cantankerous guy, whose film could have been more critical and ended less upbeat. The most entertaining and informative moments: Trumbo’s affectionate relationship with cancer-stricken Arlen Hird; his complicated but equally affectionate relationship with his elder daughter; the ability of many blacklisted writers to survive through their contributions to the B- and C-movie industry; the putdowns of the Red baiters in the latter part of the movie by Goodman (threat of violence!) and Kirk Douglas, and the comeuppance delivered to Hedda Hopper, whose last scene has her utterly dejected without makeup or hair style; Trumbo’s putdown of hyper-patriot John Wayne about his lack of military service in World War II; Trumbo meeting HUAC Chair Parnell Thomas in prison after the latter was sentenced for corruption and income tax evasion. (2016)

Truth 2015 James Vanderbilt 3.0 Interesting, sometimes dramatic docudrama about the 2004 CBS story on George W.’s National Guard service and its consequences. Robert Redford more avuncular, kind, and philosophic than the real thing as Dan Rather; Cate Blanchett nervous, emotional, charging ahead as Mary Mapes, producer of the CBS stories on Abu Ghraib and the Bush National Guard; Stacy Keach convincingly in bad health as he passes copies of incriminating documents to Mapes; Topher Grace connects with the audience as fiery young journalist working under Mapes; Dennis Quaid, Elisabeth Moss, and Rachael Blake as Mapes’ colleagues; John Benjamin Hickey as Mapes’ patient and supportive husband; Dermot Mulroney as focused, sarcastic chair of the investigative committee at the end of the film. The film is divided into two parts – the piecing together of the story that Bush got into

the Guard through family influence and then failed to fulfill his function as a flyer; and the impact of the problems in the story, that eventually led to an investigation by a committee dominated by conservative lawyers and to the dismissal of Mapes and the resignation of most everyone else, including Rather. Especially the first part of the film reads like a good, sometimes slow-moving documentary – step-by-step account of getting hold of documents from Keach and then substantiating them with document analysis and corroborating testimony. The documentary aspect of the second part of the film is even more interesting, as right-wing objections pour in (e.g., the claim that the anti-Bush documents were written on WORD, which did not exist in the early 70s) and eventually the members of the committee suggest that Mapes and her staff were “liberals” bent on discrediting the president. The second part stands out for its dramatic intensity as Mapes watches in disbelief as the CBS leadership moves to dismiss her and her team in an attempt to save the network (corporate America and thus the company’s profits) from embarrassment. The film leaves more or less open whether Mapes’ story was valid: the documents may very well have been forged and she moved perhaps too fast in putting the story on the air, but the impression remains that the substance of the story is valid. Mapes ensures that she will be fired when instead of remaining humble and contrite, she stands up to the committee and asserts her duties as a journalist. Rather resigned a couple months after Bush’s second inauguration; Mapes never again worked in TV news. The film presents journalists as courageously fighting for the truth, even when they make errors of judgment. Interesting companion to ‘Good Night and Good Luck’, where Edward R. Murrow allegedly stood up and brought down Joe McCarthy. (2016)

Tsotsi 2005 Gavin Hood (South Africa) 2.5 Presley Chweneyagae as small-time thug with an angel face who goes through a process of redemption when he discovers a baby in the back seat of a car that he steals (and after he shoots the mom in the stomach!); Terry Photo very pretty young mom who feeds the baby at her breast for Tsotsi; Mothusi Magana, Nenzo Ngqobe, and Zola as Tsotsi’s thug buddies. Slow-moving tale of redemption set in the shantytowns of (apparently) Johannesburg; Tsotsi is a seemingly irredeemable ruffian, but something about caring for a baby awakens his sense of “decency” (much discussed with his squeamish buddy Boston), and he ends up returning the baby to his parents (the mother is paralyzed by Tsotsi’s shot) and then allowing himself to be arrested by the police – the film ends with his arms in the air in the middle of the street. The picture of the lawless and chaotic shantytown is realistic and believable – tumble-down shacks with corrugated steel sides, myriad junk between the houses, lots of people hanging out in the unpaved streets, a society terrorized by rampant crime – Photo’s husband disappears one day when he goes to work, and the film begins with the star hoods murdering some poor middle class guy in a subway with an ice pick—, a bi-racial police force struggling to maintain order. However the story of Tsotsi seems contrived, too good to be true. Are we really supposed to believe that a vicious small-time hood still possesses a sense of decency based largely on memories of his mother, and that despite his constant wielding of a handgun (that he always holds sideways) and the murder of one of his compadres, he goes through a process of moral regeneration that reconciles him to a life in prison? The film can at times be moving – perhaps especially in the interchange between the pretty Photo and Tsotsi, who sees her as the incarnation of his mother and who wants to continue to visit her after he returns the baby to his parents. The (melo?) drama is partly undermined by the slowness of the editing and the film’s pace, which often leaves the viewer looking impatiently at the silent faces of the protagonists for long periods of time. Somewhat moving and interesting film too much concerned with pleasing Hollywood-conditioned viewers demanding moral regeneration in the story line. (2011)

Der Tunnel 2001 Roland Suso Richter (Germany) 3.0 Heino Ferch as athletic, bulldoggy, determined East German swimmer who helps East Germans escape to the West; Sebastian Koch as Mathis, his friend; Nicolette Krebitz as West German who pitches in. German (3:30) TV film about rescuers who in the 1960s dig a long tunnel from an abandoned factory on the west side of the Berlin Wall into a garden shed on the east side to rescue friends and relatives. Film focuses on a champion East German swimmer who despises the regime (he had served four years in prison in the 1950s for anti-regime agitation) and refuses to swim for it; he manages to escape to the West just after the construction of the Wall but he leaves his sister and friends behind. He and friends decide that the only practical method to get them out is building the tunnel. The film focuses on the construction of the tunnel – a great

set that gives the viewer a crick in the back for having to duck all the time walking through it; the German engineer plans the tunnel well with a couple of exceptions (they run into a concrete sewer barrier at one point); most of the people get fussy, lose their temper, and have psychological problems. Meanwhile the film follows events on the East side, focusing on the suspicions of the inexorable Stasi colonel who is determined to foil the rescue, his suborning of Carola, the friend of the sister, and her turning back against him when friendship again wins out. The atmosphere of the film is real – accurate sets; tense evocation of the standoff between East and West in the 1960s, of the bemusement at having the country divided by the Communists, of the dedication of some to escape from dictatorship. Standout scenes include: a group of East Germans bust through the wall in a bus while East guards look on helplessly because they are just a couple of meters beyond on West German territory; a East German worker dies shot on his side of the Wall while his girlfriend crouches helplessly only a couple of yard away on the other side; the viewer's suspense as to whether Carola will really inform to the Stasi colonel or act as a decoy to facilitate the escape of her friends. The last half hour is tense and suspenseful: when the diggers finally emerge on the east side, Carola goes on a picnic to lead the Stasi police astray – in a flourish, the Colonel throws open her crib basket to discover that she has sent the baby to freedom in the care of her husband and friends; the escapees plunge into the tunnel (crouching of course) pursued by the Stasi, who however stop just beyond the sign announcing that they have entered the French sector. Straightforward, suspenseful film that generates a lot of excitement at the end. The digging sometimes drags a bit. (2009)

Turn Me On, Dammit! 2011 Jannicke Systad Jacobsen 3.5 Low-key minimalist comedy about horniness among teenage girls. Helene Bergsholm teenage amateur actor as Alma, who is confused by sexual desire; Malin Borhovde another amateur who plays Alma's best friend – since she wants to go to Texas to help abolish capital punishment, she writes pen pal letters to a death-row inmate (she never mails them); Matias Myren as Alma's would-be boyfriend, Artur. The wry, tongue-in-cheek film is set in a tiny provincial town in West Norway – every time the school bus passes the town sign, the girls give it the finger. The film focuses on the psycho-sexual travails of Alma, who masturbates frequently and has sessions with a phone sex professional; it also outlines the cruelty of the town's local teenagers, who snub, ridicule, (even the children yell "Dick Alma"! when she walks by) and exclude Alma when she reports that her friend Artur "poked her with his dick ('boner')" outside of a youth club dance; after a trip to visit a college friend in Oslo prompted by conflict with her mother, Alma returns to town, and when Artur finally apologizes in public, she takes him as her boyfriend and seems (more or less) reconciled with her mother. The film excels in its low-key humor. The first shots of the film show "mountains", "empty roads" (two times), "stupid sheep", "stupid trampoline girls" to point out the emptiness and meaningless of the town that Alma lives in. It opens with Alma's loud masturbatory moaning as her dog watches hilariously curious; she barely escapes being discovered when her mother returns home. Alma's mother is severely shocked when she receives a big bill for the phone sex, which she insists on calling "phone service" (Alma is always annoyed when her mother doesn't call a spade a spade). When Alma calls the phone sex guy for the second time, he talks to her in a friendly, supportive way, wondering why she hung up so fast in the first scene. The three girls are often depicted hanging out in the abandoned bus shelter to indicate the pointlessness of their lives; they all three talk constantly of their plans to leave their home town. The ending is deliciously minimalist: Alma and Artur are having dinner with her mother, and when they ask her if Artur could sleep over, Mom says no – end of film with realist ambiguity. This film is a refreshingly humorous commentary on the erotic lives of teenage girls, a subject rarely treated in the movies. (2017)

The Turning Point 1952 William Dieterle (Paramount) 3.0 Gripping, well-directed crime thriller that has an aggressive (although not ambitious), morally motivated investigating attorney determined to bring down big city crime syndicate. Edmond O'Brien as fast-talking, fast-moving special D.A. brought in in a Super Constellation to confront the bad guys; William Holden as cynical, golden-tongued, somewhat sensitive newspaper reporter constantly looking for a story; Alexis Smith (Canadian actress) as soft-spoken, classy love interest – supposedly for O'Brien, but it turns out for the improbable partner Holden; Tom Tully solid as O'Brien's policeman dad, who turns out to be on the mob's payroll; Ed Begley a convincing presence as the mob boss, hiding in a legal trucking firm. Film turns into a

contest of will and resources between the law (O'Brien) and the mob (Begley); subplots include the developing romance between Holden and Smith, who trade barbs at first and then warm up to mutual affection; and the dilemma of Tully and then his murder by the mob when he develops a conscience about his betrayal of the police department. The direction and editing are taut and efficient; action sequences (such as the murder of Tully) are excitingly presented; very little excess footage even in the romantic scenes. Cinematography is in reasonably crisp black and white with some noir influences in the night scenes. As often in the Film Noir period, the film does not cop out to a happy ending: O'Brien gets his man when he gets a break, but in the meantime Begley has ordered the murder of Holden, who is shot down during a boxing match in a fight arena in a scene reminiscent of the ending of 'The Parallax View' (1974); after he dies in the arena hospital, O'Brien and Smith walk out together – perhaps to a romantic future. Although film is supposedly set in a Midwestern city, downtown Los Angeles circa 1950 including the Angels Flight funicular is easily recognizable. Film boasts a formidable combination: gifted A-list actors; competent, no-nonsense "Hollywood Style" direction, well-articulated screenplay. Influence of Film Noir seems attenuated (no femme fatale, no ruling fate). Enjoyable film from the last years of Film Noir. (August 2017)

The Turning Point 1977 Herbert Ross 3.0 Shirley MacLaine still cute and charming but now angry as housewife and mother from Oklahoma City who quit ballet 20+ years ago to get married to...; Tom Skerritt bland, nice guy husband of MacLaine; Ann Bancroft looking almost scarily skinny as friend and former rival MacLaine – she stayed dancing when MacLaine quit and is now a fading star; Leslie Browne pretty and skilled as the dancer daughter of MacLaine; Anthony Zerbe flippant and evasive as former boyfriend of MacLaine with whom she gets it on; Mikhail Baryshnikov acting competently and dancing excitingly as a skirt-chasing dancer for the company. Entertaining soap opera that takes the backstage musical form and applies it to the ballet world: Browne goes to New York, makes it with the ABT (American Ballet Theater), and of course has a triumphant performance at the end of the film that makes her a company star and brings – finally – tears of joy and satisfaction to the eyes of her mother. Aside from the 'Rocky'-style plot, the film focuses on the frustrations of the two mid-fortyish women, who have to drag their resentments out of the closets, confront one another in a famous cat fight that ends in a tearful embrace, come to terms with their pain and reestablish their friendship. Bancroft has to accept that she won't be an admired star for much longer, and she begins the process of letting go by treating Brown as a kind of adopted child; however even she is given a triumphant solo dancing Anna Karenina in the stage fog (hard to see her). The film focuses more on MacLaine, who carries within her deep seated doubts about whether she could have made it as a prima ballerina and resentments that Bancroft maneuvered her out of the way by encouraging her to marry Skerritt, who was also a dancer. We also follow the amours of Browne, who falls hard for Baryshnikov, spends the night several times with him making lyrical love in his cool apartment, but then is able to recover when he jilts her, since of course her drive for success is in first priority position. The most entertaining and moving part of the film are the numerous short ballet excerpts, many of them shot from the wings and dramatizing the emotional state of the participants – e.g., Browne not able to resist looking constantly at Baryshnikov when he is performing on stage. Movie is fun and sometimes beautiful, although the emotional soapsuds can cause the mind to wander. (2009)

Twelve O'clock High 1949 Henry King (20c Fox) 4.0 Gregory Peck, Dean Jagger (AA) as staff officer providing frame for story, Gary Merrill as Colonel relieved from command for being too close to men, Hugh Marlowe as supporting officer demoted but who comes back to perform in the end, Millard Mitchell. Outstanding postwar movie about the psychological stresses and relationships involved in command of a B-17 bomber squadron launched in noble cause of daylight precision bombing (implication being that it was largely because of the campaign that the US won the war). Charismatic and well-liked Merrill relieved of command because he was too close to men – there was little discipline or confidence among the very young men making up the squadron. Peck brought in by peppery commander Mitchell to whip them into shape; he first appears as martinet who demotes most of the command officers (Jagger being exception), cancels leaves, closes the bar, etc.; he is absolutely inflexible, and is determined to build up the pride and confidence of men so they can become an effective fighting unit. Big issue is

whether relationships or discipline is the more important in command; the answer is somewhat ambiguous. Peck succeeds after long haul; despite increasing losses (never treated as critical), squadron graduates to bombing raids against German targets, and it earns its spurs in what is presented as the virtual destruction of the ball-bearing industry in Germany. “Maximum effort” is expected of everyone; a two-edged sword that eventually gets the job done, but which causes lots of human damage, including the psychological exhaustion of Peck at the end (but he recovers for a better day and goes to sleep). Since film was made after war’s end, the rah-rah propaganda is dropped, and the film focuses on the “human” element and on the issue of what constitutes effective command. Excellent locations (nothing looks artificial). Real B-17s presented. No combat missions until the end, when the first raid on the ball-bearing factories is presented with real combat footage – fascinating, harrowing, tense with heavy losses as flak explodes all around and FWs zoom in from all directions. Good scenes of the men who don’t fly (staff, ground personnel, fire-fighting forces) waiting tensely for the return of the squadron and then counting the planes to see how many make it back. Absorbing tribute to the men who endured these conditions to get this job done. (2008)

The Twentieth Century 1934 Howard Hawks 3.5 John Barrymore, the Profile, apparently alcoholic (?), loud and theatrical, declaiming solemnly as he stares off into the distance, mugging shamelessly to make an effect, Bohemian, unpredictable, histrionically bad tempered, seems on the verge of strangling Lombard, impulsive, impossibly egotistical, subject to huge mood swings between utter dejection and manic confidence, much of the time seems close to insane, pathologically suspicious and jealous theater impresario who regularly threatens to commit suicide; Carole Lombard as young sometimes hysterical actress who makes it big with Barrymore’s promotion; when under stress, she rolls her eyes, laughs hysterically, cries out; stamps her feet, beats her hands against the side of her head; and on occasion tries to slug Barrymore. Screwball ingredients – on train where Barrymore is fleeing his creditors, sequence in which evangelist keeps sticking “Repent” stickers on every surface available; turns out the guy is mentally ill and that he also writes bad checks (but he is “harmless”); Barrymore, the lead, is also the principal butt of humor; the couple attacks one another with gusto and even violence. Plot involves the stormy relationship between Profile and Lombard; when Lombard leaves him to make it big in Hollywood, he goes virtually bankrupt and needs her star quality desperately to bail him out of his difficulties, but of course their titanic egos keep them apart; Profile constantly resorts to his hammy Thespian arts to win his way. Good running joke about Barrymore angrily firing his assistant (“I close the iron door behind you!”) and then always hiring him back, or when he reminds the boss that he just fired him, Barrymore retorts, “Shameless! Taking advantage of that, are you?” Ends with Barrymore finally persuading (?) Lombard in the long train sequence to come back to the theater, but then when Barrymore again treats her like a child on stage (as in the beginning of the movie), she begins yelling at him – fade out. Some lines: “*never thought I would sink so low – to become an actor.*” “*This is the final irony – mousing around with boys.... I always knew she would head for the gutter.*” “*Those MOVIES you were in; it was sacrilege throwing you away on things like that.*” Film seems to lose some of its gusto in the train sequence. It doesn’t have quite the breathless momentum of Howards’ later screwballs, since he had not yet invented overlapping dialogue. (2007)

Twilight 1998 Robert Benton 3.0 Paul Newman in great shape at 63 looking perhaps too good for a former policeman and gumshoe who never has amounted to much; Gene Hackman in rather small role as friend of Newman dying of cancer and who allows Newman to live in his house; Susan Sarandon looks good as Hackman’s wife, who says she will do anything to protect her husband; Reese Witherspoon as blond teenage daughter, whose smallish breasts are featured in film’s first sequence; Stockard Channing as former police colleague of Newman – it is apparent she is his potential squeeze; James Garner his usual genial self as friend of the family; Giancarlo Esposito as Newman’s comically incompetent sidekick, who is never at the right place at the right time; Liev Schreiber as one of the heavies blackmailing Hackman to protect his wife; Margo Martindale playing Bette Midler/Cathy Bates look-alike, sound-alike as outspoken companion of Schreiber. Entertaining Ross MacDonald-type private eye vehicle set in LA in the 1990s; script is meandering and often confusing dealing with blackmail and murder, in which after much misdirection the bad guy turns out to be Sarandon, who apparently murdered

a boyfriend 20 years ago and has Schreiber and Martindale offed because they were threatening her life with her beloved husband; the denouement has Hackman fixing it so that Sarandon gets off the hook unpunished and Newman gets together with Channing for a little romp on Catalina. Film has a light-hearted affect throughout: a running joke is that many of the film's characters think that Newman had his dick shot off by Witherspoon in the amusing first scene (the viewer knows better), and before Channing agrees to go with him on the Catalina weekend, she plunges her hand deep into his pocket to verify that he is still intact; satisfied, she strides off with him down the street. The pleasure is in the all-star cast obviously having a good time under Benton's direction and the whimsical good humor of the script. Without these virtues, the viewer's attentiveness would have flagged in many of the script's lethargic moments. (2013)

The Two Faces of January 2013 Hossein Amini (Britain) 3.0 Hitchcock-style thriller based on a Highsmith novel that escorts the viewer through picturesque sites around the Aegean Sea. Viggo Mortensen initially suave and cultivated but then increasingly drunk and haggard as the film progresses; Kirsten Dunst in low-key role that heats up in the second part of the film; Oscar Isaac stands out as American guide of tourists in Greece -- he is a small-time con man on the side. Film begins with promise in sun-drenched scenes on the Athenian Acropolis as Isaac makes the acquaintance of Mortensen and Dunst, who we assume are respectable potential victims of Isaac's scheming. Soon however it becomes evident that Mortensen is more morally compromised than his young friend. Mortensen accidentally kills a private detective who is trying to recover funds embezzled by Mortensen, and Isaac (unwisely) agrees to help the cash-rich couple buy a faked passport so they can flee the country. The situation becomes more alarming in the ruins of Knossos, where Dunst falls to her death in the gloomy cavern during a tussle with her husband (another accidental death!). The film ends with three long Hitchcock-style sequences, two of which have Mortensen evading the police in the Heraklion Airport and the Turkish immigration hall (multiple viewpoints to the accompaniment of slow-moving music recalling episodes in 'Torn Curtain') : the final scene takes place in Istanbul, where Isaac executes a confusing plot with the police to nab Mortensen, who is finally shot down in the street. The charm of the slow-moving thriller lies in its psychological and moral ambiguity: it is gradually revealed that Isaac is a disinterested person willing to put himself at risk to help his friends, and that Mortensen, who is genuinely in love with his wife, is a thin-skinned criminal given to outbursts of anger and violence (mainly against Dunst) and bouts of incoherent drunkenness. Dunst's anxiety at being hitched to a criminal pursued by hit men soon yields hysterical outbursts and heavy flirtation with Isaac, who is drawn to her in return. The ending is psychologically confusing but moving: after selling his friend out to the Turkish police, Isaac approaches the supine Mortensen for his dying words. Knowing that Isaac is wearing a wire to record his confession, Mortensen makes a deathbed confession of his wasted life – from being an embezzler to killing two people to not protecting the woman he loves. Joined with Mortensen by the love of the same woman, Isaac ends the film by visiting his friend-adversary's grave. Not every plot twist works, but the film excels in picturesque scenery, charismatic acting (particularly by Isaac), and intriguing psychological ambiguity. (2017)

The Two Jakes 1990 Jack Nicholson 2.5 Jack Nicholson as a portly, tamer and ultimately less interesting Jake Giddes, Harvey Keitel goes through several confusing metamorphoses, Madeleine Stowe as sexy and crazy wife of murdered man (she has the only sex scene in the movie, and it is not romantic!), Meg Tilly as languid, sometimes stultifying wife of Keitel; just when we begin to wonder why she has so much screen time, she turns out to be Catherine Mulroney from 'Chinatown,' Richard Farnsworth as crusty old oilman who knows exactly what he is doing and is taking a lot of people for a ride (shades of John Huston in previous movie). Same art direction (sepia tones, almost too perfect costumes and automobiles) and sense of old L.A. set in 1948, 11 years after its predecessor; this time the stakes are real estate and oil (mineral rights) instead of water rights. Movie is fun in places, but not nearly as good as it should have been. Towne's script has good dialogue and intriguing mysteries, but audience is constantly scrambling for clues as to what's going on, instead of being led to prepared surprises and shocks. This viewer never figured out the importance of the bad quality wire recording that drives much of the film's action. We begin thinking movie is about sex and betrayal (Giddes specializes in divorce

cases), but it turns out to be strictly greed. Nicholson directs, and to no good effect; camera seems to be looking constantly over Jake's shoulder or following him in the back seat of the car; since viewer is behind Jake's back, we are unable to dominate the confusing plot. Some good voice-over bits ("I may be a leper, but I'm a leper with the most fingers in town"), but the voice-over sounds forced, sententious, and hardly ever clarifies murky plot points. The most entertaining parts are on Berman's real estate development set out in the desert, his stated pride in helping veterans get their first house, the explosions that reveal there is oil (gas?) underground. Could have been much better with more discipline. (2010)

Two Lovers 2008 James Gray 3.5 Joaquin Phoenix in sensitive and powerful portrayal of young man struggling to find himself when caught between love for two women; Gwyneth Paltrow as mentally unbalanced single woman in love with married lawyer – she turns to Phoenix for support as a "brother", but he instead falls crazy in love with her; Vinessa Shaw as sensible daughter of family friends who pursues Phoenix and represents a prudent choice for Phoenix to stay rooted in his Brooklyn (?) neighborhood close to his family; Isabella Rossellini restrained but perhaps a bit too glamorous for a Brooklyn Jewish matron. Subtly directed, well-acted, unusual love story written and directed by James Gray (he says he got the story from Dostoyevsky). Set in modest lower middle class neighborhood in Brighton Beach. Phoenix's father owns a dry cleaning business, and he wants his son to work with him and marry the daughter of one of his old friends, also in the dry cleaning business. Phoenix has had romantic difficulties, and the first scene shows that he is suicidal. Most of the film is devoted to his dilemma between the two women. He seems to have a certain affection for Shaw and allows himself to be considered her probable mate; in any case he is easy-going and sociable and would not be inclined to hurt his fiancée. But he obviously has a stronger attraction for Paltrow, with whom he falls violently, mysteriously and excessively in love toward the end of the film. They plot to run off to San Francisco together (crazy idea!), but after a touching farewell with Rossellini, Phoenix waits for Paltrow in the courtyard of the apartment building; she then tells him that she is not going with him because her jerk-like boyfriend now tells her that he has left his wife; Phoenix takes along walk along the beach (the viewer is of course concerned about another suicide attempt), throws away the wedding ring he had bought for Paltrow, but he then retrieves it, returns to the New Year's Eve party at his parents' house, and presents the ring to Shaw. A subtle and nuanced ending: he chooses the safe route, but then he always showed that he has a certain (although not crazy) love for Shaw. One wonders how it will turn out. Film is well directed – e.g., the long sequences in which Phoenix tracks through his bedroom window a willing Paltrow in her apartment across the courtyard. The director obviously has a winning way with actors: performances are first rate all around. Treats the same material as a romantic comedy, but the drama dominates, although there are engagingly light moments. (2009)

The Unbearable Lightness of Being 1988 Philip Kaufman 3.0 Daniel Day-Lewis as self-indulgent womanizer who is a brain surgeon in Prague on the eve of the Soviet invasion; Lena Olin smashingly beautiful and sexy as a free-spirited artist who is one of his lovers; Juliette Binoche as timid girl from a small town in Czechoslovakia – she falls hopelessly in love with Lewis. Memorable though frustrating film based on Milan Kundera's book about freedom and its limits. In the first, most interesting half, it is combined with contemporary political events – the weeks of heady freedom preceding the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia: the viewer gets the impression that the film is about the thirst for freedom, which the participants are slaking through uninhibited sexual activity. The eroticism of the film is its most memorable aspects: Day-Lewis indulges in sex with no attachments with a large number of women, who seem to be constantly on the prowl for him (including a wealthy lady who seduces him when he is washing her windows toward the end); Day-Lewis and Olin make uninhibited, acrobatic love; although old-fashioned, Binoche is a sexual tiger when she is turned loose; the carefully choreographed nude scene where Binoche and Olin are photographing one another is arty and erotic, although apparently not sexual. After leaving Czechoslovakia, the three move to Geneva; then Day-Lewis and Binoche return to Prague where alienation continues, and then they end up on a farm where they seem to be happy; the film ends when Olin, who is an artist suckering rich people in California, gets word that Day-Lewis and Binoche are killed in a truck accident. The film is very vivid, especially in the first section with the eroticism, the politics, the discovery of the characters, and the charms of the city of Prague (even under

the Communist regime). It is beautifully photographed throughout, and the work and appearance of the actors always holds one's attention. Understanding the point/message of the film is another thing. One has the impression that the screenplay reproduces all the main incidents of the novel, but that the explanatory commentary is omitted. Many parts don't seem to make sense – Why does Day-Lewis agree to marry Binoche? What is the meaning of the erotic photograph session between the two women? How about Binoche's meaningless sexual encounter with the engineer? Why didn't the self-indulgent Day-Lewis sign the retraction statement so he could continue to work as a surgeon rather than condemn himself to washing windows? Are we really expected to believe that shoveling pig shit in the countryside would make the couple happy? What did the death of the dog Karenin signify? The couple's death in a truck accident is supposed to be tragic, or is it just ... meaningless? The film could have been a much more effective treatment of freedom (lightness) and commitment (heaviness) if the script had been simplified and clarified. (2009)

Under Capricorn 1949 Alfred Hitchcock 2.5 Ingrid Bergman, Joseph Cotten, Michael Wilding, Margaret Leighton as Millie, Cecil Parker as Governor. Long, pretty dull costume (Sydney, 1831) melodrama about a couple with dark secrets, and particularly about Bergman hurting because of her fidelity to her husband and then caught in a series of dilemmas. Film too self-consciously built around one stunning star with little attention to script. Bergman, often very lovely and in expensive period costumes, plays alcoholic lovesick woman; she has taken up drinking because.... Wilding arrives from England and takes it upon himself to bring her back to life; brooding Cotton at first is grateful, but then becomes insanely jealous; after series of pretty confusing crises, Wilding returns to Ireland, and the couple continues on. Almost no Hitchcock pizzazz in movie – there are elements of 'Rebecca' what with the brooding weight of the past and the machinations of the jealous housekeeper Millie (who does perhaps shine as film's most convincing actress). Cotten seems bored and just waiting for the shooting to be finished. Hitchcock still following up on 'Rope' experiment with long takes (sometimes six to eight minutes) that follow characters up and down stairs, up balconies, etc.; they are usually quite effective; works well in shock crisis scene, when camera pans from Bergman's semi-comatose head to the shrunken head half hidden under the covers (put there by Millie to scare her to death?) and then to Millie's hand that puts away the head, pours poison in the wine and brings it close to Bergman with the very large wine glass (thanks to 'Lady Vanishes') dominating the frame; and then Bergman, who we fear is comatose with half-opened eyes, screams for her husband! Unfortunately no other such scenes in the film and one even gets the impression that that scene was jazzed up to compensate for the lack of excitement in the whole movie. Hitchcock violates his principle about the primacy of the visual image, and he films very long two shots in which characters talk endlessly; e.g., Bergman tells in long-winded monologue how she was the one who killed her brother; the director could have given us a (abbreviated) flashback. Focus is Bergman caught between the two men in her life, and she emoting about it. Script is hard to take sometimes: e.g., the Governor is completely taken by Bergman at the Irish Ball (camera work detailing the changing expression on his face is very effective), and then just a few scenes later he is ready to send her back to Ireland to stand trial for the murder of her brother, a crime that Cotten has already served his sentence for! Very little of the humor that enlivens many of Hitchcock's films. Interesting social environment in Australia, where convicts are treated more or less like slave labor, and "emancipists" who make it good (become rich) are still snubbed by their social superiors. 'Gone with the Wind'-type continuous sappy music. Thank heaven for the 50s! I sense a good editing job even nowadays -- cutting movie to 95-100 minutes from the 117-- would vastly improve the product. (2007)

Under the Shadow 2016 Babak Anvari (Britain) 3.0 Scary and informative Iranian-language horror movie that delivers insight on the condition of women in post-Revolutionary Iran. Narges Rashidi as Shideh, a pretty modern (unveiled) Iranian woman into fitness – she is depressed and snarky because the regime won't let her study medicine; Avin Manshadi as cute, vulnerable little daughter Dorsa; Bobb Naderi as Iraj, her traditional husband who is called to serve as doctor in the Iraq War. The first two-thirds of the film focus on the social-cultural situation of Shideh. Well-off middle class married to a medical doctor, she is not allowed to pursue her own medical studies (a dream of her mother who was also a doctor) because of her earlier involvement in a secular political movement during the Revolution.

The mother of a little girl, she is not satisfied with her domestic life; attractive and wearing form-fitting clothes, she works out to Jane Fonda videos in front of her TV (the VCR is forbidden and subject to confiscation); when she leaves the house without a head covering, she is arrested by the morals police and reprimanded for her disdain for the grand achievements of the Revolution, something for which thousands of young men are dying in the war. Shideh's mood is darkened by her aloneness in her apartment and being surrounded by conservative women filling her ears with stories about djinn ghosts that fly on the wind and may have entered the building through the hole punctured by an Iraqi SCUD missile imbedded in the roof of the apartment. The first hints of haunting come from the anxiety of her daughter, who dreams of a frightening woman in her sleep; then she is convinced that the woman stole her doll, Kimia, and tells her that she is the only one that can find her; she also has a mysterious fever. Shideh gets several glimpses of the apparition that flits in and out of doorways and windows in a fluttering white cloth with black designs on it. When Shideh decides to leave the apartment at the urgent requests of her husband on the telephone, the djinn gets very aggressive, eventually burying mother and daughter under the large undulating cloth. Mother has to fight her way out with Dorsa and then leave instantly by crashing through the garage door in her car. It appears the djinn then goes into hiatus, since the film ends with quiet shots of Shideh's apartment and of the ceiling hole. After a low-key beginning, the horror aspect of the film builds to a smashing climax in the last 15 minutes. 'Shadow' differs from many horror films in its in-depth depiction of the situation of an educated, ambitious woman in Islamic Iran: a fable out of Iran's Islamic past, the djinn appears to be punishing the modern Iranian woman for her relative indifference to religion and for not focusing exclusively on the home and raising her daughter.

Interesting, often scary movie. (May 2017)

The Underneath 1995 Steven Soderbergh 3.0 Peter Gallagher as charming, irresponsible, gambling-addicted ne'er-do-well, Michael, who takes a job at an armored car company when he returns to his home town to attend his estranged mother's wedding; Alison Elliott as former girlfriend Gallagher decides to reconnect with ("You know me. I like money") but who marries as gangster; William Fichtner as steely-eyed, jealous, violent gangster husband; Joe Don Baker as the boss of the armored car company perhaps not as foolish as he seems; Adam Treese is overly obvious role as Michael's brother; Elisabeth Shue as Gallagher's alternative girlfriend; Shelley Duvall as a nurse. A kind of two-brained movie – one a psychological evaluation of the relationships among the main characters that doesn't seem to advance narratively, and the other as remake of a film noir thriller with a quadruple twist ending. Gallagher is intriguing as a young Michael, who returns to his small Texas town and strikes up a relationship with his ex-wife (while simultaneously pursuing an affair with Shue). When Michael is caught by the volcanic Fichtner in a compromising situation with Elliott, he agrees to pull off an armored car robbery, which however goes awry, ending in the death of Michael's father-in-law and his own wounding. The long postscript in which Michael is immobilized in a hospital after the crime brings out the noir elements and a number of manipulative, although entertaining twists: the long hospital room conversation with the henchman that has been sent to kidnap Michael; Fichtner's murder of the henchman (Fichtner wants to keep all the money from the heist) with the steely-eyed assistance of Elliott; but then Alison's betrayal of her husband enabling Michael to kill Fichtner after a struggle; then Alison walks out on Michael, presumably to allow him to die and make off with all the money herself (?); and then in a skilled series of shots in a gas station, Alison then drives off, but is watched by Joe Don Baker (identified by the mint chocolates he is eating) and Alison is followed by the panel truck that had participated in the heist (?). The film is cool, reserved with no humor. The first part of it uses confusing (New Wave-style?) editing to present Michael's situation to the viewer – his past with Rachel, when he wore a beard, gambled obsessively, and alienated Alison with big ticket purchases, the present which is played straight, and the future robbery photographed in dreamy green tints. The script's initial focus on the tangled, ambiguous relationships of the main characters is interesting – Michael's charm, clueless aimlessness and susceptibility to popular culture; Alison's polymorphous inability to decide what is important to her (money or the right guy?), Fichtner's hot-tempered cruelty, etc. Interesting, intelligent, well-made film that would have benefitted from more dramatic unity. (2013)

Unfaithfully Yours 1948 Preston Sturges 3.5 Rex Harrison in quintessential performance as fast-talking, rapier-witted, highly neurotic celebrity conductor, who is insanely jealous of his wife; Linda Darnell suitably glamorous (halo braid hairdos!) as his loving, although much younger, wife; Rudy Vallee as prim, bespectacled rich relative, who is played as an impossible tightwad; Edgar Kennedy as private detective man of the people who "discovers" Darnell's infidelity and who is a fanatic follower of Sir Alfred's conducting ("No one else handles Handel like you, Sir Alfred. Your Delius is delicious!"); Kurt Krueger dull as Harrison's secretary, who is the putative lover of Darnell. Mostly masterful serio-comedy about the ridiculous extremes that a jealous husband will go to when he thinks his wife is unfaithful. While he delights enthusiastic audiences by conducting music by Tchaikovsky, Wagner, and especially Rossini (The Overture to 'An Italian in Algiers'), Harrison plots in his head his retaliations against his wife and her lover. The camera tracks three times into his left eyeball, and the viewer is presented with three successive scenarios: a fiendishly clever murder plot using electronic equipment and in which the lover gets the death penalty; Sir Alfred forgives Darnell and writes her a check for \$100,000; he forces the sniveling Krueger to play Russian Roulette with him, and the gun goes off into Sir Alfred's head. The style switches to slapstick in the last act – when Harrison tries to implement his murderous fantasy, absolutely everything goes wrong – perhaps excessively – starting with his inability to find a pair of gloves that fit. He destroys Darnell's bedroom, and then reconciles with her when he finally realizes how much she really loves him; left unresolved is what will happen when his madman jealousy again raises its ugly head. A highlight is the rapid-fire dialogue that Harrison specializes in but in which virtually everyone participates; one particularly memorable exchange between Harrison and Vallee in which the former says 'sluice' instead of 'sleuth' and Vallee corrects him. The rehearsal scene for the Rossini overture is extremely entertaining with intimate shots of the musicians (the female harpists doing her nails since she has nothing to play), and the amusing interchange between the conductor and the mousy cymbalist, who breaks out a huge set of cymbals to get the exotic sound Harrison is looking for. Small flaws – the abrupt transitions from clever absurdist dialogue to slapstick clumsiness, and the reliance on cutesy sound effects (e.g., the sticky zipper sounds when tightwad Vallee opens his wallet). Perhaps not quite up to the standards of 'The Lady Eve' and 'Sullivan's Travels', but entertaining and inventive film. (2009)

Unforgiven 1992 Clint Eastwood 3.5 Clint Eastwood as a revisionist parody of his usual screen persona – a haggard, grim-faced retired outlaw living on a pig farm with his two children; Morgan Freeman as fellow past perpetrator who joins Eastwood on a quest for reward money; Jaimz Woolvett annoying as kid who, basing himself on the western myth, wants to be a gunfighter; Gene Hackwood steals the show as the vicious (psychotic?) sheriff in town, who however spends much of his time building his house with his own hands; Richard Harris pungent, witty, sarcastic, entertaining as English Bob, a ruthless bullshitting gunslinger; Saul Rubinek supine and submissive as a writer who is collecting information for a book on the heroics of English Bob. Anti-western concocted by Eastwood that seems to be largely a critique of his previous classic westerns. When Eastwood decides to kill two lawbreakers to collect a reward, he is woefully unprepared – he can't get on his horse, he can't shoot straight (in the obligatory target-practice scene he consistently misses the tin can sitting on the fence post), and when lying by the campfire he complains about not being in his comfortable bed. During the shooting of the two targets, he is calm, collected, rather uninvolved emotionally. Meanwhile, after shooting a man three times while he is sitting in an outhouse, the kid decides to quit gunfighting (he never really got started); and when Freeman actually has to pull the trigger on a human target, he decides to return to his wife in Kansas (he is subsequently arrested and beaten to death). Hackwood's emblematic wooden building that usually represents civilization in Ford's movies leaks terribly when it rains; and the women who normally represent civilization and settling down are in this story prostitutes— sympathetic but trouble-making – who start things moving with the reward offered on the two cowboys. Rubinek at first intends to write a book based on the standard western myth (honor, skill, fair face-offs in the street, etc.), but the information he gets from cynic Hackwood (he insists on calling English Bob the "duck" of death instead of the "duke" of death) shows him the vicious violence, brutality, venality, and betrayal of the real West. The film has beautiful Wyoming vistas of snowy mountains in the distance and of brilliant vermillion sunsets outlining spare leafless trees; but the inside shots are usually dark and starkly lit and it always

seems to be raining hard in town. The end of the film plays partly in classic terms – Eastwood has his revenge-driven showdown with the bad guys in the town saloon, and he kills most of them in a flurry of gunfire; the trouble is that the bad guy who is killed is the sheriff of town, who has expended a lot of energy keeping the law. After killing Hackwood et al., Eastwood leaves in the rain and disappears with his children to some unknown destination (perhaps California). Film has ambiguous attitude toward violence – condemnatory in the campaign against the two cowboys and in the way it treats Hackwood's brutality, but reverting to implicit approval in Eastwood's classically exciting, expert killing of the town posse in the saloon. Message seems clouded in that in the beginning he has rejected the life of violence, he then embraces it for a shootout, and then returns to where he started to live on unpunished. Film moves stolidly at times; but colorful and interesting most of the time, often beautiful, and attention-getting in its critique of the director's own film heritage. (2008)

The Uninvited 1944 Lewis Allen (Paramount) 3.0 Ray Milland as good-looking, humorous, insouciant London writer, who decides with his sister to buy an elegant house on the Cornish coast despite its suspicious history; Ruth Hussey as his 'Our-Miss-Brooks', goody-two-shoes sister also enamored with the house; Gail Russell charming, innocent, and pretty in her first role as 19-year-old living nearby with her grandfather – she is the daughter of a woman that used to live in the house; Donald Crisp as grandfather trying to protect his granddaughter from the malevolent influences of the house. Old-fashioned, not-very-scary, sometimes hackneyed haunted house film. Perhaps the strongest aspect of the film are the shots of the environment – cliffs plunging into the ocean, waves crashing against the rocks, open sky, the house jutting out against the big sky – and the elegant Georgian home, beautiful with large windows and a curving staircase even when empty, and even more stylish when gussied up by Hussey. Milland is effective as a leading man devising way to protect Russell and defusing the tension with his laid-back humor. Russell is sometimes pretty and innocent, sometimes intense and disturbing especially when she is muttering Spanish during a (rather silly) séance that Milland and Hussey organize. The fun is experiencing the haunting of the house that has no phone or electricity – female voices crying and moaning, extreme cold in the upstairs artist's studios, sudden breezes causing the candles to flicker, odor of mimosa wafting through the house, the suspense created by a character rushing up the stairs and opening the door to a room he thinks is haunted. The screenplay eventually reveals that there are two women haunting the house, one Russell's presumed mother and another her servant Carmel, whose spirit seems sadder; further revelations from the confused narrative indicate that Carmel is the real mother, and that Russell's former governess, Miss Holloway (Cornelia Otis Skinner), is a fervent admirer of the dead mother with every indication that they were lesbian lovers ("We decided together to conquer life!"). The relation to Hitchcock's 'Rebecca', filmed only four years earlier, is unmistakable – the dominating homosexual companion Mrs. Danvers, Manderley on the hill on the wild Cornish coast, etc. The hackneyed ending has the ghost of Carmel laughing since she has been reconciled with her daughter, Milland banishing the ghost of the bitter mother on the stairs, and then the four main characters pairing off in the front door – Milland with Russell, 25 years his junior, and the bland Hussey with the country doctor (Alan Napier). The ill will has been banished by understanding and reconciliation and everyone will live happily ever after, some of them in the decontaminated house. Plenty of Hollywood hokum, but a strong sense of place, a few scary bumps in the night, effective performances from all participants. (2015)

Union Station Rudolph Maté (Paramount) 3.0 William Holden as police lieutenant reigning over Union Station (seems like the Los Angeles station although the film is not set there); Nancy Olson as plain, spunky young woman who spots impending skullduggery, participates in the police procedure, and spars romantically with Holden; Barry Fitzgerald in his usual role as hyper-charming, avuncular Irish-speaking police inspector cooperating with Holden in the investigation; Lyle Bettger as good-looking, neatly dressed scatter-brained psychopath who just shoots when in doubt, killing even his girlfriend (Jan Sterling); Allene Roberts as blind daughter of wealthy local industrialist – she drives the viewer almost to distraction with her wailing and screaming. Very good police procedural detective film that includes a budding romance between Olson and Holden and some nasty violence and police abuse of suspects. Essentially a kidnapping for ransom story – Roberts is kidnapped by Bettger and his confederates, and the

script painstakingly follows the efforts of the police to get the girl back. Acting is uniformly convincing. Maté makes excellent use of on-location shots in the train station: many scenes have the police milling around in the large station crowds waiting for the crooks to pick up the ransom money, etc. Three action sequences stand out for their appropriate composition, their crisp editing, and their suspense: the opening sequence on a train when Olson spots several suspicious activities (car racing to catch up with the train at a station, a man sitting close to her on the train with his gun showing through his coat) to deduce that the men are up to no good; sequences in the train station as Holden choreographs the movement of his men in their surveillance of the bad guys; the final chase in the dark utilities tunnel next to the station as a wounded Holden pursues an injured Bettger until Holden shoots him dead as he tries to kill the girl – Roberts is then returned sobbing, as usual, to her father. The film is not truly noir (no femme fatale, no all-powerful fate, not narrated), but it has several dark aspects: the cinematography inside the tunnel at the end, the large number of persons shot and killed (most often by Bettger), and the scene in the train station in which Holden extracts a key address from one of the hoods by having his men threatend him graphically with being thrown under a train – no hint of a Miranda warning. Film is pretty typical of the era, but it stands out for its accomplished stars (Fitzgerald, Holden, and Olson), its crisp, atmospheric cinematography, its use of crowd scenes, and its efficient, no-nonsense editing. (2009)

The Unknown (silent) 1927 Tod Browning 3.0 Lon Chaney (with no make-up) showing his powerful acting versatility as a supposedly armless knife-thrower in a Spanish circus; Joan Crawford looking slight, pretty, often scantily clad as young woman that Chaney is obsessed with; Norman Kerry as Malabar the Mighty, Chaney's rival for the affections of Crawford. Not-so-horrifying dramatic horror picture about a circus performer desperately in love with a pretty young woman; he becomes increasingly alienated by Crawford's growing attachment to Kerry; the viewer learns that he actually has arms, but he keeps them bound close to his body by a tight corset that his midget assistant, Cojo, puts on and takes off for him; Chaney then has an operation to remove his arms (the object of the surgery is not clear in the film's print – it seemed that he was just having his double thumb removed) apparently to please Crawford, who has a pathological fear of men's arms always pawing and grabbing her; he then tries to murder Kerry while performing a strongman's stunt in which horses pull on his arms in opposite directions (they are actually on treadmills to minimize the force), but things go awry and Chaney is trampled to death by one of the horses. The memorable aspect of the film is the variety of expression in Chaney's face: he expresses pain, sadness, jealousy, relief, happiness, joy in an eloquent way even though the film is silent and he is deprived of spoken communication. The film shows the typical Hollywood prudence of the 1920s – Crawford, who often wears revealing clothing, is afraid of male strength and aggressiveness; she has to evade the leering attention of Kerry in the beginning of the film, but all turns out well for virtue when Kerry turns into a romantic suitor and wins his beloved for marriage in the final scene. As usual, Browning puts stunted characters in the forefront of the narrative – the armless man and his midget assistant – and plays well the theme of strength in arms (male sexuality) and armlessness (powerlessness and the rage coming from it). The scene in which Cojo unlaces Chaney's corset to reveal that he does have arms surprises the viewer and evokes effectively the uneasiness about amputation, etc. But the build-up to the climax would have worked much better if the object of the operation had been made clearer (cuts because of the censor?). (2010)

Unstoppable 2010 Tony Scott 3.0 Denzel Washington as widowed everyman train engineer with two daughters that he adores; Chris Pine as the train's conductor who has serious marital problems; Rosario Dawson as conscientious, common-sensical strong woman dispatcher who stands up to the suits at headquarters and exchanges tender glances with Washington at the end of the adventure. Action thriller by Tony Scott that traces the attempts to stop a runaway freight train in Pennsylvania (what happened to the dead man's switch?); it is long and dangerous, since not only does it have explosive materials aboard, but it has to negotiate a major curve in the middle of a city. No doubt that the film is exciting: many shots of the behemoth rushing down the tracks, cutting through the picturesque green countryside, roaring through grade crossings lined with horrified spectators, demolishing a horse trailer, smashing into the rear of Washington's smaller train and flinging the cars contemptuously off the tracks; always a sense of menacing momentum; the director uses Fox News service and pursuit helicopters to

pump up the action and keep the viewer informed. Washington is of course the hero, who pursues the train with his own locomotive, and who after slowing it down by coupling with the rear car and then applying the brakes, leaps on top of the renegade train and races down the tops of the cars to try to get to the locomotive; that doesn't work because of gaps between the cars, and in the end as rough guy in a pickup truck picks up Pine, drives to the front of the train, where after many more near spills and thrills, Pine jumps on to the locomotive and does the necessary. The film is exciting, well-made, and fun to watch, but it is afflicted with terminal Hollywood clichés: both men in the pursuit cab have gripping back stories, Washington with his two teenage daughters, whom he calls on his cell phone to tell them that he loves them, and Pine with his estranged wife, with whom he of course has a heartfelt reconciliation at the end; lots of people with tense faces watching the news coverage and then jumping up and down with joy when the train is finally stopped. Pretty good mainstream Hollywood action product. (2011)

Under the Skin 2014 Nicholas Glazer (Britain) 3.5 Scarlett Johansson as apparent robot-like visitor from outer space that preys on men (the beginning is abstract and ambiguous recalling previous space visitor films). Intriguing, sexy, weakly plotted film about beautiful masquerader trolling the streets of Scotland's cities seducing men – for reasons that are never clearly delineated. After Johansson and her assistant take the clothes and skin of a dead woman they find on the side of the road, Glazer's camera mostly focuses on the hard, blank, impassive face of Johansson, as she cruises around Glasgow (?), finding single men who are not expected by anyone, taking them back to her digs (seems to change every time), and then as she undresses, enticing them into a dark, featureless space, where they strip off their clothes and – often with visible erections – walk impassively into a shiny, black liquid as Johansson walks calmly on the surface. The film takes place in mostly a realistic space – dark, rainy urban Scotland with forays toward the end in the picturesque countryside, but the murders occur in aesthetic, dark, abstract surroundings. At first Johansson is just an unemotional killing machine, perhaps most tragically in the murder of a man that attempts to save a couple from drowning, and then walking away indifferently from the abandoned toddler crying for his parents. Johansson then starts to go through a change: she seems curious about what is happening around her – the party scene in the city, the response of the men to her, the beauty of the countryside, and especially the kindness of another man she picks up, who takes her back to his home, feeds her, and puts her to bed in a spare bedroom without at first trying to have sex with her. When they become romantic, he finds that he cannot penetrate her, after which she grabs a lamp to look between her legs to see what is missing. Johansson seems to be trying to become human despite her confusion and awkwardness. The ending is catastrophic and ambiguous: taking a walk in a forest, she tries to steal a logging truck, and when the driver catches up with her, he starts to rape her; seeing that her human skin layer is peeling off and that she is now a matte, black creature in the form of a young woman, he douses her with gasoline and lights her afire; she stumbles into a clearing and burns up; the camera follows the dark smoke into the sky where snow is falling. With its shots of Johansson's face behind the wheel of her panel truck and the interspersed non-literal spaces, the film is visually arresting. Despite the long takes where nothing appears to be happening, the film holds the viewer's interest – the seductive appearance of Johansson draws attention; one is constantly in suspense about why she has come to earth and why she is bent on murdering men. One longs for an explanation that never comes. Contains echoes of the power of sexuality and the theme of the femme fatale. (2014)

Der Untergang (Downfall) 2004 Oliver Hirschbiegel (Germany) 4.0 Bruno Ganz as a realistic Hitler who alternates between kindly behavior toward women, dogs, and cooks and rants against Jews and his generals that show that he was detached from reality, Julianne Köhler as Eva Braun, his mistress whom he marries toward the end of the long film – she seems clueless, rather empty-header commenting that she barely knows Adolf, Alexandra Maria Lara as the naïve secretary Traudl who is kept out of the loop, who is loyal to Hitler but recognizes that he is violent and insane, Ulrich Matthes as a gaunt, fanatically loyal Goebbels who allows his wife to take the initiative with the disposition of their children, Corinna Harfouch as Frau Goebbels, who says that a Germany without National Socialism is not worthy for her or her six children to live in, and she gives them a sleeping potion and then poisons them with instant acting cyanide capsule, Heino Ferch as Albert Speer, a charismatic follower of Hitler who admits to him that he has disobeyed his order to destroy Germany's infrastructure, the only one we see

who is dressed in (very chic) civilian clothes, Cristian Berk as the head shaved SS doctor who is conscience-stricken by the suffering caused by Hitler's decision to defend Berlin and to refuse to leave the city. An excellent, Hollywood-style treatment of the last ten days or so of Hitler and his entourage. Excellent recreation of the claustrophobic bunker life under the Resichskanzelerei with its limited space and its harsh lighting; film shifts to the outside only to notice the losing (hopeless) battle for Berlin, some of the women having smokes (Hitler couldn't stand cigarettes), burning the bodies of the Hitlers and the Goebbelss. Hitler and some of his entourage are fanatics; possessed by the idea of honor and failed mission, Hitler and many others commit suicide as the Russians move in – some of his loyalists show up in Berlin to die with him (Traudl at first states her intention to stay and die with the Führer, but at the end she decides to try to escape), the last half hour of the film is filled with the crack of suicidal pistol shots. Some of the principals are normal folk just caught up in the infatuation with the charismatic Hitler; especially the generals working around him are aware of the hopeless military situation and they try mightily to disabuse Hitler of his delusions that entire armies (Steiner) are going to attack to deliver Berlin from the Russian offensive; General Monke, who is put in charge of the government district, knows how delusional Hitler is, but he soldiers on in his soldiers' devotion to duty; one ends up admiring his pluck and initiative. Film is very entertaining as we move from story to story, inevitably returning to the story of Hitler until his suicide by simultaneous poisoning and pistol shot and the burning of his body by his personal aide. The escape of a 13-year old boy drafted as a soldier back into the arms of his father and the escape of Traudl through the Russian lines give us the sense that Germany will survive, and that the civilians (the "innocents," if there are any) will live on to build another Germany (obviously the Bonn Republic). Film has the courage to present Hitler and his entourage in realistic terms – they are human beings, although very flawed and destructive ones, and if the world is to resist a repetition of the nightmare of the Third Reich, we must operate on the assumption that the future "monsters" will exploit their own mainstream culture much like Hitler did. (2006)

The Untouchables 1987 Brian DePalma (wr. David Mamet!) 3.5 Kevin Costner, Sean Connery, Charles Martin Smith, Andy Garcia, Robert DeNiro (as Al Capone), Billy Drago (as hood). Extremely entertaining high concept Hollywood movie with interesting characters, suspense, violence (no sex), and compelling adventure story line. Essentially a buddy movie with four musketeers setting off on a crusade to do the right thing – defeat brutal and arrogant Al Capone in Chicago; and they triumph at the end when he is convicted of income tax evasion and sentenced to 11 years in prison. Issues a little scrambled, since everybody loves to take a nip and Prohibition is on the verge of being repealed, and yet the crusade is to enforce the law. Straight arrow Elliot Ness (Costner), endowed with a sweet wife and two children by the writer, wants to be moral and law-abiding, but he has to break a few of the rules to get Capone! Connery is excellent with his moral weight, his loyalty, his Irish wisdom, and we grieve when he is murdered; Smith very entertaining as nerdy accountant, who invented the idea of getting Capone on income tax charges and who takes up the gun himself before he is also murdered. Hard to find a trace of the famed Memetian dialogue. However, DePalma is evident in violence scenes. Connery shoots a corpse (blood!) through the head to frighten Mafioso into talking! Execution of Connery is very bloody and slow to the accompaniment of operatic music (symphonic score by Ennio Morricone that recalls 'Once Upon a Time in the West'), and cross-cuts to Capone listening to performance of 'Ridi, Pagliaccio!' Famous slow-motion style scene in Union Station orchestrated around the baby carriage bumping slowly down the stairs (obviously evoking the Odessa Steps sequence from 'Potemkin'). Seems like the end, but followed by trial of Capone, and exciting chase of sneering, arrogant punk Drago on the roof of the court house, where Costner, enraged by his murder of Malone, pushes him off the roof. Film occasionally cuts to set pieces of Capone surrounded by his hitmen, also very operatic and stylized. Great location scenes in Chicago – State Street, and many of the buildings and hotel foyers designed by Sullivan and Wright! Ends ironically with Costner saying that now the job is done, he is going to have a drink! Fun, excessive ride! (2005)

Up 2006 Pete Docter (Pixar) 3.5 Ed Asner as Carl Fredricksen, who grows up wanting adventure but never getting it until...; Christopher Plummer as Charles Muntz, am Indiana Jones-type of adventurer of the 30s who survives into Carl's old age; Elie Docter (daughter of Pete) as adorable little

Ellie who provides the spark and energy when she meets little Carl; Bob Peterson as voices of Dug (hilarious stilted looking, affectionate- and master-seeking dog) and Alpha, a fearsome Doberman who spends most of the film with a squeaky, helium-damaged voice. Ingenious, expert, heart-warming Pixar computer animation film dealing with the human need for adventure, spryness and activeness in old age, true affection between spouses, and connections between the generations. Little Clark is very nerdy, and his relationship and marriage to Ellie brings him out perfectly. The four-minute silent montage of their courtship, moving into their house, happiness as a couple, disappointment and tears when they are unable to have children, their inability to depart on adventures because of financial emergencies, and finally the premature death of Ellie, leaving Carl alone with his memories, rather helpless in his aloneness -- tight, moving, and beautiful. This first part of the film is one of the best sequences ever seen in animation. The rest involves Carl meeting a nerdy but determined young boy scout bent on getting his badge for helping the elderly. When society tries to send Carl to an old folks home, he escapes in his house borne aloft by myriads of bright colored helium balloons; the initial bursting of the balloons from a huge sack from behind Carl's house is like hope and excitement springing out of modest surroundings. The rest of the film is a somewhat formulaic melodrama in which Carl and the boy defeat the villain (paradoxically the old paladin of adventure from the 1930s), who is trying to lay his hands on a wacky, multi-colored bird. The most amusing sequences are the villain's dogs, who are sometimes snarling and mean but often comic with electronic voice activations, a weakness for tennis balls (Carl luckily has four of them on his walking stick), and an ability to serve a gourmet meal and fill champagne glasses without excessive spillage; the affection-starved Dug stands out. As one would expect, the story turns out happy with the villains vanquished and all the good guys returned to civilization and happy together. The last part of the film drags, but the strong feeling always remains -- Carl continues to address his dead wife about finally achieving the adventure he had "crossed his heart" to experience. The computer animation is dazzling -- faces are real and expressive, motion is true, 3D depth effect is convincing, colors are bright, and many scenarios are spectacular, e.g., the dizzying sequences on the villain's dirigible at the end. (2009)

Up in the Air 2009 Jason Reitman 3.0 George Clooney more likable than the character he plays as corporate hatchet man that travels to every insignificant city in the American heartland to fire employees in behalf of bosses who don't have the guts; Vera Farmiga attractive and quick-witted as like-minded playmate that he hooks up with on one of his trips; Anna Kendrick, callow-looking but with a ferocious cutting energy who comes up with cost-saving plan that would take Clooney off his beloved road; Jason Bateman excellent as pragmatic and heartless boss who has a chummy relationship with Clooney. Refreshingly original disturbing comedy that starts off strong, degenerates into sentimentality and romantic comedy tropes and then hits us with a surprise ending. The first half of the film is the best -- Clooney is hilariously riveting in his smug enjoyment of the budget jet-setting lifestyle with his swiping cards at every step of his rush through airports, packing his bags neatly and efficiently (crisp montages by the director), happy to have virtually no home (a bare, depressing one-bedroom apartment) and never complaining about the service in the Hampton Inn-style motels he stays in; he even gives motivational speeches about keeping your "backpack" light by reducing your commitments and personal relationships. As his victims Reitman uses non-professional actors who have actually been fired; their reactions are heart-rending, but Clooney takes it all in stride and moves on to his next mark. His repartee and love-making with Farmiga is also witty and enjoyable; they move through the airports of the heartland as if home means nothing to either one of them. Clooney however is challenged by the brilliant Kendrick, whose electronically based efficiency plan threatens to take him off the road; she accompanies him on one of his extended trips, where she observes his firing techniques and then performs some herself -- funny and perhaps moving to see her dominate her innate tendency to empathize with her interlocutors. The film takes a dive a little over halfway through, when Clooney takes Farmiga with him to be present at his sister's wedding, where the narrative bogs down in little domestic issues. In observing the marriage, Clooney is showing every sign of falling in love with Farmiga; and when he is delivering one of his speeches, he has an epiphany, rushes to Farmiga's home -- to find out that she is married and has a couple of kids! Later she calls him outraged that he almost blew her cover. Farmiga's character is incomprehensible; she never told Clooney that she was married; she was sympathetic in her treatment of Kendrick's romantic problems, and she showed real signs of reciprocating Clooney's evolving feelings,

and yet she is heartlessly angry when he follows up. Chastened, Clooney then returns to his old lifestyle. The film avoids the clichés of a romantic comedy, but it seriously strains this viewer's credibility. Nevertheless, often engaging and original. (2010)

The Upturned Glass 1947 Lawrence Huntington (Britain: producer Box) 2.5/3.0 Noirish thriller about brain surgeon that murders the woman that killed the woman he loved. James Mason suave as always and young as doctor determined to show that perfectly sane people are capable of murder – for a just cause; Rosamund John as middle-class woman who Mason falls in love with; Pamela Mason as free-spirited woman that (apparently) pushes John out of her third-story window when attempts to blackmail her fails. While hiding his own identity, film has Mason recount his own story to a crowd of students in a medical school lecture theater – murder of his beloved, his investigation of her death, and then his murder of the guilty woman when he is convinced she killed her. The end of the lecture is a surprise – he leaves the medical school, drives next to the seashore, then picks up Mason, who is supposed to be dead, and takes her to John's house, where he kills her in a chaotic scene in John's old bedroom. He then loads her into his car and drives toward the seashore to dispose of her body. On the way he encounters another doctor (Brefni O'Rorke), in the company of whom he saves the life of a little girl that is severely injured in an automobile accident. Afterwards, he drives to the Postsmouth cliffs, where he throws himself into the ocean, thus committing suicide. The psychological aspects of the film are interesting, but a bit confused. Through most of the film Mason is convinced that he is acting in a righteous clause: he is exacting justice from a murderer. But in the end under the influence of O'Rorke he accepts that he might just be insane; the paradoxical realization is too much for him leading to his suicide. The film has good performances and a twisty narrative, which however is not always convincing. The caretaker of John's house piques the viewer's interest with his playing the organ in the church next door, and O'Rorke is an interesting offbeat character who speculates on the "upturned glass" (not clear what he is saying). The kind of 40s film that would be a good TV movie in the 1970s. (August 2017)

The Usual Suspects 1995 Bryan Singer 2.5 Kevin Spacey as apparently stupid and gimp crook appearing to be a victim; Gabriel Byrne as crooked ex-cop who is presented through most of the film as the arch-villain; Chazz Palminteri as federal cop who takes up much of film pumping Spacey to tell him the story about the heist; Pete Postlethwaite as evil-seeming Pakistani apparently working for the arch-villain; Stephen Baldwin and Benicio del Toro as other members of the gang. Barely enjoyable film that begins with a disastrous shoot-out and fire aboard a ship moored in San Pedro Harbor, LA; the rest of it being flashbacks as Palmintieri interviews Spacey in a police lieutenant's office in LA. Most of the film's story is told in flashback – from the initial line-up in New York; the members of the line-up, none of whom is arrested, then pulling off several consecutive, very bloody and violent hold-ups; then ending with the astounding revelation as Spacey walks out of the police station that he is the legendary, much feared Kaiser Soze that is behind all the mayhem; and that all the violence is not about a drug deal after all, but that Soze (Spacey) has organized this mass attack on the ship in order to kill a witness who would be able to identify him in court. The narrative is extremely tricky: practically all the events are narrated by Spacey, who it turns out of course is an unreliable witness, since he is trying to cover his own involvement in the affair (although the viewer does not know this at the time); and only in a rapid sequence at the end (admittedly well edited) are we suddenly led to realize – gasp – that Spacey is Soze and all those murders, etc. were committed by him. The film is such a tricky puzzle that the viewer (this one, at least) spends most of the time in a confused daze and ends up not caring how it turns out; another result is that the characters, although quirky, never come alive and we don't care what happens to them. No doubt that the tricky twist genre with the gasp surprise ending is well executed, but perhaps that is not enough to make a good movie. (2009)

Les vacances de M. Hulot 1953 Jacques Tati (Frasnce) 4.0 Jacques Tati in title role as good-natured, clumsy tourist in a summer vacation spot on the beach who spreads chaos wherever he goes; Nathalie Pascaud as pretty girl who is staying with her relatives across the street from Hulot's hotel; Raymond Carl as waiter in hotel who always seems to be frustrated; Valentine Camax as hilarious stuffy Englishwoman who referees Hulot's immortal tennis match; Marguerite Gerard and Rene Lecourt as

strolling couple seen at least a dozen times; Andre Dubois as very thin retired army officer who is constantly describing his war experiences. Tati's most famous film that strikes this viewer as extremely funny on the third or fourth viewing. The style is very familiar: Tati very clumsy and ingratiating with his stuttering step, the pipe in his mouth, silly hat perched awkwardly on his head, leaning uneasily forward, clueless in social situations, through his ineptitude creating chaos wherever he goes. Almost no dialogue, but a wealth of sound effects that are often very humorous – e.g., the dozens of times that the door to the dining room makes a bumping sound, the constant backfires of Hulot's ancient (1924) little convertible with the rumble seat, the disruption caused by music played too loud on the phonograph. The film is beautifully restored -- crisp, clear and filled with sunlight on the French Atlantic coast. It has virtually no plot: just the activities of Hulot and the other inhabitants of the hotel from the day they arrive until they leave about a week later. Virtually every carefully prepared and choreographed scene has at least a little sight gag, e.g., the man painting a name on his boat whose brush paints a straight line across the bow when the boat begins to slide down the sand toward the sea. Light satire of stuffy French types who can't leave their regular lives behind: the retired officer who talks endlessly of his campaigns; the businessman who is constantly being called to the telephone to discuss stock market issues. Some of the scenes are hilarious: crowds of potential train passengers rush from platform to platform at the station in response to unintelligible instructions from the loud speaker; smitten with pretty Pascaud, Hulot carries her suitcase up a flight of stairs, then loses his footing, and careens through the house and out the back door; while Hulot is waiting for Pascaud to come down, and in trying to square two crooked paintings in the drawing room, he dismantles the room's decoration; perhaps the funniest is the tennis match in which Hulot, using the hilarious service wind-up banishes several opponents from the court without one of them managing to hit the ball; the touching little scene in which a little boy fetches two ice cream cones, and then somehow manages to avoid dumping the ice cream on the ground when he uses the hand holding the cone to turn a door knob; Hulot's noisy car accidentally rolls into a churchyard and when Hulot starts it up again it disrupts a funeral service -- one of his spare tires is mistaken for a funeral wreath, and he ends up giving several of the relatives a ride home; the piece de resistance is of course the final big scene in which a snoopy Hulot accidentally sets off the fireworks being stored in a shed and the resulting chain reaction has fireworks careening off buildings and waking up everyone in the hotel. Most of the musical soundtrack is comprised of variations on a single catchy jazz tune. A memorable French film classic that gives the best possible impression of delicate, understated Gallic humor. (2009)

Les valseuses (Testicles; 'Going Places') 1974 Bertrand Blier (France) 2.0 Gérard Dépardieu in early role as powerful-looking, handsome, charismatic cut-up looking very satisfied about breaking the rules of bourgeois society; Patrick Dewaere also good-looking as more slight and passive companion, who however likes sex as much as his friend does; Miou-Miou very pretty and sexy blond young woman, who walks around naked most of the time, is willing to have sex with most anyone, but who never gets excited doing it; Brigitte Fossey in cameo as another pretty young woman nursing her baby on a train and showing a pretty breast (!); Jeanne Moreau as sex-starved older woman recently released from prison, who commits suicide after having seemingly happy sex with the two guys (she shoots herself in her genitals); Isabelle Huppert in very early role as teenager that rebels against her parents and then thankfully has sex with the guys when they offer to deprive her of her virginity. Adolescent, thumb-your-nose-at-the-bourgeoisie film that is often fun to watch (especially when Miou-Miou is on screen), but which annoys for its egregious sexism. The film has a picaresque character as the two ne'er-do-wells crisscross small town and rural France defying all the rules of civilized behavior, stealing automobiles (perhaps eight or ten), and in desperate search for women to have sex with. The film represents a kind of aimless, anarchic rebellion against any notion of respectability or conformity. It makes fun of responsible adults – the owner of the beauty shop in the beginning, the security chief in the department store that has an amusing run-in with Dépardieu, the poor serveuse in the restaurant that is shocked when Moreau reveals that because of prison she hasn't had her period in years. Women, who are the main object of the pair's pranks, are treated with the most atrocious sexism: in the minds of the two men and the filmmaker, all women are little horny toads that are dying for a man, even when they don't realize it: Fossey becomes sexually excited when she allows (for money) Dewaere to suckle one of her breasts; Huppert is overwhelmingly happy and grateful after having the privilege of losing her virginity to the two guys;

Moreau is delighted to have sex with them simultaneously (after accepting gifts from them); and Miou-Miou is ready for sex anytime, anywhere with anyone even though she never has an orgasm; one of the small climaxes of the film is her celebration with her two friends after she has a smashing orgasm with the son of Moreau, he also recently released from prison – now she is a real woman! The men just pump the girls, often at great length – no tenderness, no oral sex, or other female-oriented sex practices. In trying to be cool (early 70s), the film illustrates male chauvinist practices in French sex relations and shows the adolescent immaturity of people who enjoy it. The film has no dramatic end – Delpardieu simply delivers a paean of praise to heedless liberty as he drives his last stolen car down a mountain road (this viewer was hoping their car would go over the side). (2011)

Il vangelo secondo Matteo 1964 Piero Paolo Pasolini (Italy) 2.0 Famous cinéma vérité treatment of the life of Jesus by a supposed Marxist atheist. The film is a neo-realist, semi documentary accounting of Jesus' birth, mission, passion, death, and resurrection. Everything is realistic shot in a depressing village carved into a hillside in an incredibly barren part of Basilicata. The costumes are sometimes very simple and sometimes fantastical – e.g., the bizarre inverted cones of the priests and scribes. The actors, all of whom are non-professionals, seem either simple peasants usually with deeply wrinkled faces and very bad teeth or students who seem to have been dragged out of the nearest Italian university; they all seem like Italians, not Jews living in Palestine at the time of Jesus. Jesus is a man of the people – no romanticizing, no soft eyes, etc.; the actor who plays Jesus has a very long nose, grown-together eyebrows and carefully slicked back hair. The beginning when Joseph finds out that Mary is pregnant (and not by him) is effective with its close-ups and silence; the film languishes after that. The middle part of the film is taken up mostly with Jesus speaking verses from Matthew: Jesus seems rather harsh with his condemnations and threats, but there are also sweet quotations such as in the 'Sermon on the Mount'. The drama of the betrayal, trial and crucifixion is undermined by shooting most of it in long shot, which allows the viewer to remain at an emotional distance. The movie ends abruptly with the (fake-looking) tomb cover being removed, and then the dark-haired (peasant) angel declaring that Jesus is risen – 'The End'. The entire film suffers from awkwardness and apparent low budget constrictions: the music comes in and fades out unpredictably mixing Mozart, Bach, Negro spirituals, etc.; the editing is awkward and abrupt, and almost always startles or annoys when shifting to a different scene; all the dialogue is dubbed poorly in English with unworthy voices and poorly matched to the moving of the actors' mouths. Crowd scenes are generally handled well. Overall, it is nice that someone made a film about Jesus without the Hollywood hype, but the movie refuses to be dramatic or spiritual, but hangs back and just records literally the events and sayings reported by Matthew. Scorsese is much better. (2007)

The Vanishing 1988 (France) George Sluizer 4.0 Gene Bervoets as obsessive, devoted husband (boyfriend?) of disappeared wife; Johanna der Steege as pretty, freckled, and therefore endearing woman who disappears in a freeway service stop; Bernard-Pierre Donnadieu as largely unfathomable marginally competent kidnapper-murderer. Outstanding chilling psychological thriller about woman who mysteriously disappears in a freeway service stop in France, the obsession of her husband even after three years to find out what happened to her, and his bizarre interaction with the normal-looking and –acting murderer, who lures him to an identical fate. The film is set in a socially normal and realistic environment – lovers in a car going on a vacation with bicycles on top, the two having a scary spate in a tunnel, long, edited scenes inside a car or in freeway service stops. The film has a deep psychological fascination that drives the narrative to its shocking, and entirely logical, conclusion. Since der Steege is pretty, lively, and engaging, the viewer is anguished about her fate; the flashback scenes toward the end when Donnadieu is telling Bervoets what he did to her are particularly disturbing and nostalgic – if only the kidnapper's sneeze had not disrupted his attempt to take another woman, the terrified eyes of der Steege as she struggled against the iron hold of the chloroform handkerchief on her mouth. Bervoets has perhaps the simplest role – he is devoted to his wife and he pursues her fate obsessively. Donnadieu is a tissue of bizarre complexities: he is an apparently devoted family man – a wife and two doting daughters – with whom he is very affectionate; he feels the need to challenge normality – as a teenager he jumps from the balcony of his apartment in order to "challenge fate", and when he heroically rescues a little girl from drowning, he warns his daughter to beware of heroes, since their actions are unpredictable; he keeps strange notes about his blood pressure, reaction times, etc., and he practices his chloroform technique on his own daughter, explaining that he was just being

affectionate. The last twenty minutes of the film have a tragic inevitability: Benvoets cannot resist accompanying Donnadieu back to Nîmes, and after initial hesitation, he submits to being drugged, when Donnadieu promises him that that is the only way to be sure about what happened to his wife. The last scene has Benvoets awakening in the confines of a wooden box – he has been buried alive in a coffin! – and we spend a couple of minutes with him as his cigarette lighter is gradually extinguished for lack of oxygen, he claws desperately at the inside of the box, and he calls out his own name obsessively; meanwhile on the surface of the ground Donnadieu and his women go about setting up the new home he has been building in St. Côme. Benvoets has thus found out what had happened to der Steege at the cost of his own life – the ultimate romantic sacrifice; the criminal goes unpunished, perhaps to commit the same crime again. A deeply disturbing but fascinating film. (2008)

Vanity Fair 2004 Mira Nair 2.0 Reese Witherspoon as the resilient Becky Sharp, dying to be accepted in upper London society despite being a governess and the daughter of a Paris opera singer; Romola Garai quite beautiful as Becky's emotional friend, Amelia Sedley; Rhys Ifans as the saintly, kind Mr. Dobbin; Jonathan Rhys Meyers as George Osborne, a glamorous ne'er-do-well who marries Amelia and then dies at Waterloo; Jim Broadbent as George's pugnacious father, who unbendingly rejects George's marriage to Amelia; Gabriel Byrne as the handsome and perfectly coiffed, good-looking Marquess of Steyne, who takes charge of Becky's career when she hits the wall but then pursues her sexually; Bob Hoskins as the good hearted, disheveled Mr. Pitt; James Purefoy as Rawdon Crawley, who marries Becky and turns out to be an improvident provider. Misfired adaptation of 'Vanity Fair' by the usually reliable Mira Nair. The film takes us through the main stages of Becky's attempted climb to greatness: the piquant characters she encounters in her first phase in the country, especially Bob Hoskins as the irascible but kind-hearted Mr. Pitt; the difficulty she encounters when trying to rise in London society – her husband Rawdon is no good at making money; the high-falutin' women she meets at society soirees (dressed in the ultimate Regency finery) make a habit of cutting her; and her gallant relationship with Steyne, who calls London society a "tawdry puppet play", turns out a disaster leading to the definitive break with her husband, who takes off for India; nice mise-en-scène in depicting the aftermath of the Battle of Waterloo, where Garai wanders among the dead eventually to find her husband's body; memorable hard-necked ill-temper from Broadbent, who for a long time refuses to recognize George's marriage to Garai or his grandson, who is supposed to be the spitting image of his father. Story ends happily with Garai finally letting go of George's memory and accepting the love of the kind-hearted Dobbins; and a character that the viewer hasn't seen for two hours returns unexpectedly from India, runs into Becky in Baden-Baden (!), and takes her back to India, presumably to live happily ever after. Nair unaccountably takes the edge off Thackeray's satire: determined to entertain her audience, she includes a couple of Bollywood-style numbers at the end to show where Becky's happiness lies; the film seems at least as interested in historical panoply, luscious costumes, and singing art songs as in the social analysis. The main problem is that Becky is too kind and sweet; she needs to be more consistently aggressive, and cat-like; she loves Rawdon to distraction, abandons the lecherous Steyne when her husband insists, and is happy with settling in colorful India at the end. What was the excuse for remaking this film? (2013)

Vénus Beauté Institut 1999 Tonie Marshall (France) 3.0 Nathalie Baye as Angèle, Bulle Ogier as the shop owner, Audrey Tautou in a small role. Nathalie Baye -- not exotic, haughty or mysterious, but matter-of-fact and rather delicate -- plays in this rather uneven film but it does have considerable charm. Baye plays Angele, a beautician whose love life is an endless string of one-night stands and dead ends. Angele claims to be 40 but looks about 45, and her life is pretty much what it was 20 years before -- revolving around romance and sex. But now the lack of any deeper attachment or ambition is beginning to become unseemly. The film takes its name from its principal location, the Venus Beauty Institute, a beauty parlor where Angele gives massages and does facials. Tonie Marshall, who wrote and directed, presents the beauty parlor as ground zero in a female world enslaved to cosmetic surfaces. The walls are pink, and each time someone opens the door, a sound is heard that sounds like a harp. Marshall suggests that Angele, like the other women in the film, has been sold a bill of goods. The movie is less interested in exploring the questions of why women buy it than in telling the story of Angele and her romance with Antoine (Samuel Le Bihan), a man who sees Angele on the street and decides that he's in love with her. He eventually emerges as a sensitive, impetuous guy who is willing to disengage from his fiancée and screw up his whole life just to be with Angele. Most interesting are Baye's scenes of Angele going about her daily life, going to work, dealing with customers, talking with her girlfriends. Baye plays Angèle not

as a sullen type but as a vivacious woman who is going through a rough patch. Every so often she comes back to life, though the energy is often reckless and self-destructive. Film has good Parisian atmosphere, the actresses are interesting and attractive, and it gives some insight into the western cult of surface beauté. (2004)

Vera Drake 2004 Mike Leigh (Britain) 3.5 Imelda Staunton as favorite aunt character, who takes care of everyone and also performs abortions on the side (“helping out young girls”), Phil Davis as her gruff but loyal husband, Peter Wight as the large detective inspector who performs his unpleasant job of arresting her with sensitivity and some pity, Jim Broadbent in cameo role as the judge. Film set in claustrophobic apartments of working class London in 1950 when the shortages of the war and bartering are still a part of London life. Vera is the ultimate kindly aunt who spends her day cleaning homes for the middle classes and taking care of various elderly and unfortunate people, including her rather unpleasant, invalid mother; her providing of abortions perhaps once a week she considers a continuation of her do-good deeds – she never pronounces the word ‘abortion,’ and tells everyone that she is just “helping out young girls.” She always uses the safe syringe method rather than dangerous coat-hangers, etc. Her interaction with her husband and two diverse children (the daughter Ethel is incredibly submissive and mousey) is genuine and convincing in the usual Leigh fashion; our vicarious participation in working class life of yore is real and convincing. Whole tenor of movie is transformed when Vera is arrested by the sympathetically presented police. Vera’s satisfaction with her lifestyle is suddenly transformed into an almost catatonic shock and passiveness, in which she just sits and sobs for the rest of the movie; she has no emotional resources to deal with the crisis; Leigh resorts to long held shots on her face in which nothing happens. Film shows her progress through the court process rather meticulously (interesting comparisons with the derivative American system), and ends with her going to prison for 2 ½ years (she will presumably be released in half the time). Leigh shows some hostility toward the moneyed middle classes, who have the means to secure safe medical abortions from established doctors, even though they are presumably illegal; the film hints that the British system tolerates the middle class abortions, while pursuing the informal working class ones when forced to. Leigh looks at Vera’s husband’s brother and his wife with a somewhat jaundiced eye: she is a social climber whose appearance and home look very middle class; and she is so horrified at Vera’s actions that she almost refuses to visit her home at Christmas (one wonders whether her true motivation is to minimize her relations with this working class milieu). (2005)

The Verdict 1982 Sidney Lumet (wr. David Mamet) 3.5 Paul Newman in his first elder role as washed up Boston lawyer who gets a second chance; Jack Warden looking paunchy as Newman’s former teacher and faithful friend; Charlotte Rampling as indecipherable *femme fatale* type who befriends Newman and turns out to be a turncoat; James Mason as the sly, rather dishonest lead lawyer in a major Establishment law firm; Milo O’Shea a hoot as opinionated judge; Lindsey Crouse touching in court as a woman with the key to the case. Famous courtroom drama that may not measure up to the standards of ‘To Kill a Mockingbird’, but which deserves its reputation. Newman is an over-the-hill alcoholic Boston lawyer with the good fortune of having a friend, Warden, who hands him a potentially lucrative medical malpractice suit; Newman has trouble getting out of his alcoholic haze, but without stopping his drinking, he pursues the case in slipshod fashion; while viewing the woman on the respirator who was paralyzed in a botched anesthesia job, he has some sort of revelation (moment of grace?) pointing toward redemption; a couple of surprising contretemps make it unlikely that he will prevail – his star witness is suborned by Mason’s law firm and disappears in the Caribbean, and it turns out that his new girlfriend, Rampling, is a spy for Mason keeping the latter informed about Newman’s strategy (what there is of it); he does however get lucky and find a nurse who can bring testimony to court that will prove negligence on the part of the anesthesiologists; surprisingly, Newman gets a favorable verdict in a jury decision that favors justice and pity for the defendant over the law, since the biased judge has already excluded the incriminating testimony; the film ends quietly with Newman taking a drink. The film moves at a stately pace with much attention to the urban environment and to Newman’s repetitive hesitations and anxieties. The film is shot with dark color, heavy shadows, dingy apartments (Newman doesn’t seem ever to clean his), old-fashioned public buildings with neo-classical columns and paneled walls; the archbishop’s residence (the

defendant in the case) is tasteful, solid, and traditional, as are the law offices of Mason's firm, where a team of about a dozen lawyers plot to overwhelm Newman. The narrative is just adequate for a legal thriller, but Newman does an excellent job of portraying a down-on-his-luck, lonely alcoholic who doesn't know which way to turn – the bleary-eyed stare, sitting in a chair for a long time while barely making a move, pouring a drink in a low glass with the ice cubes clinking, looking haplessly to Warden for instructions, etc. Although the film points toward the familiar Hollywood redemption theme, it does not quite happen: the viewer has the feeling that the damage is done and that the cash settlement won't really benefit anyone except the victim's sister and her husband; one wonders at the end how Newman will deal with the inevitable appeal filed by Mason; and Newman at the end has lost his girlfriend (she has betrayed him) and he is still drinking. A pretty pessimistic vision. (2008)

Vertigo 1958 Alfred Hitchcock 4.0 James Stewart, Kim Novak, Barbara Bel Geddes, Tom Helmore. Very deep, theme-rich, searching movie by Hitchcock. Moves at slow pace, especially in Jimmy Stewart's following of Madeline through streets of San Francisco, but works for attentive viewer, because there are themes and suggestions to keep one's mind busy; not to mention the expressive, sometimes Wagnerian score of Bernard Herrmann that evokes the obsessive mind of Stewart. The most theme-rich of all of Hitchcock's movies. Midge as mother and lover, and how the latter is turned into the former. Stewart's psychology: although a regular guy in the beginning, we know he has vertigo; and then he develops the obsession with Madeline that engulfs him in the second half of the movie. Stewart does wonderful job of portraying obsession; his trembling and stammering work extremely well, especially in the last scene when he expresses great passion and anguish for the situation he is in. The theme of passing through the "portals" of death (early conversation with Elster) evoking the quest of Orpheus for Euridice; further reference to passing into Hades through the mirrors (Ernie's? Judy's apartment; Madeleine's remark to JS on the coast) evoking imagery of Cocteau's movie. Stewart and Novak refer two times each to themselves as "wanderers," presumably men and women who wander the earth aimlessly and incomplete until they find their destined other half (romantic love). The air of mystery is further enhanced by using mission setting for the two crises. Novak does creditable job of acting, but stands out particularly as somewhat artificial icon of absolute feminine loveliness (the unforgettable scene in Ernie's when the camera caresses her features adoringly) that motivates Scotty's quest; Hitchcock was lucky that Vera Miles refused the part. Hitchcock worked with color scheme of red and green: Ernie's scene has deep red walls with stunning Novak dressed in green; when Judy appears to Scotty after being remade into Madeline, she does so in a green haze (enhanced by the green neon light outside the window), and then she steps out of it to Scotty. Plot is worked out ingeniously. The twist of the murder plot keeps the viewer thoroughly involved; Elster's use of his knowledge of Scotty's vertigo is convincing; Hitchcock's decision to reveal the real plot when Scotty leaves Judy's apartment (shows another run-through of the murder revealing the plot above the level of the steps where Scotty had to stop) works, since it takes the viewer's mind off the plot and leads us to focus on the mental state of Scotty, who from now on is acting in prime obsessive-compulsive way (forcing Judy to dress exactly like Madeline and to fix her hair exactly like hers); if Hitchcock had not revealed the facts at that point, viewer would have been focused on whether Judy was the same person as Madeline, etc. At this point Hitchcock also evokes another ancient myth – that of Pygmalion, who has fallen in love with Galatea and spends his time trying to remake her in his ideal image. Even though Novak's portrayal of Judy is excessively crass, she and Stewart are compelling in second part of the film; their predicament is gripping – Stewart is obsessed with recreating with what he thinks is the dead Madeline, and Judy is trapped between her love for Stewart and her need to hide her involvement in the murder plot. Ending (sudden, unexpected death of Judy), though psychologically complex, is satisfying, since we realize that Scotty is not in love with Judy (the real woman who played Madeline), but with Madeline, who is "dead," and who in fact has been killed off by Judy (and Elster). With what the two have been through and with the guilt that Judy is carrying for her participation in the murder plot, Judy's death at the end works. It is very difficult to imagine the two "living happily ever after." Hitchcock's thematic and poetic capabilities usually remain unspoken and implicit beneath the surface, but for once he expresses them confidently; hence the unique position of the film is his oeuvre. The movie's focus on sexual obsession probably kept movie from being a hit in the proper, "repressed" 50s, but works wonderfully now that we always look for sexual themes below the surface. (2005) (2016)

La veuve de Saint Pierre 2000 Patrice Leconte (France) 4.0 Juliette Binoche beautiful and emotional as the wife of the commander of the military detachment on St. Pierre (off the coast of Newfoundland); Daniel Auteuil as her husband, impassive, loyal to his wife, beau cavalier; Emir Kusturica (Yugoslavian director) as the condemned man that Binoche takes a liking to; Michel Duchaussoy as the rather fatuous, conformist governor of the colony, who does not have the courage to renege on the death penalty against Kusturica. Gripping psychological and existential film about a man who is condemned to death for killing a man with a knife while he is stone drunk; delays occur because St. Pierre does not have a guillotine (*la veuve*), which has to be brought in with considerable delay from Guadeloupe; while everybody waits, Binoche develops an attachment (non-sexual) for the condemned man with the full connivance of her husband; backed up by the townspeople who refuse to cooperate in any way in the execution, Auteuil refuses to deliver the prisoner, whereupon he is relieved and sent back to Saint Malo for trial for sedition; Kusturica is beheaded, and in the last scene Auteuil dies from the firing squad; Binoche is alone and has lost both of her men. "La veuve" has double relevancy – it is French colloquial for guillotine and of course signifies the widow that the guillotine will make. Cinematography is spectacular (in the fortress of Saint Louis in Newfoundland) with crashing waves (hostile attacks of fate), deep blue skies and foggy atmosphere, quaint cobblestone streets, very accurate historical costumes from about 1849, tall-masted ships standing outside the surf (there is no harbor). Film is in part a suspense thriller with our wondering whether Kusturica will be executed and what will happen to the Captain couple as a result. It is also a denunciation of capital punishment – how can you execute a man who becomes virtuous to the point of having little relationship with the man condemned for the crime? The most gripping part of the film is psychological and existential. Binoche's attachment to Kusturica (she has him working in her greenhouse and visiting the poor in the area) at first appears to be humanitarian and her interest in rehabilitating the condemned man (she succeeds brilliantly as Kusturica is a new man in his gentleness and attention to duty). From the director's mise-en-scene (mainly close-ups) and some dialogue it is soon apparent that she has a carnal passion for him – Binoche kisses him on the neck and cries out in terror. This does not deflect Auteuil, who is so committed to his wife (we have seen them making love on at least one occasion) that he does not doubt her. He is movingly loyal to her to the end, and he chooses love and loyalty over duty when he refuses to collaborate in Kusturica's execution. Music is quietly and touchingly symphonic. Wonderful classical film that takes the viewer into deeply moving drama, perhaps for the first time in Leconte's *oeuvre*. (2008)

Vicky Cristina Barcelona 2008 Woody Allen 3.0 Scarlett Johansson as young American woman Christina moving for a time to Barcelona – she is open to taking risks and abhors "American Puritanism and materialism"; Vicky Hall, a much abler actress playing Vicky, is her friend – she is opposite in the sense that she has a purpose – getting her MA in Catalan Studies –, she wants predictability in her life and the assurance that her man is waiting home for her; Javier Bardem as Spanish artist (his style is flamboyantly abstract) who is sexually aggressive and has a violently confrontational relationship with his ex-wife; Penelope Cruz is the ex-wife – a mercurial person with a violent temper, she switches wildly from Spanish to English. Latest Woody Allen entry that is better than 'Cassandra's Dream' and 'Scoop', but doesn't live up to the expectations raised by 'Match Point' (2005). The women are propositioned by Bardem; despite Vicky's outrage and sarcasm (amusing), both Vicky and Christian fall for him; Christina eventually moves in with him, she has sex with Cruz and with the two of them; film ends with Christina returned to the starting point of the move – she still doesn't know what she wants and she leaves; Vicky marries the yuppie chump from New York and resists leaving him for an unpredictable life of adventure, but her future is also uncertain. The film is mildly amusing – Hall's initial rejection of Bardem, Cruz's histrionics with her ex-husband, Christina's discomfiture when she gets sick on the verge of having sex with Bardem, etc.; it seems to draw from French bedroom farce with the changing of partners and amorous complications, and no credible resolution. But there is no rueful Woody Allen cracking one-liners, and absolutely no philosophical, humanistic observations (however pessimistic) as in 'Match Point' or the great films of the 80s. The film seems to come directly out of Allen's experiences. What do you do when you are deathly afraid of death? You cast around desperately for meaning in life, most notably in love and sex. On the one hand, you as author are drawn to a stable life with a stable love relationship like Vicky, but since you are pessimistic, you have no faith that it will

work out – you are always drawn by the siren call of adventure. On the other hand, the adventurous life also turns out to be a disappointment; sexual adventures are fun, but then you are left empty and you move on like Christina. No one has learned anything at the end of the film; no one lives happily ever after. We just continue with the search, but with no confidence that it will ever lead to satisfaction. Woody Allen is the never satisfied pessimist existentialist, faithful as ever to his mentor, Ingmar Bergman. (2009)

Victoria and Abdul 2017 Stephen Frears (Britain) 3.0 Picturesque, sometimes saccharine, comedy of the elderly Queen Victoria's relationship with Abdul Karim, her private secretary for the last years of her life. Judi Dench (as usual) nailing her role as the prickly, independent, affectionate old queen, in her own terms, lame, morbidly obese, and ill-tempered; Bollywood actor Ali Fazal as the eternally smiling, optimistic, and usually subservient immigrant from Muslim India; Tim Pigott-Smith (d. 2017) as the unflappable, ever vigilant Household head Sir Henry Ponsonby; Eddie Izzard as an ineffective, rather powerless Bertie (Prince of Wales); Michael Gambon in cameo role as prime minister Lord Salisbury; Adeel Akhtar as Abdul's heavily bearded second, who is the only one to express impatience with the Raj, the British dominion of India; Simon Callow in absurd impersonation of Giacomo Puccini. The movie exploits the popular fascination with Queen Victoria's loneliness after the death of Albert in 1861, picking up where 'Mrs. Brown' left off in 1997. With its shots of Osborne House, Balmoral Castle, the army of servants, and the snooty aristocrats surrounding the Queen, the film is picturesque, especially in the beginning, where the absurd pomp and circumstance of monarchy is satirized cleverly; stuffing herself into near unconsciousness at a state banquet out of loneliness and boredom, the queen is revived when she catches sight of the handsome, adoring Abdul. She makes him her private secretary, and keeps him on (for apparently 15 years) until her death in 1901. The narrative hook is the queen's plucky refusal to heed the campaign of her household (including her Scottish doctor who nosily monitors her bowel movements) and her son Bertie to separate the two and send Abdul and his companion Mohammed back to India. Dench of course is the star of the show; she even – most improbably – poses as the champion of diversity and acceptance by standing up to her entourage, reproofing them for their "racialism" and snobbery and reminding them that she is the boss and that further attempts to send Abdul away is "treason". Abdul, in contrast, seems almost to have no personality – good-looking, smiling, obedient, disinterested, seemingly having little ambition. The ending of the film is touching: Dench magically grows fatter and weaker and after her death, she lies in dignified state dressed in pure white. The film has no critique of the ill effects of British hegemony in India (and Pakistan); Mohammed is revolted by the things the British eat, but Abdul's fondest ambition is only to serve the monarch faithfully. Definitely entertaining to observe Dench and her indignant, stubborn resistance to the machinations of her courtiers. (March 2018)

La vie et rien d'autre 1989 Bertrand Tavernier (France) 3.5 Philippe Noiret as French army officer charged in 1920 with taking a census of French war dead from World War I; Sabine Azéma as wealthy, combative French woman looking for her missing husband; Pascale Vignal as sweet, young French institutrice looking for her missing boyfriend; Maurice Barrier usually a bit overwhelmed as Noiret's assistant. Memorable anti-war film that focuses on Noiret's research on identifying French war dead and on his rage at the human suffering imposed on millions of French people (including 1.5 million dead). The film's mise-en-scène is memorable: the front in Champagne a year and a half after the end of the war; the green, deceptively peaceful rolling hills and the forests; soldiers laboring to dig out a train that had been blown up inside a tunnel; family members milling about and looking for their sons' mementos laid out on a series of tables; the offices of the search detachment set up in temporary quarters (e.g., an antique factory sporting huge flanged wheels). The film essentially follows the dedicated, dogged work of Noiret, who increasingly vents his rage against the ravages of the war as the film progresses. A big-shot senator contacts him relentlessly about finding his son; the artists (not the most idealistic and unselfish of Frenchmen) are delighted that so many war dead means so much work designing and executing war memorials in every French commune; one commune sends a delegation to Noiret pleading with him to assign a couple of unknown dead soldiers to their commune so that they wouldn't lose face; the continual pressure of the government and the top army brass to designate an

unidentified dead soldier to be buried as the “unknown soldier” under the Arc of Triumph. In addition, he discovers other more personal secrets: Vignal’s boyfriend turns out to be a married man, and in fact by an extreme coincidence he was apparently Azéma’s husband; and the husband he discovers was a war profiteer who through his political influence was able to make a deal with the Germans to spare his factory. The story ends with everyone moving on: Vignal returns to her village apparently with a new boyfriend; Azéma, who at one point makes a (scarcely credible) play for union with Noiret, decides to move to Wisconsin (!) after he rejects her. The film ends with Noiret walking over the former battlefields while reciting a flowery letter he wrote her. The film moves at a slow, stately pace and some personal aspects of the story (e.g., Azéma’s impassioned declaration to Noiret) seem forced. However, an excellent performance by Noiret; and the humanist feeling behind the narrative surface is real and deeply felt – France celebrates after having its youth decimated by that war? (2012)

The Vikings 1958 Richard Fleischer (Kirk Douglas) 3.5 Kirk Douglas strutting, alpha male Viking warrior who loves to laugh, rape kiss his women, and fight; Tony Curtis as more subdued, civilized character (perhaps because he is English?), but who knows how to wield a sword in a pinch; Janet Leigh looking beautiful and pointy-breasted in an obviously Hollywood role as a Welsh princess who is the object of lust of almost all the men; Ernest Borgnine a bit over the top as the Viking king and father of Douglas – he laughs uproariously and loves to party. Despite some absurdities, an entertaining and ably made expensive 50s adventure epic with fabulous art direction and expertly staged fighting scenes, particularly the climactic one between Douglas and Curtis on the roof of a castle that ends with Douglas’ death. The narrative is quite complicated: perhaps the best way to follow it is to stay on the heels of Leigh, who is pledged to the Northumbrian king, the object of Douglas’ lust and also of Curtis’ devoted (50s romantic) love; the political plot – Curtis is considered the heir to the Northumbrian crown because he was the product of a Viking rape of the English queen – is confusing and not developed or resolved credibly. The story ends with the Vikings slaughtering English defenders of the Northumbrian castle, but somehow everyone is paying tribute to the brave Douglas at the end with no resolution of the relationship between the English and the Norsemen (the Vikings will settle down? Does Curtis take his “rightful” place as king of Northumbria?) Rather touching that Curtis hands swords to both Borgnine and Douglas when they die – being good Norse warriors, they want to die with a sword in their hands so they can enter Valhalla. Some of the acting is annoying: Douglas always goes overboard dominating the screen, Leigh does not have much to do, and the Northumbrian king (Frank Thring) is inexplicably effeminate. But the film holds the viewer’s interest for the entire two hours. The on-location cinematography is beautiful and picturesque, particularly the shots of the Viking ships returning to a real Norwegian fjord after a successful raid; they are announced to the people of the Norse village by men perched atop tall towers blowing on long, curved horns. The Viking armor and costumes seem authentic; the pièce de résistance is the three long ships that were copied from the original ones in the Oslo museum; shots of them sailing in the fjord, approaching the English coast, or of the men rhythmically rowing are all striking. Pictures of northern England in the 10th (?) century however are incredibly genteel – characters wear brightly colored, pressed clothes and have slicked back hair; the men are clean shaven. With the exception of the famous scene in which Curtis’ hawk tears out Douglas’ eye, the film is not as bloody as its reputation. Fun to watch with much attention to visual and anthropological accuracy and a lot of epic scenery and military action; not much however to stimulate the minds of the viewers. (2011)

Village of the Damned 1960 Wolf Rilla (Britain) 3.0 George Sanders unusually avuncular but stubborn with an excess confidence in his pedagogical abilities; Barbara Shelley as straight 50s housewife, English-style; Martin Stephens creepily effective as “their” son David (he appears in “The Innocents” in 1961); Laurence Naismith as also avuncular village doctor who resembles Alistair Sim. Low-key space invasion thriller where the threatening beings resemble humans closely: on a pleasant day in the bucolic English countryside all living things fall asleep, and they reawaken only after every child-bearing woman in the village is impregnated. After they are born, the children establish themselves as different from the other village children: they are smarter, precocious, larger, and are all wearing thick blond wigs; they communicate among themselves by telepathy (one one of them learns to do something, all of them know even though they were not originally present) and once they reach about ten they can

read the minds of the humans; they are suspicious of humans who they think will try to destroy them, and they protect themselves with measured violence (e.g., when confronted by a group of villagers carrying pitchforks and torches like ‘Frankenstein’, they strike at only the leader, allowing the others to disperse); when they confront a perceived enemy, they just stare (only David ever speaks) and their eyes turn an eerie white with a dark dot in the middle. The story ends sacrificially: Sanders decides to blow them (and himself) up with a timed dynamite bomb in his briefcase; he strongly images a brick wall while he stands in front of the children to keep them from reading his mind; the film ends with the destruction of the house (not very convincing special effects) with the disembodied eyes scurrying away presumably to prepare a sequel; terrorist suicidal bombers are not an exclusively Muslim phenomenon. The film is tightly directed and beautifully restored. The investigation of the military authorities of the “dead” area of the village is intriguing, and the way the children move in a tight group (tighter when they are ready to act) and stare is eerie, if sometimes a little hokey. Some of the film’s aspects certainly touched a 50s nerves in Britain and the USA: the reference to the Virgin’s Immaculate Conception in the conception of the children; the presence of a dozen unaccounted for pregnancies in pre-60s England; the transfer of the US 50s sci-fi approach to the English countryside – we are invaded from outer space, we don’t know exactly what it is, the people threatening us look close to normal (but there is something eerily different about them) we rely upon the military to bail us out (doesn’t help much in this case); the Russians are treated as fellow sufferers. The musical soundtrack is often distracting and sometimes unconsciously humorous. Overall, entertaining and sometimes intriguing. (2011)

Vincere 2009 Marco Bellocchio (Italy) 3.5 Filippo Timi as young Benito Mussolini with jutting chin, ferocious energy, emotional violence, unquenchable lust for power, admiration for Napoleon, violently favors Italy’s participation in World War I (also plays his son Benito as a young adult); Giovanna Mezzogiorno equally ferocious, hugely passionate, single-minded, obsessive mother and lover as first wife Ida; Michele Cescon as Rachele Mussolini; Corrado Invernizzi as sympathetic psychiatrist that tries to help Ida. Melodramatic, grandiloquent, hugely operatic treatment of the love affair and marriage between the young Mussolini and Ida Dalser and the catastrophic consequences of his breaking with her and hiding their relationship so he can present his marriage to his second wife Rachele to the Italian nation as his only one. The first half of the film focuses on the fierce political passions of the ambitious young Mussolini and the equally fierce sexuality, possessiveness, and maternal instincts of his passionate mistress; the second part of the film is less interesting, since it consists primarily of shots of Ida locked in insane asylums shouting and protesting against the Duce’s treatment of her and their son, Benito; the film ends with Ida still alone and young Benito mentally disturbed and imitating grotesquely the speaking style of his father (he dies young in a mental hospital), while imitation newsreel footage shows a bronze head of the Duce being crushed. Most of the film is presented like an Italian opera. Highly theatrical set pieces; darkly lit scenes, hyper close-ups, deep light and shadow contrasts; accompanied by extremely dramatic music – pulsating strings, ominous horns, disturbing voices, agitated strings and clarinets, bells playing. One time Ida sells all of her possessions to help pay for her lover’s new newspaper, leaves the money on the hall table of the apartment she shares with Mussolini, and waits for him lying naked in her bed like a sacrificial offering. Another lurid and exciting scene has her enter a Fascist monument to murder an associate of Mussolini; she is violently arrested before she can fire a shot and confined naked to a manicomio under the care of hard-nosed, indifferent nuns. In another scene Ida in a flowing white gown climbs up a large window grid with snowflakes falling all around and throws notes to her son through the bars. And in a later escape attempt she walks down the deserted hallways of a clinic in a borrowed nun’s habit while lightning flashes and thunder crashes outside the building. Some may consider the sensational mise-en-scene over the top, but it never fails to astonish. The dramatic scenes of the narrative are often intercut with contemporary film footage of Mussolini and contemporary military and political songs to place the film in its historical setting. Although rather repetitious toward the end, a movingly tragic story of injustice. An eloquent demonstration of the adage, “Inferno non conosce furia come una donna disprezzata”, although Ida’s furia got her nothing but grief and rejection. (2012)

The Virgin Spring 1960 Ingmar Bergman (Sweden) 4.0 Max von Sydow young and ruggedly handsome as the taciturn, commanding Swedish knight Töre, who passionately loves his daughter; Birgitta Valberg as Märeta, the pious mother Karin; Birgitta Petersson as the beautiful, self-centered, innocent Karin raped and murdered by herdsmen on the way to church through the forest; overacting Gunnel Lindblom as the tortured, restless servant girl worshipper of Odin and intensely jealous of Karin. Classic Bergman film that for once does not seek to make metaphysical points, but is generally content to tell a stunning melodramatic story in a striking cinematic style. The setting is a gentle, forested landscape with rushing, pure streams, a highly realistic farm, and herdsmen who shepherd a flock of goats; the script goes to some pains to depict medieval Sweden as still in transition from paganism (Lindblom praying to Odin in resentment against the Christian landowners) to Christianity (both Töre and Märeta are pious Christians reciting their prayers faithfully – the wife inflicts pain on herself, something disapproved of by her husband). Frightening contrast between the innocence and purity of Karin and the senseless violence inflicted on her by the goatherds (one of the three is a little boy who is just a witness). The violence is turned around by Töre, who premeditatedly murders all three of the guilty ones (even the little boy) in a ritual of revenge after careful preparation including bathing and lashing himself with birch branches. In Bergman's universe, violence and revenge lurks just under the surface of civilization and Christian piety, ready to emerge dominant in a genuine existential emergency (the murder of one's daughter). Many of the characters experience profound guilt – Lindblom because she had wished the death of the beautiful Karin, the little boy because of his vicarious participation in the crime, the two guilty herdsmen, and even Töre since he realizes that he has violated the Christian prohibition against killing. After the revenge murders, the film has a quietly optimistic (?) ending: Töre and Märeta go to retrieve the body of Karin, and after Töre, his back turned to the camera in an existential, Bergmanian moment, questions the ways of God and His seeming indifference to the suffering of men, he calms down and vows to build a church "of stone and mortar" on the site of his daughter's death in atonement for his sins, and a (miraculous?) spring surges out of the ground where Karin's body was lying. The ending belies Bergman's usual existential despair. The film moves slowly and quietly and without a music soundtrack; the lovely, highly contrasted images of Sven Nykvist (including exquisitely textured close-ups) command one's attention and sympathy; all help immerse the viewer in the poetic, quietly dramatic experience. Lindblom's restless character and the obvious symbolism (raven, water, fire) in parts of the film are sometimes distracting. Lovely film imbued with a pessimistic view of human life. (2014)

The Virgin Suicides 1999 Sofia Coppola 3.0 Moody treatment of famous novel material about the suicide of five girls in upper middle class Catholic family. Kathleen Turner and James Woods play very repressive parents; in some degree their repressiveness is responsible for the disaster. Kirsten Dunst excellent as Lux, the daughter who yearns for bursting out of the cocoon and (probably) leads her sisters to suicide. Parents' blindness is off-putting. Style is dreamy, meandering, beautiful, poetic with little narrative drive and indistinct points. Early adolescence as a time of unconscious privileged beauty? Or is it a time of misery, especially for girls? All soft-edged focusing on mood and aesthetics; message never clear. (2004)

The Visitor 2007 Tom McCarthy 3.0 Richard Jenkins (AA nomination) in the role of his career as lonely, introspective college professor who is coaxed out of his isolation; Haaz Sleiman as charismatically pleasant Syrian illegal living in New York; Danai Gurira as his pretty, suspicious, defensive girlfriend from Senegal; Hiam Abbass as Haaz's pretty, sensitive mother falling perhaps in love with Jenkins but devoted first to her son. Entertaining, well-made Independent movie with a message. Jenkins is a taciturn, burnt-out college professor in a Connecticut college who has lost his wife; his state of mind is early depicted by his monotone cruelty to his piano teacher and his utter indifference to his students, one of whom he brushes off when he tries to explain why his paper is late; when entering his New York pied-à-terre, he is shocked to find it occupied by an immigrant, dark-skinned couple (both, it turns out, illegal); not to be phased, he makes friends with the husband, while Gurira remains aloof; Jenkins starts to come out of his shell as he learns to play the African drums under Haaz's guidance; things take a turn for the worse when Haaz is arrested and incarcerated in a deportation detention center; Jenkins tries his best to get him out, in the meantime falling in love with Haaz's charming mother who

arrives from Michigan to find out what happened to her son; no happy ending as Haaz's is deported and the mother abandons her budding love affair with Jenkins to follow her son back to Syria; the last frame has Jenkins drumming away in Central Park with no apparent intention of returning to his teaching job. The film has the usual charming, beautifully photographed and tastefully framed style and the real, believable characters in normal life circumstances that we expect from McCarthy's films. Haaz's passionate and charismatic performance helps the viewer understand that a character as repressed as Jenkins would make a major change in his life. Jenkins' low-key and subtle performance carries the movie through, making it believable that he would not immediately call the police when he discovers squatters in his apartment and that he would bond strongly to Haaz through a most unprofessional activity like African drumming, and then become attracted to his mother. Perhaps the least satisfactory part of the film is the highly critical focus on the actions of the immigration authorities in the last third of the film: although it is easy to empathize with the plight of the unfortunate illegal immigrant, the cards are perhaps excessively stacked against the bureaucrats – the three immigrants are such attractive, kind, thoughtful, and responsible citizens, while the immigration employees are curt and unfeeling behind their impenetrable official wall. They even deport their detainees without telling the relatives. Nevertheless, an entertaining, well-made film that is on the side of the angels. (2011)

I Vitelloni 1953 Federico Fellini (Italy) 4.0 Franco Fabrizi as Fausto, the Lothario of the Vitelloni (slabs of veal); Eleonora Ruffo as his pretty, innocent, and long-suffering wife; Riccardo Fellini (brother) plays Riccardo the singer of the group; Franco Interlenghi plays Moraldo, the pensive stand-in for Fellini, who is finally able to leave town in the end. Amazingly resonant film about five young guys in postwar Rimini who seem to have little ambition and refuse to grow up. They go to beauty contests and vaudeville shows, dance in the carnival, wander around the streets, mooch off their parents and their siblings, and talk about getting jobs but rarely do anything about it. Film focuses on Fausto who has to marry his pregnant girlfriend, then lives with her parents, gets a job through his father-in-law in a religious articles store (photographed in cluttered, phantasmagoric detail and treated with affectionate comedy). He can't stop philandering, although he has little success; his attempt to seduce the wife of the owner of the store where he works is painful and awkward, and he is fired. Film ends with a long sequence in which Ruffo runs away with the couple's new baby; it turns out that she has spent the whole time at Fausto's father's house; after dad gives adult Fausto a beating with his belt, the lovers are reunited, and they stroll off in a fog of romance, although no viewer believes that Fausto will change his ways. Script also focuses on the quiet Alberto, who writes incredibly turgid lines for his play, and when he thinks he has a break with a famous actor in town, it turns out the latter is a homosexual lusting after him. Moraldo also is featured as the youngest and most thoughtful of the five; he mostly observes what the others are doing; in the end when he decides to leave town, the only person to see him off at the train station is a little boy who admires him. Film is obviously autobiographical: Fellini did not film the movie in hometown Rimini, since he was afraid that his old friends who stayed behind in dumb jobs would think he was condescending. Film stands out for the exactness and depth of its characterization; its humor, in which he satirizes the idle worthlessness of the five; and yet also the deep affection that Fellini feels for his characters and the respect with which he treats them. Also present are the fantastic images that stand out in his later films: the large statue of an angel that Fausto and Moraldo steal from the religious articles shop; the line of boys in clerical robes and hats, who pass in front of the camera along the beach; the large *papier maché* head that the drunken Alberto carries away from the carnival ball. Nino Rota's colorful score alternates between humorous circus-like music and romantic strings: it adds much to the atmosphere of the film. (2008)

Viva Max 1969 Jerry Paris 2.5 Peter Ustinov playing it over the top with a marginally competent Mexican accent; Pamela Tiffin as Texas bimbo with ugly blonde wig – she becomes Max's confidante; Jonathan Winters as foolish appliance store owner who is also a general in the comically incompetent Texas national Guard; John Astin a bit muggy and fussy as General Ustinov's sergeant – he has a better Mexican accent than Ustinov; Harry Morgan playing it fairly straight as the highly annoyed, blustering chief of police of San Antonio; Keenan Wynn as equally blustering, tough-talking regular army general in charge of the National Guard operation against the defenders of the Alamo; Kenneth Mars;

Alice Ghostley as Hattie, a local Texan who thinks the invaders are Chinese Communists – “You pink chink!” A farce. Ustinov leads 87 men over the border to reoccupy the Alamo for personal reasons – his mistress had made the crack that his men wouldn’t follow him into a whorehouse. A lot of reasonably amusing situations fertilized by Texas accents. The password for getting into the occupied Alamo is “John Wayne” with counter-password “Richard Widmark” (reference to the 1960 film). Sergeant prepares a place for Ustinov to make out with Tiffin, since “the men expect it”! When the State Department representative insists that Ustinov leave the Alamo immediately, he responds that he must stay as long as the original defenders of the Alamo held out against Santa Anna. In speech to his men before the expected attack of the “Norteamericanos”, Ustinov tells the soldiers that the Americans have “hee-droh-hen” bombs, but they are free to leave if they will just step over the line he draws in the dirt (no one does since the adjutant threatens the men with a pistol). Meanwhile, Winters briefs his officers, one of whom is playing with a pink bird that squeaks. Neither side has any ammunition. When the men have the opportunity to step over the line without the danger of being shot, all the men do so except for the sergeant. All ends happily when Ustinov’s men follow him in an advance on some comical Special Forces enthusiasts, and Wynn and Morgan bluster at one another. Mildly amusing farce entertaining mainly for the appearance of a gaggle of veteran actors. (2010)

Volver 2006 Pedro Almodovar (Spain) 4.0 Penelope Cruz as busy, energetic, fast-talking housewife in Madrid – this film is probably her best performance; Carmen Maura as her mother, who although she is supposed to be dead (the film starts with the women polishing and cleaning her gravestone), appears one-quarter through the film; Lola Dueñas as Carmen’s sister, who like all the women in the family, has no luck with men; Blanca Portillo as the woman who is a pillar of strength and caring in the family – it turns out she has cancer; Yohana Cobo as Cruz’s teenage daughter who seems devoted to her mother. Film set in contemporary Spain in a village in La Mancha and in Madrid where Cruz lives with her husband. Plot events are baroque (complicated), the main ones being 1) Cobo kills her stepfather with a knife (she doesn’t know at the time that he is just her stepfather) when he tries to have sex with her, and Cruz has to store his body in a freezer locker in a restaurant that she “takes over”; 2) Maura is seen four years after her supposed burial taking care of Aunt Paula, but then it turns out she is not a ghost, but that it was really her sister who had died in the fire (everyone thought her sister had run away afterwards), and she has been hiding out, most of the time in Paula’s house! Plot events move very fast with a lot of surprises: eventually Cruz manages to bury her (no good for nothing) husband’s body in a hole near her home village; and Portillo gets cancer and retires to her house to die; Cruz reveals to the viewer that her father had sexually abused her and that thus her daughter was also her sister! The daughter never finds out. In any case, the plot details are pretty irrelevant; they are just a framework on which to hang the director’s tribute to the women who raised him. The women in the village are in charge of the transmission of life from generation to generation: they produce new life, nurture it, and also take care of the graves of the dead (and often talk about them as if they were still alive). All the women are struggling to make life work. The men are useless or worse than useless (father molests Cruz, Cruz’s husband tries to molest her daughter, etc.), and play little part in the film. Dueñas is the sensible sister, who gets along with her “dead” mother, disguising her as a “Russian” helper in her illegal hair salon, doesn’t get upset about her mother preferring Cruz, etc. Portillo takes care of her mother, and cares deeply about the well-being of the other women in the family. Cruz is perhaps the most self-centered of the women, but she is also always interacting with the other women; and she delivers an able and emotional version of Carlos Gardel’s “Volver”. Maura, for all of her unhappiness with her husband (the father of her granddaughter!), is the staff of life, supporting Auntie Paula in her dotage, and then when Portillo retires to her death bed, Maura sneaks over to her house (the town still thinks that she is dead and thus a ghost) to be with her until she dies. The point of the film emerges so clearly that the viewer doesn’t mind the Byzantine plot complications. The author’s style is as usual flamboyant and baroque – tracking shots (one of them backwards!), but particularly his Technicolor style color schemes – sometimes decorative backgrounds (two women exchanging on a bench with busy murals in the background) and lurid color schemes, especially yellows, golds, and oranges, but also sometimes cool blues and greens. Through all this the author manages to evince laughter, smiles, and little thrills of

sympathy for these wonderful women. The movie makes you appreciate your mother and miss her.
(2007)

Vivre Sa Vie 1962 Jean-Luc Godard (France) 3.0 Anna Karina. One of more accessible of Godard's 60s films. Story about young, pretty woman who is vaguely dissatisfied with her life (she appears to have a child by her lover), who apparently wants independence and autonomy, but whose efforts are diverted (by a perverted capitalistic society that turns everything into money) into prostitution. Film indulges in denunciation of prostitution, which although it does give a certain independence, makes the girl a slave of the pimp (he constantly tells her that she has to serve every customer who applies regardless of how disgusting); film ends very abruptly (why?) with the shooting of Nana by her pimp, who has sold her to another one. Karina is mysteriously beautiful with dark, short 60s hair with little curls in front of the ears; she has a wan smile that protects her from revealing too much to her friends and to her viewers. But her beauty and seriousness make the viewer root for her and thus get involved in the movie. Film quite "New Wave." Conversations are often filmed with us seeing only the backs of talking heads; or in one conversation with pimp, camera oscillates from side to side in back of one head to occasionally gain sight of the other. Film in 12 "tableaux" that are announced by cards at the beginning of each; the continuity from one to the other is sometimes tenuous, e.g., why in the third one is Anna Karina being pursued by men in the courtyard of a cheap apartment house (she hasn't paid her rent)? I.e., lots of jump cuts. Also two involved philosophical conversations – the one when Anna talks about being "responsable" (shades of existentialism?) not so bad (but since when does a barely educated prostitute talk Sartre?), but the one in which the elderly gentlemen rattles on about language and thought and Hegelianism and how truth emerges out of the experience of error is endless with the most tenuous relationship with the theme (?) of the movie. There is also a mime performance by one of Nana's friends, and she does a little dance routine that is ignored by a fellow at a pool table; but he apparently falls in love with her, but the film ends brutally and abruptly with her murder. Also one section where a narrator's voiceover gives us all the dry facts about the profession of prostitution in sociological jargon. Movie works fairly well mainly because of Karina – she is point of focus, and we care about her despite Godard's distancing throughout. (2006)

Waiting for Guffman 1996 Christopher Guest 3.5 C. Guest, Fred Willard, Catherine O'Hara, Eugene Levy, Parker Posey, Bob Balaban. Funny (although not hilarious) satire of middle America and high school musical productions, as the city fathers and mothers of Blaine, Missouri, put on a sesquicentennial production in the local high school auditorium. Tone is somewhat affectionate and does not indulge in full-fledged ridicule of *This is Spinal Tap*; more like *Best in Show* and *A Mighty Wind*. Guest is excellent as is-he-gay-or-isn't-he Corky (he allegedly has a wife but no one has ever seen her, and he buys clothes for her). Balaban is music director who is in competition with Guest; he leads a good orchestra, but is ineffectual in his confrontations with Guest. Levy his usual hilarious, over the edge character, a dentist who aspires to be an entertainer; his huge glasses are a continuous source of entertainment; he ends up quitting his dental practice and doing song and joke routines in Miami Beach for old folks' homes. Willard and O'Hara are equally start-struck, and after hilarious, enthusiastic performances in the *Red, White, and Blaine*, they quit their travel business and go to L.A., where they have a bit part in a movie (?), but they haven't even been able to buy a car. Parker Posey is semi-tragic young woman, whose father is in prison and who works in a Dairy Queen and who is obviously hoping that success of the musical will get her out of her dead-end life; she tugs at your heart, and you feel for her at the end, when the production does not move on to Broadway (Corky had raised their hopes, but the Broadway producer's assistant Guffman never shows up); her father returns with early parole, and she is stuck again at the Dairy Queen. Film ends with performance of the musical – most of the songs, written by Guest et al., are pretty good and pretty well performed, although sometimes with unintended hilarity. Somewhat like *A Mighty Wind*, in that the author has too much affection for his characters to be as funny as he could. Humor is very subtle, and if you aren't fairly alert and knowledgeable of music, history of the theater, etc., you will miss a lot of the laughs. (2005)

Wake in Fright 1971 Ted Kotcheff (Australia) 4.0 Gary Bond as mild-mannered, isolated, Peter O'Toole look-a-like, teaching school in the desert, who wants to spend Christmas vacation in Sydney with his sexy girlfriend (we see her clad in a bathing suit emerging from the surf in a couple of flashback shots); Donald Pleasence as educated-sounding doctor in Outback town of Yabba (really Broken Hill) -- he is really an alcoholic, drunken lout like most of his local buddies; Chips Rafferty as avuncular, hospitable police sergeant in Yabba, who, a little like Mephistopheles, slyly introduces Bond to the drinking, gambling, and hunting male culture of his city. Hard-to-watch film from the beginning of the Australian Renaissance that leaves a powerful, lasting impression. The highly civilized Bond stumbles stepwise into a nightmarishly magnified version of Australian male society, where the guys spend their time gambling, joking, laughing uproariously, and drinking enormous quantities of beer; barely a minute passes without the pop of another tab being pulled off an aluminum beer can and another bloke gulping down the whole container without taking a breath, whether in the outback, on a train, in a home, or in the bar. The guys are extremely hospitable, offering acquaintances to buy them another beer even before they finish the one they are drinking. The women play a small role in the film: the wives sitting off to the side in the gambling club, one young woman contributing to Bond's perversion by initiating sex with him; one bloke opines how strange it is that Bond would rather talk with a woman than drink beer with his mates. Bond's true decline begins when he hooks up with four buddies, one of which is the doctor: they gulp down beer after beer, they joke noisily and shout lustily, they get into violent fights tearing apart buildings and knocking out windows. The low point comes when they pull out their rifles to go 'roo (kangaroo) hunting, and the viewer has to watch both a day- and a night episode of the jerks killing and terrorizing the poor marsupials (there can be little doubt that the footage is from a real kangaroo hunt). The filming is dynamic and oppressive -- a lot of editing, close-ups of the sweaty, dirty, unshaven men and the flat, scrubby, featureless (except for the mining tailings) landscape. Bond sinks deeper and deeper into corruption -- when he tries to hitchhike out of Yabba, he is given a ride that returns him inadvertently to the same town; he then goes to Pleasence's shack to kill him, but instead he tries to commit suicide; when that fails and he is released from the hospital, he cleans himself up, returns on the train to his starting point (blokes drinking on the train, of course), and tells the local (beer-drinking) bartender that his vacation was great and he is ready to go back to work. Bond has descended into the barbarian depths of his soul, and chastened by the experience, he appears to be glad to be back in civilization. The film reminds one of other Aussie movies in the 70s that comment on the thin line separating the civilized urban culture of the country from wilderness, barbarism, and chaos. This time the threat comes from Australian male society itself instead of the wilderness, the magic of Aborigines, etc. The film is a sardonic put-down of the traditional image of the hospitable, comradely Australian male, who drinks his beer, but knows when to stop. (2014)

Walk the Line 2005 James Mangold 3.0 Joaquin Phoenix as intense and quivery Johnny Cash, scarred in childhood (his "better" brother died in a sawmill accident and not him) and thus driven to greatness, Reese Witherspoon as sassy and plucky June Carter who resists Cash's pleas for marriage but finally gives in at the end of the film, Ginnifer Goodwin as Cash's wife who wants the middle class life and reproaches him constantly for his deficiencies, Robert Patrick as Cash's judgmental, condemnatory father who drives Cash to prescription pill use and presumably to greatness. Good musical biopic à la Hollywood set in the South of post-World War II (much like Loretta Lynn and Ray Charles), following most of the conventions of the genre. Cash has difficult childhood, learns music by singing his mother's hymnal (she with her beehive hair a very colorless character), plunges into personal difficulties (use of prescription pills and once arrest by the feds for importing the pills from Mexico) because of his father's condemnation, and while he prospers musically and commercially, he finds potential redemption (à la Hollywood) in the love of a sincere woman, and after great difficulties, she finally agrees to marry him – on stage after turning him down many times (they then live happily ever after married and performing together for 35 years). Phoenix performs Cash's songs himself, and we hear Cash's and Carter's actual voices only in the crawl at the end; Phoenix does good job, but his voice just doesn't have the warmth and bass resonance of Johnny Cash; Witherspoon does perhaps better in evoking the sass and verve of June Carter. Film has the virtue of a good romance – Carter loves Cash but is (justifiably) skeptical of him; and when Johnny asks her to marry him –perhaps for the 50th time – on stage, she finally accepts him; we

are pretty thrilled; we are also touched that June's mother and father accept Johnny more readily than his own parents. We don't learn much about Cash's music (origins, influences, etc.), even though we hear some of Elvis and Jerry Lee Lewis who perform on stage with him. Film is definitely entertaining and involves us in its narrative arc especially after Cash gets serious about Carter; we could use more insight in the music and less dependence on Hollywood clichés. (2006)

Walkabout 1971 Nicholas Roeg (Australia) 3.0 Jenny Agutter, David Gulpilil. Film about survival in the Australian outback. Two children (one the fetching Agutter, beautiful in small-breasted adolescent way, who has a frontal nude scene in last part of film) taken into desert by father supposedly for picnic, but then he tries to kill them and he commits suicide by burning himself up! Children suffer desert hardships, but are saved from death by aborigine boy on his adolescent walkabout; he demonstrates his ability to survive in the harsh environment by spearing kangaroos, drinking water out of the ground, etc. Some beautiful photography of nature; sometimes film comes across as tribute to Australian nature, which is indeed very beautiful. Sometimes heavy-handed comparison between alienated *homo australicus* in the city (suicide, inability to survive in a natural environment, Agutter's obvious alienation at end of film when she is married to an accountant, who blathers on about promotions at the office) and a kind of Rousseauist nature, which is pure, beautiful and uncorrupted. Gulpilil falls in love with Agutter, courts her with paint and dance, and when she (in her civilized prudery?) does not respond to him, he hangs himself. Tragic end to the love story contrasted with glimpse of Agutter's unhappiness in the final scene. (2005)

Walking and Talking 1996 Nicole Holofcener 3.5 Catherine Keener as insecure, but light-hearted single Manhattan woman very attached to her elderly cat; Anne Heche gloriously blond and smooth-skinned as Keener's friend from childhood; Todd Fields as mellow, somewhat over-attentive live-in-boyfriend of Heche – he plans to marry her; Liev Schreiber amusing although physically unattractive ex-boyfriend of Keener – he admits he is addicted to pornography; Kevin Corrigan in stand-out male performance as Keener's "ugly", short-term boyfriend who is a gore freak. Engaging, pleasant, amusing, insightful – although never particularly dramatic – film about the trials and tribulations of young urban women in the 90s. The film centers on Keener's and Heche's friendship – from giggly togetherness as pre-adolescents, to quiet alienation, to reconciliation at the end of the film. Keener, who has problems in her relationships with men, becomes a bit unhinged when Heche decides to turn her long-term relationship with the adoring Field into marriage; she goes from one little crisis to another – the sickness and death of her beloved cat, the ambiguities of her relationship with her ex-boyfriend Schreiber, her abortive relationship with Corrigan; meanwhile, Heche begins to have her doubts about marrying Field and starts to behave erratically and insensitively; everything is more or less patched up in the end with Field and Heche going through with their wedding, with Keener seriously considering getting back together with the ne'er-do well ex-boyfriend, and with the two friends patching up their relationship in a heartfelt hug. As in her subsequent films, nothing much happens in 'Walking' aside from the emotional and relationship difficulties of the main characters – always women. But the film stands out for its light-hearted humor – Heche's tribulations with her clients in psychological counseling (she fantasizes sex with one, another claims he sees red devils, admitting later that he invented them to make himself more interesting); Keener's hilarious interaction with her own dead-pan counselor; Keener's indignant reaction to Schreiber's addiction to pornography ("I've already seen these videos"); and his phone sex with a woman in California that he has never met; Keener's reaction to the special effects-gore hobby that fascinates Corrigan; Keener's indignation at being dropped by Corrigan after "I had sex with you!"); Heche's horrified reaction to a mole that she discovers on her boyfriend's chest and then his (backfiring) decision to present it to her in a jewelry box when they tentatively decide to reconcile, etc. The film's disposition is inevitably sunny; even the most intractable-seeming problems are resolved without too much blood spilled – Heche and Field are reconciled with amusing difficulty, Keener comes to terms slowly with her rejection by Corrigan, Schreiber is able to convince his phone sex partner that they should not pursue their relationship when she comes to visit him in New York, etc. Much of the appeal of the film comes from the charming light-heartedness of the two principal actresses, who constantly evoke not only chuckles and laughs but also moments of recognition from the viewer. Film has wonderful beginning

and perhaps drags in a few passages. Holofcener, Keener and Heche comprise an irresistible combination. (2010; 2015)

Waltz with Bashir 2008 Ari Folman (Italy) 3.5 The voices of various subjects of Folman's interviews as he seeks to understand how the massacres of Palestinian citizens occurred in Beirut during the Israeli-Lebanon War in 1982; the entire film is animated, except the final sequences, which are documentary footage of the swollen bodies of the victims. The film is an investigative piece, in which Folman, who has forgotten what he did and what happened during his service in Lebanon, is obsessed with finding out; he travels to Holland to question an old war buddy, then back to Israel, where he interviews several of his former army friends and approximately three psychologists, who help him piece together the events. His conclusion: the Christian militia was responsible for the massacre as an act of revenge for the assassination of their leader, Bashir, and that the Israeli soldiers in the vicinity were at least passive and indifferent as they stood in the middle distance observing events, and that they might even have been directly involved by firing flares to facilitate the killings, etc. The eloquent explanation for Folman's memory gaps involves his childhood horror at the story of the death camps and his subsequent inability to admit that Jews could participate in something similar. The animation is distinctive and memorable: evocative, realistic drawing, but minimalist blocking and face movements while the participants respond to Folman's questions. The film opens with a memorable sequence of vicious, angry dogs racing through the streets of a city and then surrounding the apartment of a friend of Folman; it turns out that the sequence represents a dream that the friend has regularly, since he was ordered by his commander to kill all the dogs in a Palestinian city the Israelis were patrolling. Some of the animated sequences are realistic representations of what really happened, such as the killing in an orchard of a kid who was firing rocket propelled grenades at the Israeli soldiers, or the phantasmagoric visit of Folman to his home city after a month at the front. More are representations of dreams and hallucinations the different interlocutors experienced: the oft repeated sequence of naked Israeli soldiers rising from the sea, dressing on the shore, and walking down the streets of Beirut past ghost-like representations of dead Palestinian civilians; an Israeli soldier escapes from an exploded patrol boat and is "rescued" when he lies on the body of a female figure who is half seductress and half mother; a soldier seizes an automatic rifle from one of his fellows and then stumbles into a contested street surrounded by portraits of the Christian leader Bashir, where he wildly fires his weapon in all directions. The film definitely gets under your skin. It depicts the horror of warfare, where even the "good guys" don't go out of their way to prevent atrocities; it portrays the holes in a man's memory and the difficulties of the effort to recall events accurately; it shows the traumatic impact of such violence on the very young men who are sent into battle. (2012)

The War of the Roses 1989 Danny DeVito 3.0 DeVito as worldly wise divorce lawyer who tells the story and advises his listener to be very generous in divorce, Michael Douglas as Oliver Rose, a successful lawyer whose erotic fascination for his wife turns to hatred, Kathleen Turner as wife who for reasons not explained to the audience, develops an intense dislike for her husband (his sleeping face so disturbs her that she inexplicably sticks two fingers up his nostrils) and demands a divorce....with drastic unforeseen consequences. A black comedy that toward the end is on the verge of going over the top. The two more or less agree to a divorce, but the combat begins when both refuse to cede the house – she insists it is all hers since she spent most of their marriage decorating it, and he insists it is his since he paid for it. Some moments when actually you are not sure whether to laugh or be horrified – Turner totally crushes Douglas' little sports Morgan car with her huge SUV with Douglas in it (and somehow he survives), they battle it out at the end by throwing their precious china figurines at one another, Turner (apparently) pretends that she made a pâté she served to Douglas out of the family dog, they finally die when they both hang inexplicably from the large chandelier in their foyer and it plunges to the floor. Very jaundiced look at American marriages, all of which are destined for the dust heap, and you may as well accept it gracefully, don't resist, make concessions, and play for survival. All performances are very good; both Douglas and Turner are formidably vicious and evenly matched (they had played previously together in at least two movies), and they seem to be enjoying their roles. (2006)

War of the Worlds 1953 Byron Haskins 3.5 Gene Barry as handsome and glamorous leading scientist; Ann Robinson as weak-kneed, sometimes hysterical librarian who cooks his food and plays nurse to him when he is injured; Leslie Tremayne as the take-charge General Mann. Doomsday narrator sets plot in context of advance in technology in the 20th century and the ambitions of the more advanced though covetous Martians who set their jealous eyes on the conquest of earth; the scientific context remains precise and credible Color; pretty decent special effects, although there are some artificial looking studio sets; obviously big budget movie. Set in rural, small town community apparently in California. Original fireball lands red hot in usual Western landscape, while locals think of tourist money they can make off it (later unconcerned they go off to a square dance). Martian apparatus appears – long metallic cobra-like neck protruding from ship with a big flashing red-orange eye on the end and a destructo sparkling ray accompanied by a high-pitched sound when mad or aggressive; later we find the neck attached to a man-o-ray like hovering saucer with green tipped wings. The Martians are completely hostile, blasting anyone who tries to negotiate with them. Simultaneous landings in many parts of the earth. Use of excited chattering radio announcer (a la Orson Welles) and shots of destruction in world capitals to build up excitement. The locals call out the Marines (armed to the teeth), who cooperate cordially with the scientists. Marine weapons including aircraft are completely ineffective since the invading ships are protected by shields. When all else fails, the president resorts to a flying wing to drop an atom bomb on the Martian machines while a bunch of people watch with goggles on; of course it does no good. Best scene has a TV eye on a long flexible tube nosing around with a gurgling noise inside a half-destroyed house looking for Barry and Robinson; when the bug-like creature enters the house, he seems vulnerable and he retreats shrieking. Scientists are very active in studying the Martians (their lens and their blood): discover that they have inferior eyesight and that they are quite anemic. Climax begins when the atomic bomb does not work; we have six days before they take over the world; General to Barry the scientist – “Our best hope lies in what you people can do to help us.” LA under attack; some panic as people fight to get on trucks to get out; nice shots of Barry running through empty, trash littered streets of the city. Alien ships enter city in an orgy of destruction including City Hall, etc. Barry enters a Spanish-speaking Christian church where the priest prays for a miracle and people stoically await the end. Suddenly ship dips and crashes into a building; silence suddenly reigns; ship door opens; spindly hand crawls into sight and dies. “We were all praying for a miracle.” But announcer tells us that the Martians succumbed to germs, “which God in His wisdom had placed on this earth.” Gripping sci-fi thriller; patriotic, confidence in science (although scientists are helpless), and Christian. (2009)

War of the Worlds 2005 Steven Spielberg 1.5 Tom Cruise, Dakota Fanning as annoying endangered child, Tim Robbins as almost certainly loony survivalist. Very annoying and stultifyingly loud rendition of H.G. Welles story. Basically same Spielbergian formula as ‘Jurassic Park’ – big threat, humans band together to cope, hugely realistic and impressive special effects, all turns out “well” in the end. Special effects absolutely overwhelming – very large tripod battleships pictured against big lowering skies wreaking untold destruction on humankind – veritable orgy of destruction for no apparent reason. If these extra-terrestrial folk are smart enough to plot against humanity for a million years and to arrive on earth with seemingly indestructible technology, why couldn’t they have figured out the microbe situation that causes their final demise – the mighty tripods bob, weave and stumble through Boston at the end, falling heavily to the ground and as usual take out large buildings (mostly old ones) in the process. Biggest insult is the absolute senselessness of their destructive orgy – why bother to invade if all they are going to do is murder most of humanity and destroy all their buildings? Wouldn’t it have been a better idea to take over the earth and exploit humans as slaves? And can’t they get it straight? Are they interested in vaporizing humans (pretty horrifying since the only things left after vaporization are human clothes), or are they interested in harvesting them, collecting them in their little baskets and then feeding on them (and what was the blood spewing out of the machines and the veins all over the ground? I thought they were feeding on the blood?!). Speilbergian family togetherness exchanges scenes with rampant destruction – Tom Cruise showing his true worth as a parent – No! I am not a flake! He insists on taking them to Boston, apparently, as his son says, to dump them on their mom so he won’t be bothered any more. Fanning screaming constantly and sucking all of us sucker parents into the sense of danger, but she does not engender the same sympathy as the little girl in ‘Poltergeist.’ The absolutely

annoying teenager Robbie, who we all hope will disappear from the screen (always pissed at his dad whom he refuses to call ‘Dad’ and wanting to die a hero’s death in the company of the military, or something like that), but who then reappears at the end to effect the required feel-good, family-united, ending. Wait a minute! He was the *only one* to escape the fiery Armageddon on the hill where his father left him? Movie has little of the magic one would hope for after \$135 million. We remain on the outside and hope that it will soon be over. John William’s score is notable mainly for its absence: there is too much noise for music. (2009)

Water 2005 Deepa Mehta (India) 3.0 Stunningly pretty Lisa Ray as one of the widows who refuses to cut off her hair but then we learn why; Sarala as the little girl of 8 that is already widowed; John Abraham as the hunky wealthy guy who falls in love with widow Ray and wants to marry her. Woman’s film about widows who are placed in a kind of poverty-stricken retirement home to live out their lives after the death of their husbands. Film is imbued with Hindu spirituality with much discussion of ‘faith’ and traditions, but it takes a liberal/humanistic view about the widows, who are sacrificed to tradition, and especially (Abraham) to the need of the family to eliminate another mouth to feed. Film has positive, humanistic, romantic sensibility, and we are surprised when Ray commits suicide (it turns out she has been moonlighting as a prostitute to earn money for the widows’ home and thus cannot marry Abraham) and the widow mother sends out Sarala to a sexual assignation; but film ends hopefully when in a train station a friend gives Sarala to Abraham with instructions to give her to Gandhi. Film takes place in 1938, and the rise of the Congress Party and Gandhi shows the coming of modernity and widow liberation coupled with the importance of the open-minded Abraham in the story. The viewer becomes strongly attached to the beautiful Ray and Abraham and we are deeply disappointed when the former commits suicide thus adding a tragic depth to the film. The film style is quite lyrical: the image of the sacred river (“water”) that runs through the town; it moves slowly and quietly; a lot of dark shadows in photography of the slums of the city (actually Sri Lanka). There are still 24 million of these widows living in India. (2007)

Waterloo Bridge 1931 James Whale (Universal) (Britain) 2.5 Mae Clarke plays chorus girl prostitute (she works mainly on Waterloo Bridge) who falls in love with an American soldier; pretty, she has some difficulty projecting her thoughts and feelings without words, e.g., fairly long sequence when she silently prepares – apparently with some reluctance – to go out to work in the streets; much of the sequence shot of her reflection in the mirror as she applies make-up; and when later in the film she has the verbal meltdown, it comes across as wooden. Kent Douglass callow, baby-faced, and cluelessly enthusiastic with super shiny white teeth, awkward stage movements and often stilted delivery – come to Europe to fight in the war. Doris Lloyd as her theatrical, cynical, cockney-talking fellow street worker. Bette Davis as young American sister in Douglass’ wealthy Anglo-American family; her specialty is repeating things to her deaf father (she should have been the one who played Myra!). Frederick Kerr effective as dotty, hard-of-hearing father of Douglass, but the joke gets a little stale in his second scene. Takes place in World War I London with bombs sometimes falling; taking shelter in cavernous bomb shelter. The film covers the rapid courtship (“Things happen faster in wartime.”). Drama and tension arise from Clarke’s reactions to Douglass’ courting – she would like to hook up with him, but her heart resists, and she seems paralyzed. She can’t tell him that she is a streetwalker, but she confides it to his mother! She always looks indecisive, guilty and suffering, pacing back and forth. Her domestic, true love tendencies expressed by her sometimes knitting. Movie ends with a bang: on Waterloo Bridge Clarke agrees to marry Douglass just before he returns to the front, but a bomb from a German zeppelin kills her. The End. Showgirls in dressing room at beginning very free with nudity – thin brassieres, nipples, etc. Several humorous smaller roles, especially salty older women – humor rather corny and sometimes forced. Very talky and slow moving reminiscent of its stage roots, the effect emphasized by the lack of soundtrack music and thespian emoting – especially in the low-key upper class home. Minimal editing with long takes and the camera moving subtly to recompose the shot. The film is not effective in exploiting the wartime atmosphere – there should have been more anxiety and urgency, but the characters sit around the tennis courts and drink lemonade. Some interesting aspects, but generally stilted emotional effect. This is the last film Whale made before ‘Frankenstein’. (2009)

The Way 2010 Emilio Estevez 1.5 Martin Sheen paunchy with dyed hair hiking relentlessly along the Camino de Santiago in honor of his dead son; Yorick van Wegeningen as annoying, back-slapping Dutchman he meets on the way; Deborah Kara Unger as annoying, semi-feminist, chain-smoking, suffering woman he meets shortly after; James Nesbitt as extremely annoying, loquacious Irish writer with writer's block that also joins the group. Kind of soft-focus, semi-Christian treatment of the experience of walking the Camino de Santiago. Sheen is a non-religious Santa Barbara ophthalmologist who abandons his golf course to travel to France to recover the body of his son, who was killed in a freak storm in the Pyrenees. Sheen then makes the impulsive decision to walk the path himself presumably to spread the ashes of his son along the way, although he ends up saving most of them for a rock overlooking a raging ocean in Muxia. Not much happens along the way: the viewer is presented with nice images of the (semi-) picturesque Camino across Northern Spain; Sheen meets his three companions, with whom he entertains mostly a testy relationship; the viewer has the opportunity to hear some uplifting (semi-) Christian rock songs. Presumably, all four characters gain some sort of enlightenment in the process: Wegeningen loses weight so his wife will make love with him; Nesbitt loses his writer's block and indicates to Sheen that he will treat him gently in the book he will publish about the journey; Unger does not follow through on her promises to stop chain-smoking, but she seems to have reached some peace with her decision to have had an abortion (disapproving references betray the film's Catholic-Christian intent); Sheen is able to reach some closure after spreading his son's ashes. There is surely a good movie that could be made about the Camino, but this one is unfortunately simple-minded and vacant. The film seems to be more about Estevez composing a tribute to his dad, who apparently hasn't got many leading roles recently. (2013)

Way Down East 1920 D.W. Griffith 3.0 Lillian Gish as the adorable Anna, Richard Barthelmess as David, Lowell Sherman as Sanderson the heartless seducer. Opening title: "Since the beginning of time man has been polygamous – even the saints of Biblical history – but today a better ideal is growing – the ideal of one man for one woman. Today Woman brought up from childhood to expect ONE CONSTANT MATE possibly suffers more than at any point in the history of mankind, because not yet has the man-animal reached this high standard – except perhaps in theory." Rather epic ("pastoral") story of young woman seduced and abandoned, but she finds a new life, and although accused, is rescued by a virtuous young man from physical and moral perdition. Very melodramatic and moralistic with clear religious message and clear distinction between good and evil characters. Gish absolutely radiant as poor, innocent and passive young woman with low self-esteem; she is virtuous and pure, and is led astray by a staged false marriage; she does however have reserves of courage and boldness (e.g., in scene where she reveals guilt of Sanderson); film depends on her sterling performance. Film pretty marginal as a modern women's statement, since it is keeping women in a traditional marriage and family, but just insisting that the men be faithful too. Griffith criticizes false religious piety; Mother Bartlett is gentle forgiving female religion, while Father is stern, unbending Puritan figure; many prissy hypocritical and intolerant women (with hair pulled back tightly) who gossip and condemn Anna for having a baby out of wedlock. In the end, Father has to accept the error of his intolerance. The film ends with the famous cliffhanger rescue on the ice floes (presented very realistically and frighteningly with no special effects), and then a triple marriage that is celebrated gaily. Some good scenes: 3243-4030 have classic and moving close-ups of Gish in great emotion; 4546-4758 has her brave Madonna/pieta scene when her baby dies; 13930+ about five minutes of dramatic confrontation between Anna, Father and Sanderson at dinner; and then of course the famous rescue scene. Film set in rural New England at the turn of the century; it photographs the countryside radiantly (Griffith often holds arty shots for admiration), and presents farm life as healthy and positive. At the end the meteorological storm matches the moral crisis of Anna, and her rescue from the river matches her redemption in a good marriage, although she is no virgin and has had a baby; she is forgiven. Quite a few subplots, mostly comic ones of unsophisticated romances that produce two of the three weddings at the end. The print is surprisingly good. (2006)

The Way Way Back 2013 Nat Faxon, Jim Rash 3.0 Liam James as Duncan, a silent, disaffected 14-year-old trying to navigate his way through his mother's impending marriage to...; Steve

Carell as (hilariously) obnoxious prospective stepdad, know-it-all, passive-aggressive toward his potential stepson, always using the editorial ‘we’; Toni Collette as quietly pretty mother of Duncan – she is afraid to challenge Carell for fear of losing the potential husband; Allison Janney as over-the-top, sexy, highly verbal alcoholic neighbor, also divorced and the mother of three children; AnnaSophia Robb as next-door teen girl who forms a beginning relationship with Duncan; Rob Corddry and Amanda Peet as hard-partying friends of Carell; Sam Rockwell (‘Moon’) as wise-cracking overgrown hippy, who is assistant manager of the local water amusement park and serves as Duncan’s life guru; Maya Rudolph as his boss – she has tender feelings for Rockwell (!). Entertaining, if not profound coming-of-age film about kids from broken families spending the summer with one of their parents in what appears to be a mid-Atlantic beach resort. The resort picture with beach houses, barbecues on the beach, bicycling down the streets provides a separate space for the kids to work on their issues; the water park – filled with playing children and quirky adults – provides a fantasy venue for Duncan to learn to speak and communicate with adults. Duncan strikes up an embryonic tender relationship with Robb, the only person in the neighborhood that understands him, and he learns eventually to express his loathing for Carell (hooray! He deserves it), criticizes his mother for being such a doormat, and finds a community of like-minded people in the water park. The movie ends with the ‘family’ leaving early and heading back to suburbia – Duncan sitting in the “way back” seat of Carell’s 70s Buick station wagon, as he did in the first scene of the movie arriving in the beach town. Some very amusing scenes: in the first scene Carell suggesting to Duncan in his passive-aggressive way that he is a loser, a 3 on a scale of 10 – we’re going to have to work on that if we are going to get along; the adults in the water park giving the teenage girls orders to move back and forth at the top of the water slide so they can ogle their bodies. Some silly, adolescent scenes toward the end, where the free-wheeling park employees squirt water guns as a way to celebrate a friend’s departure and where Duncan breaks free psychologically of his limits by passing another kid in the water slide (big deal, triumph!). All the performances are true and amusing. The movie is honest and entertaining, but fails to get much below the surface of moving into adulthood. (2013)

Wayne’s World 1992 Penelope Spheeris 2.0 Mike Myers, the brains of the show, as his naive, manic, good-humored self, Wayne; Dana Carvey in very thin role as the insecure, brainless Garth, Wayne’s sidekick; Tina Carrere as extremely dull, although pretty straight girl who sings a few pop songs and attracts the attention of Myers; Rob Lowe in thankless role as bad guy producer trying to seduce the boys and steal Carrere from Myers. Sometimes entertaining movie rip-off of SNL skit that flounders for its lack of plot and character credibility. The boys are happy doing their community cable thing in the basement of Myers’ parents home (whom we never see), but Lowe tempts them with a commercial contract that however produces significant conflict since the guys resist losing their creative independence and selling out to commercialism; more tension is generated by Myers bird-dogging of Carrere. The narrative ends ambiguously with several alternate endings leaving the viewer in uncertainty about the boys’ situation. Myers’ manic antics – broad grin, prancing about, clever bons mots in a language that is often his own (particularly the placement of the word “NOT” at the end of an affirmative sentence to negate it) – are the bright light of the show, while Carvey just doesn’t have enough to do to help fill a 90-minute film. Some of the gags are amusing – the cheap-shot put-downs of TV commercialism, Carvey saying that Carrere is “Babe-raham Lincon”, Carvey lip-syncing a Jimi Hendrix song as he approaches his dream girl with pelvic thrusts; but too many of the gags are brainless and tied to contemporary pop culture – Carvey’s dog wears a wig like his owner, references to a “Grey Poupon” TV ad and to Schwarzenegger’s ‘Terminator’, Lara Flynn Boyle playing a ditzy blond girl obsessed with Wayne and unable to let him go after the break-up. An extension of Myers’ humor and persona which should have been left on television. (2011)

We Were Soldiers 2002 Randall Wallace 3.0 Mel Gibson understated, male, noble as Lieutenant Colonel leading his battalion in first US big engagement in Vietnam War; Madeleine Stowe as his patient, faithful, large-lipped wife; Greg Kinnear as fearless helicopter pilot; Sam Elliott as hard-bitten, no-nonsense battalion sergeant major; Chris Klein; Keri Russell; Barry Pepper. Brutal war film chronicling a battalion-level engagement in the first part of the Vietnam War, 1965; intended as a tribute to the courage and professionalism of the American soldier. The command sends Gibson’s battalion into

the mountains to “search and destroy” and they end up surrounded by a large North Vietnamese regiment. The strength of the movie is the battle sequences that are incredibly kinetic, bloody, convincing; they depict the confusion and desperation of battle; enormous carnage with heavy losses among the Americans and astronomical losses among the Vietnamese (the Americans pile up their bodies in a large pyramid at the end, presumably for the American photographers but also facilitating the enemy’s disposition of their dead). The battle would appear to be a defensive victory for the Americans (the Vietnamese lost 8-9 as many men; Gibson could have probably captured the Vietnamese commander if he had pushed for it), but the script makes it clear that the effort is fruitless – as the Vietnamese colonel says at the end, the Americans are good fighters and are here to stay, but that does not change the outcome of the war; just a lot more men will die. Gibson is also excellent: a dedicated professional soldier who believes in what he is doing; an old-fashioned guy who is devoted to his wife and five children and to his Catholic religion (he regularly prays in folksy fashion for his men and over the dead). The film is essentially apolitical – focusing on the dedication, professionalism, and accomplishment of the men, and especially on their loyalty and affection for one another (the military combat bond). It makes several tributes to the bravery and sacrifices of the North Vietnamese, even having a pretty Vietnamese woman looking disconsolately at the photograph of her dead husband. The main weakness of the film is its sentimentality, especially when dealing with the waiting plight of the women back home, who are in dread of the tell-tale telegram (which is delivered by a taxi cab driver!); Gibson’s prayers and tributes to his men also fall in that category, as does the scanning of the Vietnam memorial at the end. The excellent action sequences perhaps undercut the avowed point of the film: instead of admiration for the courage of the soldiers, we are horrified at the carnage and at the *hubris* of the commanders who send these men into the trap (“Westmoreland” is mentioned by name). (2010)

We're Not Dressing 1934 Norman Taurog (Paramount) 2.0 Carol Lombard pretty charming as heiress on an excursion in her huge yacht, which is wrecked in a storm; Bing Crosby as sailor (it turns out he is really an architect) who does a whole lot of singing; George Burns and Gracie Allen in completely unrelated events which give the duo occasion for about 15 minutes of their standard dumb wife-exasperated and sensible husband routine; Ray Milland as a prince from some European country who is supposed to be interested in Lombard (he seems more interested in the other handsome young prince on board); Ethel Merman along for the opportunity to belt out a couple of songs; Leon Errol mugging along and often drunk. Paramount musical-comedy just before the imposition of Code enforcement. Plot and character are mostly irrelevant, but just the framework for singing, Burns-Allen antics, and a little bit of (pretty corny) comedy – e.g., every time Lombard slaps the laid-back Crosby, he gives her a little peck on the lips. Plot is based on ‘The Admirable Crichton’, (DeMille’s ‘Male and Female’), but when Crosby has control on the deserted island (the playboy characters aren’t capable of any work), he doesn’t push it very far! Pretty hard to watch, but it is fun to look at the stars in their early incarnations. (2007)

Wedding Crashers 2005 David Dobkin 3.0 Owen Wilson as charming, tousle haired guy who crashes weddings in the DC area to pick up girls; Vince Vaughn as his tall, more excitable, and aggressive companion that enjoys the petits fours served at weddings as well as the women; Rachel McAdams as rich girl with a wan smile that is engaged to Cooper; Isla Fisher as McAdams’ sister, small and sexual dynamite in her pursuit of Vaughn; Christopher Walken as the cautious Secretary of the Treasury and father of the two girls; Jane Seymour as leering, horny mom; Bradley Cooper in over-the-top slapstick performance as McAdams’ dorky boyfriend; Will Ferrell batting clean-up position as the senior crasher admired by all -- he crashes funerals and seduces widows. Very amusing farce about a bunch of sexually obsessed characters -- male (Wilson and Vaughn) and female (Fisher and numerous horny bridesmaids in the beginning of the film) -- who eventually pair off in a late developing romantic comedy. The very funny initial scene that has our two heroes mediating bitter divorce proceedings demonstrates their cynical attitude toward marriage. They end up at Walken’s palatial mansion, where Fisher exhausts Vaughn draining him of all available bodily fluids and Wilson decides that mature lovers want a permanent relationship with their lovers rather than a one-night stand. Ferrell’s appearance at the end confirms that the narrative is strictly secondary in this film and what counts is comedy, much as in a

series of Saturday Night Live sketches. The two principals are very amusing in their initial pursuit of available women -- talking with old ladies and dancing with little girls to convince the bridesmaids that they are nice guys; Fisher is effective in her obsessive sexual pursuit of Vaughn, as is Vaughn in his uncharacteristic eagerness to get away from her; Ferrell is his usual manic self, screaming over his shoulder to his mom for her to bring the meat loaf, then seen weeping copiously at the funeral with two grieving widows on his arms; the viewer empathizes with Wilson in his often befuddled transition to true love. Cooper with his gleaming, straight teeth is an effective comic foil for our two repentant womanizers: the audience cheers as McAdams abandons the wrong guy for the right one. Funny movie with no pretensions at hidden meanings. (2014)

Le Weekend 2013 Roger Mitchell (Britain) 2.5 Jim Broadbent as witty, avuncular but insecure professor from Birmingham (England), who has just been dismissed from his job (what happened to tenure?); Lindsay Duncan memorably bitchy, vicious and impetuous as his schoolteacher wife bitter from a lifetime of making compromises; Jeff Goldblum boozing an exaggerated American accent as clueless, ill-informed admirer and old chum of Broadbent from their Cambridge days. Kind of modern-day 'Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?' about a middle-aged British couple gone to Paris to celebrate their 30th wedding anniversary, only to have them unload every anger- and frustration-saturated misery in their lives -- their son is a layabout pothead who watches the telly all afternoon and wants to move back in with his parents; Broadbent just got fired from his job because of a politically incorrect remark to a Black student; Duncan is thoroughly sick of her job, but doesn't know what to do with her life; the two have not been having sex for the last ten years; Broadbent is convinced that Duncan had an affair with a nerdy computer tech (the suggestion makes her insanely furious). Duncan's sour resentment recalls Elizabeth Taylor and Broadbent's passive incompetence recalls Burton from the earlier film. The two wallow in their misery, and only occasionally enjoy eating or walking in Paris. Duncan is constantly threatening to divorce Broadbent, who being insecure and convinced that he would never find another friend, goes into a self-pitying panic. The film reaches a sort of climax in a party at Goldblum's palatial Paris apartment (it has a view of most of the monuments), where the host expresses his undying admiration for Broadbent -- he is wise, successful, in love with his wife (?). Broadbent gives a speech before the assembled luminaries confessing every misery and sin of his life, and Duncan, who had just agreed to meet one of the male guests for a tryst, decides to proclaim her love for her husband (?). Afterwards, our couple skips out on their bill at the Plaza Athénée, sits down penniless in a dive cafe, and Goldblum enters to bail them out, while they figure out how to get their passports back from the hotel safe. Matters have slowed to a depressing standstill in a blind alley. Some scenes are entertaining: Who doesn't enjoy doing a vicarious tour of Paris? The scenes in which Broadbent and Duncan skip out on their restaurant and hotel bill are funny in their aimless insouciance, especially when Duncan has to undo a plastic fastener to escape from the basement of the restaurant. And the snappy, one-up-man dialogue of Broadbent and Duncan is often witty and entertaining. (2014)

Weekend in Havana 1940 Walter Lang (20c Fox) 3.0 John Payne rather boringly handsome as man who has to choose between his rich New York fiancée and Faye, Alice Faye as the sensible, rather stubborn lingerie salesperson at Macy's -- she is sent to weekend in Havana when her cruise ship gets stranded, Carmen Miranda as hot-blooded Latin spitfire who sings, dances, and campaigns to keep Romero, César Romero quite thin as Miranda's straying boyfriend -- he can't sing or dance, despite trying. Well-produced Hollywood trifle from just before the war -- well done, entertaining, keeps your attention, but without the imagination and attention to elaborate detail of the MGM postwar musicals. Done in eye-catching Technicolor -- not a washed out hue in the whole film! The plot is a throwaway -- will Payne stick with his snooty society girl from New York, or will he break away and opt for the good-hearted lingerie salesgirl; of course, in the end he chooses the latter. Music is fun: driving Latin rhythms with strings, prominent trumpets and percussion sounds; also some good ballads sung by Faye in her mezzo-soprano when she is sitting in the shade or dancing with the dreamy Latin Lover Romero. Miranda is unique: rather short with attractive chunky body; dressed like a Carnavale (Brazil) celebrant with her midriff exposed; elaborate headdress of fruit, vegetables, feathers and flowers piled on top of her head (never in this movie just a pile of fruit); strongly made up face (very dark red lipstick and heavily outlined

eyebrows against her smooth, full featured face); tendency to mug and exaggerate facial expressions – bulging eyes, mobile mouth, etc. She is a dynamo and a caricature of Latin (Brazilian) fire and panache. Film is fun! (2010)

Das weisse Band 2009 Michael Haneke (Germany) 3.5 Christian Friedel as good-humored, sensitive, mild-mannered schoolteacher who observes the bizarre goings on in the village (he narrates the story from his old age through the grammatically precise comments of Ernst Jaobi); Leonie Benesch as shy 17-year-old who arouses the romantic attention of Friedel; Ulrich Tukur as the stubborn, ill-tempered, and haughty baron of the local manor; Ursina Lardi as his young, glamorous wife; Burghart Klaussner as overbearing, puritanical, somewhat sadistic Lutheran pastor, who is the father of six children (all the families in town are large); Maria-Victoria Dragus as Klara, one of the most disquieting of the children; Rainer Bock as the vicious doctor who insults his mistress (Susanne Lothar) and sexually abuses his daughter, Anna (Roxane Duran). Disquieting, ambiguous, beautifully photographed and acted film set in a small north German village in the last year before World War I. The author sets our eye on the Nazi connection when he mentions in the beginning of the film that he hope the events that he describes will help us understand what comes later in Germany. The village is picturesque and clean with brick buildings for the upper class inhabitants, lots of farm animals wandering around the streets, and the big tumble-down chateau rising in the middle. Strange, dangerous things are happening in town – the doctor is severely injured when his horse trips over a wire, a woman is killed in a sawmill accident, the chatelaine's son is beaten to a pulp on his buttocks, the town's retarded boy comes close to having his eyes gouged out, etc. We also soon learn that the adults in the town are somewhere between flawed and cruel: the pastor beats his children for being late for dinner and berates a son for masturbation; the doctor mistreats and insults his mistress and molests his daughter; the bailiff beats his children; (the farmer is perhaps the exception). Also it becomes apparent that the children are just as bad: every time something happens a gaggle of children led by the blank-faced Klara (she replies "Ich weiss nicht" whenever asked a question) and her brother Martin are herding ambiguously around the house of the injured person; the viewers' suspicions are borne out in a scene toward the end of the film when the two boys of the bailiff try to drown Sigi, the baroness' son. Uniformed and plain clothes detectives visit and ask a lot of questions, but they, like everyone else, are not able to ferret out the truth. The shenanigans end when word comes that the Archduke Franz Ferdinand has been assassinated and that Germany is going to war; the screen fades out during a church service while the choir sings Luther's hymn. Film is very intriguing to watch: crisp, pale, detailed black-and-white cinematography, detailed interiors, picturesque shots of village in mild and wintry weather, ecstatically beautiful shots of the countryside – flat terrain, neat, open, fields bordered by trees. It is a bit frustrating not to understand exactly what Haneke is driving at (but that is a common problem in his movies). Perhaps: Germany is oppressively and cruelly paternalistic; here the younger generation is rebelling against their elders; the gap is perhaps widened by World War I and the social and economic chaos of the 20s; the paternalistic structure steps in to reassert itself with the Nazi domination. (2010)

Welcome to the Dollhouse 1996 Todd Solondz 3.5 Heather Matarazzo, an impossibly deadpan geeky near-sighted 11-year-old with zero fashion sense (Dawn) and clueless expression, Matthew Faber as equally geeky older brother with challenged teeth. Hilarious but sad – almost tragic – film about the pains and horrors of junior high school: Brother Faber responds to Dawn's question of whether things get better after seventh grade – "Junior high school sucks. High school is better because it is closer to college. They call you names, but not as much to your face." Film chronicles the torments to which disliked junior high kids are subjected: all the uncertainties of growing up (sex, drugs, romance, etc.) but mainly the explicit rejection by your peers – everyone professes to despise Dawn, calling her "lesbo," "Wiener dog" when she is trying to thank students for helping find her sister, except for perhaps one finky kid known as the "faggot." Dawn is bullied and threatened by school tough kid Brandon, but then he courts her in bizarre fashion by making a date with her to rape her, and she shows up and asks him if she should lie down. It seems that 'faggot' is not as bad a name to have as 'asshole.' Dawn has very uncomfortable home life; her parents are over the top adult nerds – the song that Faber's band plays for 'Harv and Marj' at their anniversary party is hilarious; and Dawn has to suffer the spectacle of her

little ballerina sister being petted by everyone, being bratty and getting away with it. Music is amusing. Much ‘Swan Lake’ on the soundtrack to match little sister’s dancing, and fun rock music played by brother’s band with Dawn’s hunky idle singing the lyrics: “Love’s a confusing thing in my suburban home/I feel so alone./I walk through sterile rooms/There’s voice in my head/Coming from the phone. I got a blow up doll just like you, Little Girl/Well, the two of us have made a special world, Little Girl/So welcome to the dollhouse (3x)/I got a love....for you.” (Band sounds a little like The Doors) Hook at the end is the kidnapping of the little sister by a neighbor perv, but she is returned home unharmed (much to the relief of Dawn who was partly responsible for her disappearance). Quite sad at the end: Dawn goes to New York to look for her sister; she has a dream where she heroically rescues her and then everyone she knows shouts “We love you,” when she tries in reality to thank school kids for helping rescue her sister, they shout her down; and as the kids in the bus on the way to Disney World sing the school song, Dawn sits alone, disconsolately singing the song in her own way. Film is an effective blend of hilarious satire and sadness; you wonder how anyone could survive junior high school. (2006)

What the Gypsy Said is a one-reel film (about 12 minutes) made by D.W. Griffith for Biograph in 1910. Their story is slight. Two farm sisters (Martha, played by Mary Pickford, and Millie, played by the charming Gertrude Robinson) are feeling romantic and looking for suitors. Mary consults a gypsy who gives her a fortune that promotes his intentions to seduce her. Mary is shocked when she finds the same gypsy courting her sister next to a waterfall. The menfolk chase the two-timing gypsy out of town, and the girls – flirtatious as ever – decide to make do with two local boys. The film is interesting for taking a look at Mary Pickford before she became a star – she is pert, pretty and vivacious playing an adolescent role (in her later roles in the ‘teens she plays children’s roles). The whole film is shot in just a few setups on one rural location. The title cards do not record dialogues but summarize scenes for the viewer – e.g., ‘Martha discovers the gypsy’s perfidy’, ‘A cowardly attack’, ‘The old man unhurt but the gypsy man is warned to leave the neighborhood’. The copy sold in the Milestone Collection is in good condition with good brightness, contrast and sharpness. (2006)

What's Eating Gilbert Grape 1993 Lasse Hallström 3.0 Johnny Depp convincing, earnest and good-looking as Gilbert (although his long, glamorous, off-color hair is out of place), Leonardo DiCaprio the star of the show as the retarded young brother of Gilbert, Darlene Cates as the huge 350 pound mother who is virtually housebound, Juliette Lewis mannered and annoying as the girl passing through who builds a small fire under Gilbert, Mary Steenburgen as the lonely housewife who seduces Gilbert but who has to move on when her husband dies. Southern-style quirky and nostalgic home comedy about an unusual family living in rural Iowa – Gilbert works in a small town grocery, which is struggling because of the competition of the new super market Foodland; Gilbert’s family lives in a ramshackle house that the dead father (there are hints he committed suicide) built several decades ago; Gilbert and the two sisters take care of the almost immobile mother and retarded Arnie (DiCaprio). Despite the death of the mother at the end, the movie is mostly light-hearted, with quirky humorous events and characters – Gilbert periodically has to go on home grocery “deliveries” in order to service Steenburgen; one of his friends is a rather morbid undertaker’s assistant in town who talks freely about his work; the other does repairs for Gilbert’s house, but is excited about going to work for the Burger Barn franchise. Most of the real heart-tugging emotion comes from DiCaprio, who plays the sometimes endearing, sometimes annoying retarded teenager with great skill (one hopes he is destined for great things!). When the kids burn down the house at the end when the mother dies (with her in it, we think!), then we know finally a chapter has been turned and we have to move on – Lewis returns and Depp prepares to move on to a big city. Film has its moving little moments, but overall tries too hard to be endearing and cute; it might have done better without the presence of Lewis! (2006)

Whatever Works 2009 Woody Allen 2.5 Larry David as older Greenwich Village schmuck (the role should have been played by Zero Mostel) who rants about everything through most of the movie; Evan Rachel Ward almost unrecognizable in stereotypical dumb Southern belle role; Patricia Clarkson also underserved as Ward’s ditzy Southern mom; Ed Begley Jr. as Clarkson’s ex-husband who also surfaces by surprise in New York. Back again in the USA after four films in Europe (two of them pretty

good), Allen starts off with a script that he had written for Zero Mostel in the 1970s and then set aside. Larry Davis stands in for Woody Allen spouting his regular party line – life is meaningless, God does not appear to exist, there is no such thing as virtue or morality, you just have to find as much happiness as you can grab in love and pleasure, specifically in New York (what a beautiful city!), old movies (represented here by a scene from Orson Welles' ‘Touch of Evil’), and of course young women represented here by Ward, i.e., “whatever works”. The first half of the film is mildly amusing with David shouting denunciations and insults at the camera and any character in his vicinity about the rest of humanity being inchworms (e.g., a little girl he is teaching chess to takes the bishop in the R2 position!); although the situation is static, the writing and the vituperation are entertaining, and David performs well as a stand-up comic. The big problem begins with the intrusion of the other characters. Ward is a stereotypical Southern belle with depleted brains, who nevertheless develops an unending admiration for David's huge IQ and a romantic attraction for him; this leads inexplicably to their marriage (she 20 and he 60!!). The up-tight Bible Belt Clarkson then arrives unannounced, and after some initial hesitation, she finds non-traditional mainstream happiness in the Big Apple – she dresses like an artist and has an ongoing sexual relationship with two men at the same time. Then Ward's father Begley arrives, and after some additional confusion, he decides that he is gay and takes up in a stable relationship with an ugly guy he meets in a bar. And of course Ward, being mismatched with a misanthropist, meets a cool young guy that fills her needs; David tells her that she is making the right decision. Even David lucks out: he falls on top of a woman when he attempts suicide jumping out of a window, and after visiting together in the hospital, they marry! The film ends with a false feel-good scene in which all couples are gathered at a party proclaiming how fate has found them partners (you know, you marry the girl whose bones you break on the street) and perhaps life isn't so hopelessly miserable anyway. Allen plagiarizes himself in this film; you keep waiting for Annie Hall to walk around the corner. If produced in the 1970s, the movie would have been reasonably entertaining; but even then its drama and clichéd characters would have been attracted attention. (2009)

Where the Sidewalk Ends 1950 Otto Preminger (20cFox; wr. Ben Hecht) 2.5 Dana Andrews as tough-guy cop who, like Clint Eastwood, often gets in trouble with his superiors, Bert Freed as his credible cop sidekick, Gene Tierney in romantic, glamorous role that seems displaced in a noirish film, Gary Merrill pretty credible as small-time gangster conducting a floating craps game, Ruth Donnelly catchy delivering snappy, sarcastic Ben Hecht dialogue, Karl Malden pretty wooden as the recently promoted police lieutenant. A potential film noir offering that gets highjacked by Fox glamour. Andrews and Tierney reprise their ‘Laura’ duo, and their presence seems to put the film in a straight jacket. Tierney doesn't have a mean bone in her body (the viewer is dying for a picturesque mean spider woman); and Andrews, although he is supposed to be a tough cop who beats on criminals to get confessions (this was about 15 years before the Miranda decision, and anyhow we never see him beat up anyone), is down deep a sweet guy, who feels guilty about incriminating Tierney's cab driver father for a murder (actually an accidental death) and anyhow only acts the way he does because his father had been a gangster. His tough guy exterior represents his attempt to overcome his past and to go straight. Production is terrific – lots of nighttime streets in New York, elegant camera work by Preminger and seamless editing by the editors. Ending is doubly unsatisfying: Why does the police boss arrest Andrews for murder, when he already knew that the victim died by an accident? And why does Tierney smilingly and bravely promise Andrews that she will stick with him through thick and thin, despite her knowledge that he was willing to allow her father to be incriminated until his conscience got the better of him? Too many concessions to the studio images of the stars and to the ‘happy ending’ complex. (2006)

While We're Young 2014 Noah Baumbach 3.5 Ben Stiller as aging (44 years old), unsuccessful documentary filmmaker living in New York; Naomi Watts as his charming, pretty, insightful wife – almost the same age; Adam Driver (‘Tracks’) as younger (about 25) documentary filmmaker that makes friends with Stiller; Amanda Seyfried as Driver's wife – a relatively undeveloped character whose main activity seems to be making homemade ice cream; Charles Grodin a standout as Watt's cynical and humorous father, a highly respected documentary filmmaker. Satirical film picking up on Stiller's character in ‘Greenberg’ about the difficulties of accepting the aging process in youth-

obsessed America and the dangers of wanting to be hip. Stiller and Watts are drifting in their lives – Stiller can't finish the documentary film that he has been working on for eight years, and he and his wife don't have any children and can't fit into the baby culture of their contemporaries (Adam Horovitz). As a result, they "fall in love with" the charismatic 20s-something younger couple, who seem to represent an infusion of insight and energy for their relationship and their work. Their lifestyle is seductive – while Stiller and Watts are immersed in their generation's fascination with gadgetry (cell phones, Netflix, the Internet), Driver and Seyfried are strongly retro with their huge vinyl collection, their rejection of the Internet, watching movies on VHS, and attending cultural happenings in the street. Seyfried is retiring, but Driver is full of supportive enthusiasm for Stiller's work. Stiller is at first excited by his new friendship, but it is soon apparent that Driver is not as innocent as he seems, he is exploiting his relationship with his friends, and he does not respect the accepted moral parameters of documentary filmmaking. Stiller and Watts eventually discover that Driver's reason for striking up a friendship with them had nothing to do with his admiration for Stiller's work and everything to do with wanting to meet and use Watts' father for his own work. The film has a rather jaundiced view of the filmmaking profession, and when at the end Stiller denounces Driver publicly and he and Watts decide to accept their childlessness (the last scene of the film has them babysitting their friends' baby as they drop them off at the airport), it is apparent that our protagonists have moved on: Stiller is beaming at what appears to be his restored relationship with his wife. The film is reminiscent of the best of Woody Allen films – the conundrums of attractive, educated New Yorkers (without the sexual hang-ups), the walking scenes in the streets of New York, Vivaldi constantly on the soundtrack, the Allen-esque intonations of Watts. The film is often funny: the satire of cellphone obsession at a table in a restaurant; the scene of the "infantilization" of the mothers in the baby music class; Watts' absurdly awkward hip-hop movements when she attends a hip-hop class with Seyfried; Grodin's comment to his son-in-law that his 6 ½ hour film is 7 hours too long; Stiller's comment that Driver is so cool that he doesn't make a distinction between 'The Goonies' and 'Citizen Kane'; Stiller's stupid-looking porkpie hat; the hilarious shamanic ritual in which the older couple get high, vomit their inner demons into little tubs, and experience life-changing revelations. Funny and warm satire of the difficulties of growing old in America. (2015)

Whirlpool 1949 Otto Preminger 2.5 Slow-moving noirish thriller about hypnotism and murder. Gene Tierney very glamorous, carefully sculpted face, wearing the latest fashions as kleptomaniac wife of a psychiatrist; Richard Conte in curiously low-key performance as loving husband; Jose Ferrer as bizarre hypnotist, shaman con man bent on extracting money from vulnerable women; Charles Bickford as police lieutenant with tussled hair. Frequently unbelievable drama slowly reveals the campaign of Ferrer to frame Tierney through hypnosis for the murder of a woman who had turned against him. At beginning of film Ferrer turns up in high-end department store to rescue Tierney from arrest when she is caught shoplifting; he exploits the acquaintance to begin treatment of her, using hypnosis to help her sleep, then to place her in an incriminating situation when Ferrer commits the murder. When Tierney is arrested by world-weary policeman Charles Bickford, Conte springs to her defense, and essentially everyone makes an effort to exculpate her (Bickford is very lax in allowing Conte visit Tierney, etc.). Much film time is consumed with exploring Tierney's shoplifting neurosis (due to her father being tight-fisted). Everyone believes that Ferrer committed the murder, but his alibi is air tight – he had been recuperating from a gall bladder operation. The remainder of the film resembles a 30s whodunit more than film noir: it turns out that Ferrer had hypnotized himself into not feeling pain and had thus been able to commit murder undetected (!). The ending resembles a Thin Man movie: Ferrer drags himself to the scene of the crime for the second time, where his incriminating activities are observed by the other three principals until he unmasks himself by rushing at them with a pistol. The happily ever after is provided by Tierney's and Conte's reconciliation, since now the latter understands the source of his wife's secretiveness (after all, he is a psychiatrist). Preminger's cinematography is impeccable: tasteful mix of cutting, camera movement and expressive close-ups; a shame that he wasn't able to make more sense of the screenplay. Conte often seems to be bored with the film; his heart doesn't seem to be in it. Disappointing from the maker of 'Laura'. (August 2017)

Whisky, Tango, Foxtrot 2016 Glenn Ficarra, John Requa 2.0 Dull, inconsistent, occasionally funny comedy dealing with reporting on war in Afghanistan. Tina Fey as reporter seeking success and eventually romance in war-torn Afghanistan; Margot Robbie as another female reporter – glamorous and competitive; Martin Freeman as supposedly obnoxious but underneath actually teddy-bearish reporter that becomes Fey's squeeze; Alfred Molina as Afghan Attorney General, who spends most of his energy lustng after Tina Fey; Bill Bob Thornton in often funny, absurdist performance as over-the-top Marines commanding officer. Taking advantage of Fey's likability and comic gifts, the film delivers some good laughs in its initial stages (she is good at getting a laugh out of a nice-looking woman cursing), but they fade quickly as soon as the narrative shifts to a romantic entanglement with Freeman; barring a sudden character transformation, the relationship is doomed from the beginning. With some good scenes of military operations (the reporters want to be "embedded" in Marine units), the film pushes the idea that war is hell, reminding one perhaps of Altman's 'Mash' from 45 years before (this viewer didn't much care for that one either). Much attention to the plight of reporters, who live in extreme discomfort and amidst danger trying to get one of their pieces on the air, while the American public switches interest to other topics (presumably Iraq). The film loses its way in the second half: the affair with Freeman wilts, when he stands up a meeting with Fey to scoop her on a story. Fey's final visit back home to a soldier who has lost his legs to an IED attempts to depict her as conscience-stricken and reluctant to "move on" after her war experiences, but it comes across as smarmy and flat. Then a bit of triumph however since she secures a network anchor position after her return. Fey is the only credible reason to see the film. Combining comedy with warfare is a difficult undertaking. (2016)

White Christmas 1954 Michael Curtiz (Paramount) 2.5 Bing Crosby laid back, big-eared, velvet-voiced baritone, smoking his pipe – dull as dishwater; Danny Kay always clowning as Bing's show biz partner – gets pretty old after a while; Rosemary Clooney dowdy and straight-laced, but she has a good voice; Dean Jagger as avuncular retired general who would like to return to active service; Vera Ellen in torpedo bra looking mature and thin compared to her adorable image of six years before, coiffed and dressed to the tee and dancing with lithe enthusiasm. Terminally corny and sentimental backstage musical plus romantic comedy that showcases all the faults of 50s culture. The film is almost incredibly sentimental all the way through with preordained misunderstandings and dumb plot moves by the principals to make sure the predestined couples bury their hatchets and end in the inevitable clinch. The plot focuses on making Jagger feel good despite his postwar retirement and on the long and arduous (and dull) task of getting the two couples together: both Vera Ellen and Clooney (who can't dance) can't wait to get married so they can retire from showbiz. A lot of snappy, zingy 'Road to...' style dialogue between the clowning Kay and Crosby, who always seems about to break into song. Several croony songs, the only one of which worth remembering is "When I am worried and cannot sleep, just count your blessings instead of sheep," which however takes first prize in 50s sentimentality. Crosby and Kay do a cross-dressed version of Clooney's and Vera Ellen's signature duet – very corny cutesy, and perhaps objectionable. Martial ballads by Berlin keep alive the memories of "good" World War II – marching choruses belt out "We'll follow the old man wherever he wants to go" and "I wish I was back in the army; the army wasn't really bad at all." Although Kay is not a very good dancer and Clooney is downright flat-footed, the best moments are dancing, especially when John Brascia is teaming with Vera Ellen in energetic, precise, Bob-Fosse-like moves. The film begins with Berlin's "White Christmas" (AA in 1942's 'Holiday Inn') and ends with the same song as snow finally starts to fall on Jagger's Vermont Inn. Hard to watch without fast-forwarding, but it has its good musical and dancing moments. (2014)

White God 2014 Kornel Mundruczo (Hungary) 3.0 Zsofia Psotta as Lili, sensitive, cute 13-year-old that plays the trumpet in an amateur orchestra – she is very attached to her dog; Hagen, mixed breed, lab-looking dog, who is an excellent actor; Sandor Zsoter as Lili's grouchy, though attentive father; good-looking orchestra leader that goes out of his way to include Lili in the performance. Original film with a dual focus: the deep connection between a pre-teen and her dog (seen this a million times), and the cruelty and insensitivity that humans show toward animals, except that this time the dogs take revenge. Lili is a semi-abandoned child – no contemporary friends, and her mother dumps her on her father when she takes off for Romania for several months. Lili's relationship with her father is initially troubled: he

won't keep the dog in his apartment and pay the mongrel tax; after Hagen is dumped on the side of the road, he moves through several adventures – being pursued by the dog catchers with wire hooks in hand, bought and sold a couple of times, the last time to an unpleasant type that trains him ruthlessly and exhaustingly for viciousness in dog fights. While subsequently confined in the animal shelter, he and his fellow mutts break out and spend most of the rest of the film running wildly and chaotically through the streets; they kill and terrorize randomly and also take revenge against the worst anti-canine perpetrators, such as the fight trainer; the city fights back by shooting them down with rifles. Parallel to Hagen's adventures, Lili's story follows a rather trite curve – reconciliation with her father, re-entry into the Liszt orchestra, generally getting over her rage. The ending is visually spectacular although narratively questionable. When Hagen and his cohorts (he seems to be a commander) catch up with Lili, he at first bares his fangs and backed by his followers threatens to attack her; she then intones the famous trumpet solo from Liszt's rhapsody, and the dogs lose their attacking spirit and lie down; Lili then lies down too to show her trust, and to make sure we have a happy ending, Lili's father does the same; final shot is a bird's eye view of the hundred or so bodies lying in the public square. No indication of what the city will do with these serial murderers. By far the best thing about the film is the director's marshalling of a large number of well-trained dogs following his bidding individually and in large groups. One wonders whether dogs are really treated this badly in Central Europe. If so, I don't blame the mutts. (Most people I know really like dogs and treat them well.) (2015)

White Heat 1949 Raoul Walsh (Warners) 4.0 Jimmy Cagney as Cody Jarrett, Edmund O'Brien in unlikable role as the cop who goes undercover in an Illinois prison and betrays Cody to the LA police, Virginia Mayo as sleazy, unfaithful and sexy wife whom he doesn't much care for anyway, Margaret Wycherly as Cody's mother, Stephen Cochrane as Big Ed who steps out with Mayo while Cody is in prison and pays the price for it. Bone-rattling, violent, even shocking gangster film representing Cagney's return to stardom after the doldrums of the 40s. Filmed and edited in economical, focused style that moves the action along step by step and with a lot of momentum. Set pieces are perhaps the best – the robbery of the train in the Sierra where one of the henchmen is scalded badly by the steam; the public scenes in the prison cafeteria that make prison seem strangely civilized compared to the early 21st century (the scene where the news about the death of Cody's mother is whispered from prisoner to prisoner at the mess table is memorable); the final confrontation in the complex, gleaming, high tech Long Beach oil refinery ending in the enormous explosion. The milieu is much modernized compared to the gangster films of the 30s – the gangsters are no longer first generation Italians and Irish, the police turn out in large numbers and use the latest technology (perhaps developed in World War II) to track down the criminals. Cagney is charismatic and riveting as usual: he is nervous and twitchy with the bouncing, pouncing gait; he is very violent killing many in cold blood – the two engineers in the train, Big Ed whom he shoots through the door, the henchman whom he shoots through the locked trunk of his car ("I'm gonna give you some air"); his own men and the police when he is trapped in the refinery; his men are in awe of him and fear him. He is however closely attached to his mother, who is the only force that can get him out of his migraine headaches and his seizure-like incidents; she constantly encourages him and gives him advice including murder; the two exchange the confidence-building "Top of the World" several times before Cody finally invokes the famous saying at the end; he is beyond furious when he learns that someone has killed his mother, and he tracks down Big Ed ruthlessly and suspensefully. The ending is rightfully famous: Cody makes it clear that he will not surrender; after all his men are killed, he is wounded by sharpshooter O'Brien, and he lights the fire on top of one of the storage tanks, he stares out to the world and shouts "Finally made it, Ma! Top o' the world!" and the tanks go up in huge fireballs, an immolation worthy of any World War II dictator. Classic gangster movie that updates the 30s versions of the genre with expanded violence and bizarre psychology. (2005)

White Material 2009 Claire Denis (France) 4.0 Wrenching drama about the destruction of the life of a white woman trying to save her coffee plantation in Africa (Cameroons?) during a vicious civil war. Isabelle Huppert gaunt, disheveled, determined to save her plantation as the chaos of civil conflict rages around her; Christopher Lambert as her weak-willed ex-husband who sells the plantation to the mayor of the nearby town without telling his ex-wife; Nicolas Duvauchelle as Huppert's mentally

unbalanced, no-good-for-nothing son; William Nadylam as the Black mayor of the village – scheming to profit from the events, he seems to have a romantic relationship with Huppert; Michel Subor as the terminally ill father-in-law of Huppert. The film affords an extremely vivid portrait of an African country in civil war: open fields, coffee trees, red earth, dirt roads, mountains in the distance, dilapidated buildings everywhere; a highly confusing mix of political groups – neatly clad soldiers in the army, a rebel leader named Boxer who seems to be the savior for some of the locals, bandits who charge Huppert \$100 for taking the road to town, child soldiers (boys and girls) armed to the teeth roaming aimlessly around and finally murdering people for not much at the end. Denis' film style portrays the utter chaos, fear, confusion well – shaky camera roaming randomly, shots of characters beginning with their midriffs (anticipating being shot in the gut?), photographing the desperate Huppert through half-open doors, grisly wounds and burns shot in indirect fashion. The screenplay follows Huppert as she maneuvers desperately to save her property – “the only thing she has left”, although she doesn't even own it; her father in law does. Driving to town to hire workers to bring in the coffee crop, persuading them to work, operating the machinery, directing treatment of the coffee beans, dealing with the moral collapse of her son. Huppert is strongly attached to Manuel, who would rather sleep in late while the plantation goes down; he is captured, humiliated and perhaps raped by teenage bandits, and then disintegrates emotionally, shaving his head, snarling at himself in the mirror, and rushing into the fray with a shotgun. The only time Huppert shows open emotion is at the end of the film when she realizes that her son is doomed, probably already dead. The film ends badly for her: multiple groups invade her plantation house, the last being the army that sets her buildings on fire; when she enters one of the burned buildings, she finds the grotesquely charred body of her son, and when her father-in-law enter, Huppert clubs him to death (?). The film ends with a young rebel leader stranded in the middle of a field looking around desperately not knowing what to do or where to go. The pessimistic depiction of the anarchy and cruelty of the African players must not have played well in Africa. Vivid picture of a society in chaos, and a moving depiction of the relentless energy of a single woman. (September 2017)

White Night Wedding 2008 Baltasar Kormákur (Iceland) 2.5 Hilmir Snaer Gudnason as Jon, the unhappy, stone-faced literature professor with the confused romantic life; Margrét Vilhjálmsdóttir as Anna, his mentally unstable first wife; Laufey Elíasdóttir as his younger bride-to-be, an ex-student who is convinced that she can “save” him; Ólafía Hrönn Jónsdóttir as the shrewish mother of Laufey who is raging about her soon-to-be son-in-law owing her money. A sort-of romantic comedy full of tragic elements that somehow manages to limp and jerk to its modified happily-ever-after ending. The story is set in a frame that has professor Jon explain to a bored audience of students that the film is based on a play by Chekhov. The narrative begins on the isolated island of Flatey (the scenery is mostly spectacular), located in the summer just off the coast of Iceland, where Jon is about to wed again to Eliasdottir; the story has the wedding guests arrive on the ferry; the unpredictable folksy ways of the locals provide some amusement – mainly the drunkenness of the male organist, the sincere cluelessness of the Lutheran pastor, who at one point is reduced to jumping to collect banknotes that have been blown off a table, the mother's obsessive pursuit of the money that Jon had borrowed from her to build a (silly looking) golf course for German tourists, etc. Meanwhile, the viewer endures unpunctuated, usually depressing flashbacks tracking the disintegration of Jon's previous marriage – Anna kills a goose against her windshield when she is driving in Reykjavik, dumps her medication in the sea off Flatey where she and her husband have moved, raves unpredictably and makes disgusting “sculptures” out of gooey seaweed, witnesses the naked cavorting of Jon and Laufey in the arctic grass, and finally rows out into the sound, pulls the plug on her little boat, sinks and drowns. Either from a debt to New Wave editing or from editing carelessness, the flashback scenes are hard to follow; one often has the impression that the scenes with Anna are in the present, and the viewer is uncertain about whether she is dead at the time of the wedding. The film ends in an entertaining paroxysm of confusion: with the wedding party assembled in the quaint church (his best man however who is supposed to play the organ is late because he had to order a pair of sneakers from the mainland), Jon gets cold feet, informs his bride that he can't go through with the wedding and ruin her life too, runs to the shore, gets in a boat, and rows out a ways before it sinks; then the bride flails out to him in her wedding dress, followed by the parson on the shoulders of the father-in-law, whereupon they take their wedding vows standing in the water up to their waists; then

mandatory applauding from the guests congregated on the shore. A postscript shows them together in Reykjavik, leading more or less separate, unromantic lives; the last scene has Laufey walking away from the house while Jon gets to work writing. Hard to know what to make of such an ending. Perhaps mixing genres and moods in the same film is sometimes a sign of non-conformist imagination, but it can also manifest inconsistency and confusion. (2011)

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? 1966 Mike Nichols (Warners) 3.5 Elizabeth Taylor in the performance of her life as boozy, slutty, shrill, aggressive wife who seizes upon the visit of a junior faculty member to humiliate her husband (her persona is perhaps reminiscent of Bette Davis, whom she invokes); Richard Burton as the husband, an over-the-hill History professor (who is trying to publish novels?) who hasn't lived up to his wife's expectations; George Segal as ambitious junior faculty member invited to George and Martha's house for late night drinks; Sandy Dennis (AA!) as rather lost soul of a wife, i.e. "mouse." Excellent adaptation of Albee play by Mike Nichols in his first film! He does the best one can with an adapted play – intense close-ups (Richard Burton's pock marks on his face! some slanted camera shots), some of the action taken outside, quiet external interludes among the acts, etc. Strong points of the film are the aggressive, insult rich, in-your-face Albee dialogue, and the memorable performances of Burton and Taylor, who appear to have been playing out their own alcoholism and anger in their characters. The play is questionable in places – there are more or less inexplicable phrases and references. What for example does the tagline mean? What exactly is the role played by the imaginary son in the couple's relationship? Given their commitment to "total war", one supposes only to wound the other as deeply as possible. Actually, the more important absent character is Taylor's father, Daddy, the president of the college, whom the daughter invokes frequently to make Burton feel guilty and a failure; being constantly compared to Daddy and told that you are a wimp and a miserable failure would annoy me too. It is extremely entertaining to watch the two go at it, particularly in the first part of the film, when the behavior is fresh and the big issues have not yet intervened. Taylor is a delicious alcoholic aggressive bitch, and Burton is a snide, more defensive and cynical interlocutor with a vicious, sarcastic sense of humor ("What would you like, Martha? Rubbing alcohol?"). As combat begins, we are amazed that these two have lasted together so long; but from Taylor's revelations to Dennis and other actions, it is obvious that the two thrive on violent behavior and (apparent?) hatred, i.e., a classic love-hate relationship. The film is like making love, i.e., rough sex: there is a great deal of dangerous looking violence, but after the orgasm (well, three of them in the games "Humiliate the Host," "Get the Guests," and "Bringing Up Baby"), calm is restored the next morning, and the couple embraces quietly and walks up the steps to rest. A great 60s era work that tears the mask off the supposedly placid and complacent American marriage! (2005)

Who's That Knockin' at My Door 1967 Martin Scorsese 2.5 Harvey Keitel as J.R., Zina Bethune as The Girl. Scorsese's first feature film: he began with students film about the guys farting around in Little Italy moving from camaraderie to violence, added the story of The Girl, and then at the insistence of a film distributor, added the arty sex scene shown about halfway through. The result is a rather seam-rich movie that has some continuity of theme and plot, but seems pasted together with lots of raw edges showing. Filled with avant garde, New Wave, style film techniques: long montage sequences (mostly of the guys fooling around) set to pop music songs; slow motion (the sex scene); jump cuts from the guys to The Girl story and back again (it is not at first clear whether the love story is happening at the same time or is a flashback); cuts and montages mainly to show JR's thoughts (e.g., of the sex events in the film while he is going to Confession at the end) or to describe a character's narrative (e.g., The Girl's account of her rape); his trademark hyper close-ups of physical objects – automobile windows closing, door locks opening and closing. The parts seem greater than the whole. Theme is JR trying to grow up, break out of the Italian ghetto with all its attitudes about women, friendship, religion, etc. The developing relationship with the modern white college girl challenges his beliefs and upbringing (family, mother, neighborhood, sexual attitudes), but in the end he is unable to break away. He won't have sex with her because she is a "girl" (continuation of his mother, comforting, a woman you would marry) and not a "broad" (the sex object shown gratuitously in montaged sex scene with several models) – a variant of the madonna/whore complex of the Italian ghetto. He has violent emotional crisis when she reveals to him

that she was raped a few years ago, and when he comes back to her, he says he “forgives” her and will marry her anyway; realizing he is still imprisoned by his past, Girl refuses, he loses his temper and calls her a whore, and movie ends with them separated. JR and Girl talk a lot about movies, especially ‘Rio Bravo’ and ‘The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance.’ He identifies with Wayne’s macho persona, and makes reference to his racist/sexual obsession in ‘The Searchers’ with its parallel to JR’s dilemma about his girlfriend’s rape. Film appears to mirror Scorsese’s difficulties breaking away from Little Italy when he went to NYU film school and married a fellow student from a different background. Although film ends with JR in confession, the forces holding him back are presented as more cultural than strictly religious. This film is interesting mainly for its small parts and for its insight into the beginning of Scorsese’s career. Not a great first film like ‘Citizen Kane!’ (2006)

Why Change Your Wife? (silent) 1920 Cecil B. DeMille 3.0 Gloria Swanson starting off as a rather dour and serious housewife who can’t hold on to her husband; Thomas Meighan as her husband who would rather have affection from her than read a book; Bebe Daniels as the other woman who sets her sights on Meighan and wins him with her flirtatious ways. Another DeMille sex comedy that plays on the romantic boredom of marriage, and after Meighan strays to the other woman, he returns to (remarry, one supposes) his first wife. This time (compared to ‘Husband’) the man strays, which makes it somewhat easier for him to return to his first mate than when the woman sets off. Swanson is cute in all her roles: as the dowdy, though pretty and conservative wife; then she decides to dress up in sexy, transparent, etc. clothes in order to win Meighan back; then she fights with Daniels in her husband’s sickroom when he falls and bumps his head in the street, and she wins him back with her fire and determination. Film ends cleverly – Daniels throws what she thinks is acid in Swanson’s face, but Swanson has tricked her – it is only her nighttime eyewash! Daniels takes the money out of her husband’s pocket and absconds saying that the best thing about marriage anyhow is the alimony. The last scene has the butler and the maid pushing the couple’s beds together and laying out the nightclothes on the bed. Film is in pretty good condition. It is well directed with telling close-ups of objects (the key over which the two women are fighting in the end) and faces (Swanson’s loving, concerned face while her ‘husband’ is lying in bed in a near coma). Slams against classical music, which appears to be for Europeans and effete people (such as the violinist who moves the soul but keeps his hands firmly on his instrument!) vs. good red-blooded American dance music and American guys who enjoy physical affection. Very similar to “Why Change Your Husband”. (2007)

Why Worry (silent) 1923 Sam Taylor, Fred Newmeyer 3.0 Harold Lloyd as himself, Jobyna Ralston as bad-toothed but very cute nurse sidekick that ends up landing her man. Rather unusual Lloyd vehicle since it is set in a small island in the South Pacific, Paradiso, that is inhabited by Latin Americans, most of whom resemble Mexicans. Most of the inhabitants wear large sombreros, sleep in the sun with their sombreros over their heads, are lazy and dirty, and act like Keystone cops – frantic and cowardly when the chips are down; much satire of the Latin American institution of revolution. The great lovable giant is a central sidekick of Lloyd – it takes dozens of local soldiers to subdue him, he can bend the bars on the jail, he can carry a canon on his back and have it fired by Lloyd; for the first half of his experience he is afflicted with a bad toothache, and Lloyd gets good comedy out of his resourceful attempts to extract the offending tooth, including jumping off a building with a rope tied around his waist; the tooth finally comes out. Lloyd’s character is fairly interesting – he is a very wealthy hypochondriac, who takes a nurse with him on a vacation; she has to feed him pills to satisfy him. Lloyd, although clueless about the situations around him, remains resourceful in the immediate context – in his perfect middle class costume (tight, light-colored pants, straw hat, big glasses, and painted lips) he manages to extract the Giant’s tooth, make his way to the hotel (a funny scene with a stumbling, dying man mistaken by Lloyd as a tango dancer), and to frighten and fight off an enemy army with no troops of his own. There seems to be some reference to ‘Zorro’ in the setting and the character of Herculeo, who reminds us of Captain Raymond in the Fairbanks movie. The romance with Ralston gets sweeter toward the end, and we are glad to see her getting her man and Lloyd giving up his hypochondria in the end – he would rather have the nurse than her pills. The film suffers from its non-USA/Los Angeles location, which Lloyd usually exploits to the max; Lloyd seems hopelessly out of context in Paradiso. (2006)

Wicker Man 1973 Robin Hardy (Britain) 3.0 Edward Woodward as a pretty uptight Christian policeman drawn to Summerisle (reborn pagan community off the west coast of Scotland) to investigate an alleged disappearance of a pre-pubescent girl, Britt Eklund as merry, sexy barmaid on the isle representing wanton sexuality (she has infamous nude dance trying unsuccessfully to seduce Woodward), Diane Cilento as prim schoolmarm who turns out to be just as devotedly pagan as the others, Christopher Lee as Lord Summerisle, the controller of events behind the scenes. Interesting movie that includes elements of detective investigation (Woodward nosing around everywhere in trying to uncover the fate of the girl Rowan whose supposed disappearance has been denounced to the police), horror (introducing the idea of sacrifice and then carrying it out at the end with the horrifying sacrifice-by-fire sequence in the wicker man, musical (several songs that derive from 60s folk genre and are pretty forgettable).

Woodward especially good as the Christian policeman horrified at first by the sexual degeneracy of the island and then – more understandably – by the practice of human sacrifice and his own murder: the last scenes in which he expresses his horror – personal and ideological – at the sacrifice of himself and the animals in the burning man and in which he spouts Christian imprecations and condemnations at the pagans killing him are quite shocking. He always plays well as the Christian tribune surrounded by pagan self-indulgence. The whodunit aspect of the film is quite good: Woodward is the (apparent) hunter through most of the film as he seeks the fate of the 12-year-old girl; after finding a hare in her coffin, he becomes convinced that she is being hidden and kept for sacrifice to ensure the success of next year's crop; and then – wham! – the viewer discovers that the whole community has been plotting against him and that they have lured him to the top of the Scottish cliff to sacrifice *him* to their gods -- the hunter is really the hunted; he is the ideal sacrifice, since he is a law enforcement officer and a virgin (he does not believe in sex before marriage). Film mocks Christian belief a bit in the person of Woodward, but also of course the pagans who seem to have few moral standards and indulge in human sacrifice, even if not of one of their own. Perhaps all religions leave much to be desired. After a promising, suspenseful beginning, the film drags a bit in the middle, only to hit the viewer hard with the twist and the shocking finale. The shorter version (by 12 minutes) is probably the better one. The Burning Man celebration in the Nevada desert is probably partly inspired by this film. (2006)

Wild 2014 Jean-Marc Vallée 3.0 Reese Witherspoon (also produced) as reserved young woman, Cheryl Strayed, who has made a hash of her life and proposes to walk her way out of it by doing the Pacific Crest Trail; Laura Dern in flashbacks as her joy-filled mother; Thomas Sadoski as Cheryl's nice-guy, long-suffering husband; Gaby Hoffmann as Cheryl's good friend in flashbacks. This film is part travelogue up through the mountains of California and Oregon, part personal redemption drama that leaves the viewer puzzled. It has an interesting narrative structure: it stays anchored in Cheryl's progression up the PCT, where she encounters a variety of experiences: a rough beginning trying to hitch her enormous backpack on her shoulders (she seems to have included many unnecessary things), backwoods guys that come on to her and threaten her, men and women who are kind and supportive, a friendly fox that stares at her with curiosity, extreme difficulties with her boots, which are too small (one tumbles down a cliff when she removes it to look at her bloody toenails; she throws the other one after it cursing in frustration) – REI replaces the boots free of charge; a water crisis, when she almost expires from thirst and is saved only when she happens upon a dirty pool of water; and finally a sort of epiphanic redemption in the Washington rain forest, where a little boy sings a clear-voiced a cappella version of "Red River Valley", before he and his grandmother walk off down the trail with their llama. Her journey is broken regularly by short, sharp flashbacks filling in what brought Cheryl to her journey: her extreme attachment to her affectionate mother, who left her abusive husband to give all of herself to Cheryl and her brother; her mother's sudden, shocking death from cancer; Cheryl's descent into the hellhole of casual sex and heroin use; her increasingly coarse character, characterized by cynicism and a lot of coarse language; her conversations with Hoffmann, who helped her decide to do the trail. To keep the viewer's attention focused on the personal drama, the lovely cinematography does not present spectacular scenes like Yosemite Valley or Lake Tahoe (Crater Lake is an exception). It is obvious that Cheryl is traumatized by the sudden disappearance of her mother, and that the distance from human interaction and the healing purity of nature separate her from her unhappy past. One wonders whether the film is

spiritual, perhaps transcendentalist – God, who dwells in the majestic vistas and the big trees in the beginning and end of the film, might have healed Cheryl’s soul and made her a better person, so that she can move on and, as she says in voiceover at the end, marry and have her own family. The Sierra is after all the spiritual home of John Muir. But then, what is the import of the boy’s performance of “Red River Valley”? The film is similar to the recent ‘Tracks’, although Mia Wasikowska is far more reticent than the voluble Cheryl. (2015)

Wild Strawberries 1957 Ingmar Bergman (Sweden) 3.5 Victor Sjöstrom as elderly Isak Borg making the journey to Lund for an honorary degree; Ingrid Thulin as his pregnant daughter-in-law, a sort of life force; Bibi Andersson in dual role as Sara, his teenage sweetheart who marries another man and as the happy, giggling teenage hitchhiker who teaches Isak by her example; Gunnar Björnstrand in his usual grim role as the lifeless and alienated son of Isak. Very famous film that is difficult to criticize, it is so influential. Depicts a journey of self-discovery just before it is too late: the literal journey is in a car on the way to receive the honorary degree; the inner journey is a series of discussions (mostly with Thulin), observation of the endearing and life-affirming college students that Isak picks up on his way, and especially the dreams, visions and recollections he has in the course of the film. Some of the visions are wonderful – the eerie dream with the carriage with the broken wheel, the clock with no hands, and Isak’s dead body trying to pull the live Isak into the coffin with him; the beautiful and bucolic reminiscence of the family’s summer vacation by the lake, as Isak walks through the scenes, overhears the dialogue, but is not seen by the other characters (shades of course of Woody Allen’s films); and the beautiful final scene where an enlightened Isak visits the summer lakeside again, sees a small family group fishing and lounging, and then smiles beatifically (the smile then being transferred to Isak as he falls asleep); the scene of his wife’s past infidelity and his incompetent examination are less affecting and more pompous. The stakes are whether Isak will recognize before he dies that he has been cold, cruel and lonely all his life (despite the admiration of service station owner Max Von Sydow and his wife), and start to make amends before it is too late. He succeeds: aside from the final smile, he reaches out to his son and his housekeeper, Agda, (unsuccessfully), and he exchanges avuncular comments with his Thulin. In rewatching, the most memorable thing is the performance of Seastrom: the camera lingers constantly on his ravaged (he must not have been in good health) and expressive face, as he reacts to the fight of the married couple in the car, the live-giving nature of the teenage “children” (representing innocence and hope). Film belongs to the early phase of Bergman’s career, when his films were not so ponderous and negative. (2007, 2008)

The Wild Bunch 1969 Sam Peckinpah 4.0 William Holden as the damaged leader of the gang looking for one more good haul in Mexico in about 1913; Ernest Borgnine as his usually good-humored sidekick; Emilio Fernandez as the bestial, usually drunk but entertaining general of the Federales; Alfonso Arau (director of ‘Like Water for Chocolate’) as a pungent, amusing and bad-toothed lieutenant under Fernandez; Warren Oates and Ben Johnson very fun to watch as two extremely dirty and disheveled brothers loyal to one another; Jaime Sanchez as an overly sweet Mexican member of the gang; Edmond O’Brien entertaining and completely unrecognizable with horrid teeth, dirty face covered with a grizzled beard; Robert Ryan as ex-associate pursuing the gang with a band of incompetent deadbeats. Classic western that stands out for its action scenes and violence. The action scenes are unforgettable, particularly: the initial robbery in the Texas town that turns out to be a trap that turns into a massacre of innocent bystanders (preceded by a bunch of kids torturing a scorpion with ants and then setting them all on fire); the intricately edited and timed robbery of the train that ends with the surprise appearance of horses but then the gang’s escape with the rifles and the machine gun; and the final hopeless shootout in which the four protagonists go down fighting while taking about 100 Federales with them. The violent scenes are characterized by expressionistic blood squirts – very unrealistic but they illustrate well the physical damage caused by gunshots – and by the use of slow motion for the falling bodies; the overall effect is to bring home the reality of gun violence, unlike traditional American westerns where the victims look like they have gone to sleep; the brutal portrayal of violence seems to point to the influence of spaghetti westerns. An overall theme is the passing of the Old West: automobiles and machine guns make their appearance, and the gang repeats that, unlike the old days, it is hard to make a living; also

Holden is a damaged fellow on his last leg, what with an old wound that keeps him from mounting his horse and many regrets about missed romantic opportunities and his betrayed friendship with pursuer Robert Ryan. Too much sentimentality especially in treatment of the Mexican villagers led by Sanchez, who seem to be innocent souls with soulful eyes and their hearts full of song (scenes in the Mexican village recall Kerouac?). Film concentrates on the relationship of the gang members: they all are dirty and ragged (especially Oates and Johnson!) and always seems to be drinking whisky straight from the bottle and looking for Mexican whores; they bicker among themselves and even threaten to kill one another; but ultimately a bond of honor binds them together, and they make their famous walk through the village to certain death because they want to avenge the torture and death of their friend Sanchez. Despite substandard musical score, the film has an epic feel: men hanging together and willing to perform honorable deeds despite the hopelessness that comes from the decline of the independence and lawlessness of the Old West. Significant borrowing from Huston's 'Treasure of the Sierra Madre'. (2009)

Wilde 1997 Brian Gilbert (Britain) 3.5 Stephen Fry perfectly cast as the very image of Oscar Wilde – dandyish multi-colored clothes, long, carefully brushed hair, broad brimmed hat, supercilious and witty; Jude Law beautiful as his selfish, bratty, destructive lover Lord Alfred Douglas; Vanessa Redgrave in a small role as Wilde's steely Irish mother; Jennifer Ehle as Wilde's pretty, maternal, long-suffering wife; Michael Sheen also pretty as Robbie, Wilde's first male lover and a faithful friend until the end; Tom Wilkinson as the rough-hewn, rage-filled, and revenge-bent Marquess of Queensberry, Douglas' father – he cannot abide the idea of his son's relationship with the “bugger”. Biographical film of Wilde that begins with his trip to America, where he lecturers to frontier miners (!), taking him through his marriage, gay love affairs, trial, imprisonment, and his sad, lonely last years in Paris. The film is handsomely produced – lush Edwardian interiors and costumes, elegant carriages rattling down London streets, large audiences watching Wilde's plays appreciatively, witty dialogue, and of course classy, skilled British actors that help immerse the viewer in the story. Wilde is depicted as a largely conformist, surprisingly vulnerable man that loves his wife and two sons, who loves being the center of attention and épating the bourgeoisie with his iconoclastic witticisms and amusing plays, but who cannot resist following his “nature” into homosexual involvements, which he always seems in part to regret. As long as he restricts himself to pretty boys (Robbie and valets that he picks up in the street), Edwardian society just looks on with just some bemusement, but when he falls in love with the unrestrained Douglas, things get dangerous. Douglas is a bratty egotist locked in combat with his ranting father and looking upon Wilde as more of a substitute father figure than his true love, and when he makes the reckless decision to sue his father for libel, a hopelessly ensnared Wilde cannot help but follow him to destruction. The civil suit soon leads to a criminal action against Wilde for indecent behavior (the transition from one to the other is truncated and confused), and he is condemned to a short prison term that breaks his health and spirit. British polite society is characterized as viciously hypocritical in the way it turns suddenly on Oscar after many years of tolerating and lionizing him; as he is led from the courtroom, people shout at him and spit on him; there is no question of his ever returning to life in London after he is released, and he dies at 46 after a short reunion with Douglas. The first three-quarters of the film up to the trial is the best: it is a delight observing and listening to Fry as Oscar Wilde incarnate; his demise is tragic, but not nearly as fully realized as Wilde in his glory. (2013)

Win Win 2011 Tom McCarthy 3.0 Paul Giamatti pleasant, scruffy, happily married lawyer down on his luck and anxious for income opportunities; Amy Ryan as his delightful stay-at-home wife and born-to-be mother; Jeffrey Tambor as upper middle aged, long-faced accountant who helps Giamatti coach the local high school wrestling team; Bobby Cannavale as Giamatti's buddy, an enthusiastic jock engaged in an amusing (?) divorce; Burt Young as the irascible older client of Giamatti that he puts in a rest home to supplement his income; Alex Shaffer as footloose teenage grandson of Young who brings light and movement to Giamatti's life. Rather optimistic, good natured, small scale Independent film about life in America showing the difficulties of our lives but expressing confidence that we can find our way out. Giamatti, in many ways the father in an ideal American family (charming and supportive wife with two cute, little daughters), has income problems since his law practice is moribund; he takes the guardianship of one of his clients but commits an ethical lapse in the process; meanwhile Young's

grandson arrives in town fleeing from his more or less irresponsible mother; Giamatti and Ryan adopt him informally, and the kid finds new purpose by joining Giamatti's high school wrestling team; trouble looms when Shaffer's mother returns to claim him and her father (she wants the guardianship commission) and Giamatti's subterfuge risks coming to light; all ends happily when the mom agrees to leave her father and son with Giamatti, and Giamatti decides to tend bar to supplement his income. Nothing very dramatic happens in the film, but McCarthy has a delightful light touch that leaves the viewer smiling: Giamatti is often bemused but always open about it and searching for solutions; Ryan can be challenging and even irascible, but she is supportive of Giamatti and eager to rescue an abandoned child like Shaffer ("Alex, we love you."); Giamatti's assistant coaches are always amusing, especially Cannavale, who doesn't seem to have grown up since he wrestled in high school and he is given to high fives and shouting too loud from the bench; Young is curmudgeonly and seems to be gradually losing his contact with reality, but he loves his grandson and at the end of the film is delighted to be back in his own house. The author's point of view is very positive: sure, not everything always goes right for us, but with a little patience, resourcefulness, and personal flexibility, things will turn out ok. Little film with a sure light touch and a kind of instinctive wisdom. (2011)

Winchester '73 1950 Anthony Mann 3.0 James Stewart clean shaven with a very dirty hat; Shelley Winters as annoying token woman (she would be better off playing in 'Gidget'); Will Geer as rather humorous and easy-going Wyatt Earp; Stephen McNally as good-looking gunfighter who has a personal problem with Stewart; Millard Mitchell as easy-going, tongue-tied comic relief as Stewart's sidekick; Rock Hudson in amusing early role as stern and dignified Indian chief (he seems to be wearing an artificial nose); pretty boy Tony Curtis miscast in small way as a soldier in the cavalry; Dan Duryea in character as wise-cracking, vicious, simpering outlaw. Film is focused on the rifle the Winchester 73—lots of people caressing it and oohing and ahing over it. Guns are presented as the key to survival and importance in the West; without one you are naked, defenseless. The rifle, won by Stewart in Dodge City in a shooting contest, passes through many hands, rather reminding the viewer of 'La Ronde'. This western puts the protagonists through all the trials of the genre: the good guys have to deal with large numbers of outlaws (all of whom are dead by the end of the film), not to mention the Indians, who have learned about repeating rifles (the Little Big Horn just took place) but who use miserably ineffective tactics when attacking a small squadron of cavalry armed with two repeating rifles; and there is the *de rigueur* irrelevant romance between Stewart and Winters. The narrative hook is why McNally and Stewart have such bad blood between them (*vide* the famous scene in the beginning when upon seeing one another, they instantly go for their guns forgetting that Earp does not allow anyone to wear their guns in Dodge City), and the expectation that they will confront one another by the end of the film. The viewer finally finds out that they are brothers and that McNally killed their father (shot him in the back!). In final methodical confrontation on a craggy mountain overlooking the plain (taking cover, frequently shifting positions, firing repeatedly with their repeating rifles) Stewart finally gets McNally. Then comes the standard Hollywood ending: Stewart gets his man, and Winters, conveniently freed by the death of her fiancé, gets her man (Stewart). The film is a classic western, but with a more personal psychological touch – the rivalry/hatred between two brothers. Stewart is a complex and morally ambiguous character: the code of honor means loyalty to his father and he has (of course) a relaxed and genial character; but he is vindictive and unforgiving, morally righteous (he never doubts that he is justified to kill his brother), a bit brutal (his pummeling of Duryea in a bar), and of course cold-blooded and relentless (shoots his brother down and leaves his body on the mountain). Lovely black and white scenery – dry grasslands, barren mountains in the background. Good chase of Hudson and Indians after Winters and her swain; picturesque shots of horsemen backlit riding on top of a distant ridge. Last part of film appears to be in desert environment perhaps in Arizona; final shootout in picturesque mountain, where ricocheting bullets torture Stewart. Clean, efficient, no-nonsense cutting. (2008)

The Wind 1928 Victor Seastrom (sc. Frances Marion) 3.5 Lillian Gish as pretty, innocent, lonely, shy, naïve, anxious easterner come to the desert to visit relatives and find a new life, Lars Hanson as one of the men who falls in love with her and then he marries her, Montagu Love as the city slicker salesman she meets on the train and who wants her to run off with him to the East. Filmed in Bakersfield

with fans running all the time to simulate the sand-driving wind; film is largely about the harshest possible environment – the desert with the wind blowing constantly and driving sand before it, blinding people outside and seeping through the doors of houses depositing itself in every nook and cranny and beating against the window panes, even breaking them toward the end. One wonders whether the sand and wind reflect the dust bowl conditions prevalent in parts of the central USA (but 1920s?). All the people of the area are poor and starving, but Gish, who arrives uncertain, anxious, and naïve, is almost driven to distraction (insanity) in many scenes, particularly toward the end when she has to deal with issues of fidelity, murder and the environment! Film is a melodramatic potboiler filmed in arty fashion by the renowned Seastrom. He and Marion concoct several wonderful scenes with aggressive editing of short shots: 1) 3.0-3.5 – Gish’s wedding night when she resists the eager Hanson (she has married him in desperation to have a place to live), and when he tries to force himself upon her, she shrieks that he never touch her again; 2) 4.1-4.8 – the final sequence when Love again imposes himself on her while her husband is gone (does he actually have sex with her two times in the film?), but she – close to despair – shoots him with a revolver, and then tries to bury him outside in the sand; when Hanson returns and she confesses, he pretends not to see the body (one assumes that it is exposed because of the shifting sand), they embrace and they live happily ever after. The happy ending was imposed by the studio; the original ending had her wandering to her death in the sandstorm, a victim of her sex, the environment, and her crime. Some humor in the beginning, but unrelievedly dramatic for most of the film. A kind of existential drama: nature is fierce and without pity and inveterately hostile to human settlement (sometimes pictured symbolically as a superimposed white ghost horse cavorting on the screen); Gish is rootless, looking for an emotional and physical home and suffering much from being a single woman in the West. She finally finds comfort in the revised ending in true love that conquers all – we can bear anything with a mate that loves and supports us. (2009)

The Wind Rises 2013 Hayao Miyazaki (Japan) 4.0 Feature length animated film adapted by Disney Studios with voices of well-known American actors, including Stanley Tucci, Gordon-Leavitt, Emily Blunt. Interesting, excruciatingly beautiful, sentimental film about Jiro Horikoshi, the designer at Mitsubishi of the famous Japanese fighter, the Zero; the only Miyazaki film seen by this viewer that tells a more or less realistic, contemporary story. Starting when Jiro as a child of six, the film follows a dual narrative: Jiro’s fascination with aircraft including his career as an aircraft engineer up to the end of World War II; and his romance and marriage to Naoko, his cute wife, who dies of consumption at the same time Jiro’s fighter soars in its test flight. He retains always a boyish appearance with spiky dark hair and big round, dark-rimmed glasses; he and his friends smoke an awful lot of cigarettes. Most of the characters, the clothing (except the kimonos), and the city constructions have a strong western look. Beautiful animation that one expects of Miyazaki: rather jerky movement with vivid, vibrant colors; particularly compelling nature scenes – swelling clouds moving past, green fields, snow falling past bare tree limbs, trains following curving tracks through the landscape, airplanes soaring through light-filled, cloudy skies, rain pouring down on a leaky umbrella. Starting with a citation from Paul Valéry – “Le vent se lève. Il faut tenter de vivre” – the spirit of the film is spiritual and poetic. Jiro is a dreamer: in his inspirational dreams he meets the good-humored Italian airplane designer, Gianni Caproni, who encourages him to become an aircraft engineer (he can’t become a pilot because of his poor eyesight); later when he is working on aircraft design, he detects flaws such as popping rivets or collapsing struts while imagining flight tests, and then corrects them before actually testing. The film is excellent in portraying the fascination and romance of manned flight – the planes rushing and soaring past the clouds and over the landscape, the fire exhaust emerging from the exhaust pipes, the enthusiasm and dedication of the engineers, draftsmen, and assembly workers that work on the planes. The romantic narrative is less compelling, but sweet, sentimental, tears flowing, Naoko calling Jiro into her bed despite the weakness from her disease, the German character, Hans Castorp (yes, from ‘The Magic Mountain’) invoking a sanatorium that might cure Naoko’s tuberculosis. Japan is depicted as poor, inferior, behind every western country in aircraft development; Jiro is sent to Germany to learn the principles of all-metal aircraft construction from the Junker company, where he learns to despise the Nazis – Junker himself is described as having problems with them. His design of the Zero catapults Japan into the foreground of fighter aircraft development, an implicit tribute to Japanese aeronautical genius. Jiro’s fundamental desire is to

build an aircraft that is “beautiful”, making him a bit melancholy when he realizes that the only practical outlet for his plans is the military. Miyazaki’s final film. (2015)

Wind River 2017 Taylor Sheridan 3.5 Thriller about the murder of a teenage girl on the Wind River Indian reservation in Wyoming that is also a dark drama about the condition of the inhabitants. Jeremy Renner strong, resolved, yet quiet and sensitive as a predator tracker -- his efficient one-shot killing of a wolf in the first frame gives the viewer a clear premonition of what is to come; Elizabeth Olsen young, blond, inexperienced, yet gritty as the FBI agent sent to the reservation to solve the murder; Graham Greene massive, solid, colorful as the Indian police chief; Gil Birmingham noble, wise, stoic, yet entertainingly humorous as the father of the murdered girl, Nathalie (played in cameo by the too-Los Angeles Kelsey Asbille) The setting is the paradoxical nature of the reservation: spectacular mountain scenery and tall-treed forests covered with a thick blanket of snow (including Gannett Peak, 13,809') and yet the tragic condition of the people who live there. Although Renner and Birmingham live in decent quarters, drugs and violence plague the population: Birmingham's son is on drugs alienated from his father and living in a crack-like house on the reservation, Renner's own daughter has disappeared with no information on what happened to her. Although not an Indian himself, Renner identifies with the Shoshones on the reservation and is the only character able to communicate in a friendly way with the shell-shocked Birmingham; the two bring the film to a stoic conclusion in their last talk together, in which Birmingham seems to have come to terms with the death of his daughter. The thriller aspect of the film is expertly done. The film begins with Nathalie running desperately through the snow. After her frozen body is found Olsen arrives from the FBI and asks Renner to assist her, to which he surprisingly agrees since his own daughter has presumably met a similar fate. The investigation moves slowly with numerous forays in roaring snowmobiles into the wilderness. Toward the end the screenplay takes us to an oil drilling site, where there ensues a bitterly bloody gun battle between the Indian police and the security people on the site (the film never clarifies what they are hiding); the viewer is led to believe that Olsen is shot dead, but it turns out she is only wounded since protected by (a highly effective!) bullet-proof vest. One of the last scenes in the hospital has Renner and she bonding in what promises to be as romantic connection. The perp who led the rape assault against Nathalie escapes from the shootout into the wilderness, and since Renner has promised her father that he will even the score without bringing him back, in a memorable scene next to Gannett Peak, he sets the guy free barefoot to die in the snow the same way his victim had. The violence and revenge drama are sometimes unsettling. The frank depiction of conditions on the reservation, the violence of the narrative, and the solid presence of Renner produce a memorable, gut-wrenching film. (December 2017)

The Wind that Shakes the Barley 2006 Ken Loach (Ireland) 4.0 Cillian Murphy as Damien, handsome, quiet teenager who is transformed into a radical follower of the IRA by the bullying and brutality of the British Black and Tans; Pedraic Delaney as Teddy, his loving brother, devoted soldier of the IRA, brave even when the B&TS pull all his fingernails out, and who eventually settles for the moderate course of the Irish Free State; Liam Cunningham as Dan, the devoted IRA leader (the father of the boys, and he is killed in the end?); Orla Fitzgerald as Sinead, solid Irish girl that supplies weapons for the IRA boys and eventually marries Damien. Excellent political film by Ken Loach that tracks the history of the 1919-25 Irish War and then Civil War by focusing on a small group of militants in County Cork. Excellent screenplay provides exciting encounters with the Brits, internecine conflict between radical IRA gunmen and the English landlords and hangers-on of the status quo, background political discussion between the moderates (who opt for the Irish Free State) and the radicals (who want a socialist redistribution of property and a completely independent Irish Republic), a slight amount of romantic intrigue between Damien and Sinead, who don't even seem to kiss until the truce is declared in 1920, and a loving depiction of the grey-green Irish countryside, rocky and bare heaths, deep woods, thatch roofed cottages that are gleefully burned by the out-of-control black and tans. The violent encounters between the two sides are exciting: usually it is the IRA ambushing small British patrols (the payback/revenge factor is particularly intense when the guys execute four British soldiers in a back room of a pub after the latter have humiliated and insulted the kids while playing pool in a pub); the British get a tip-off toward the beginning that enables them to capture the whole band, but then the betrayal of one of the guards

enables most of them to escape; the most rattling episode is when Damien has to execute a British landlord and an Irish teenager who had betrayed them to the enemy (much hesitation and suffering); although obviously reluctant, Damien does his duty, shooting both of them with a pistol. There is no doubt that the director is on the side of the radical idealists, who say they want to bring economic and social justice to Ireland, and not the Church, which just denounces the violence, or the Anglo-Irish upper class who exploit the peasants, nor the moderate kids like Teddy who accept the halfway solution of the Free State (Teddy claims that acceptance of the plan is only temporary). Many loud, raucous debates between the two sides over treatment of rich Irishmen who support independence and whether to accept the Irish Free State. There is a great poetry in the courage of the revolutionaries, their dedication to their military task despite being decent kids who are close to their sisters, mothers, and friends, whom they sometimes have to kill, and great tragedy in the sadness that comes from internal struggle and the deaths of young men with a shining future. In the end, Teddy himself orders the execution of his brother, and when he brings his belongings to his wife, Sinead, she beats him with her fists and shrieks that she never wants to see him again. The film is often noisy, but Loach's admiration for the courage and dedication of the Irish resisters is eloquent. (2010)

The Wind Will Carry Us 1999 Abbas Kiarostami (Iran) 2.5 Behzad Dourani plays the head of a film crew that has traveled from Tehran to a picturesque village in Kurdistan to make a documentary about the funeral of an elderly woman – but first they must wait for her to die! Because the director leaves so many things out of his “narrative” and doesn’t construct the film’s progress with the usual narrative coherence, it is difficult to know what the film is about. It is multi-faceted and makes a variety of observations that just don’t adhere with the average viewer. The three fellow crew members who arrive with him are never seen; and the 16-year-old girl that milks a cow for him in a dark cellar appears only in the dark and we see only her back (the same when she is running away from the Engineer on top of the hill). The four wait, the three men sleeping in their room, and the Engineer circulates in the village, having a debate with an older woman who runs a tea cafe, and driving his four-wheel-drive to the cemetery on top of the hill for better reception whenever he receives a phone call. Behzad befriends a precocious little boy, who is a good student and learns moral lessons about the good going to heaven rather than something practical to prepare for life; the two of them get in a fight and then make up. Behzad is courteous to the villagers and they are courteous to him, but he remains fundamentally aloof from the people. Most of the trackable observations deal with women – all the older women are dressed in blue costumes; women are expected to serve men; but on the other hand even the men are provincial with limited horizons; there is certainly no emphasis on exploitation and unhappiness. The viewer is saved from pointlessness by little bits of humor scattered throughout the film. The strongest part of the movie is the exquisite cinematography – rolling fields dotted with lone trees and mountain ranges in the background, the picturesque village with its pinkish walls and intricate interior passageways; camera shots are usually framed with attention to painterly symmetry and balance. The ending deals with death and funeral rites: after washing his car’s windshield, Behzad throws a human femur that he has found in the cemetery into a large flowing irrigation ditch; we watch the bone float for about half a minute; and then ‘The End’. (2007)

Wings 1927 William Wellman (Paramount) 4.0 Charles Rogers, Clara Bow, Richard Arlen, Gary Cooper in pronounced cameo role. Outstanding silent Hollywood film with convincing special effects and battle sequences and moving individual drama. Jack (CR) is in love with same girl as David (RA), while Clara Bow pines away unrequited for Jack. The three end up in France with the boys flying; David is killed by Jack due to a misunderstanding (he is escaping from behind German lines in a German fighter plane), and David, returning home as a war hero, finally turns to Mary (CB) and they kiss at end. Individual melodrama and romance are excellent: Clara Bow is as usual eager, enthusiastic, innocent, tomboyish, and good hearted with a manic smile. The two male leads are like two pretty kids in a playpen, but we do grieve when Dave dies and when his parents forgive Jack for his mistake. Reasonably accurate depiction of fighting in World War I with much death and elegiac passages about the brave people who die. The French are cordial allies, the Germans worthy adversaries; Kellerman and his Flying Circus even have a sense of chivalry. The battle sequences (Dawn Patrol, the Gotha episode,

shooting down the balloons, the Big Push to final victory) stand out: the fighter planes (the American pilots appear to be flying French planes) turn and twirl through the sky, plunging into clouds with jaunty assurance; intense close-ups of pilots as they grimace and jerk heads back and forth trying to see what is happening – has another plane got behind them? Entertaining picture of Paris on leave including a lot of stuff that would never have made it beginning in 1934. An obviously first-class production with no expense spared, but all seems to be under control, thanks perhaps to the director (doubt that Howard Hughes would be very disciplined). (2007)

The Winslow Boy 1999 David Mamet (Britain) 4.0 Rebecca Pidgeon in calculating, sometimes off-center performance as a suffragette “new woman” in search of a strong man; Nigel Hawthorne as older family patriarch – stern but kind and loyal underneath; Gemma Jones as balanced, sensible, elegant wife of Hawthorne; Jeremy Northam smashingly handsome and charismatic as barrister who takes up the Winslow Case. Extremely entertaining, subtle Mamet adaptation of famous 1946 play that recounts the impact of the son’s dismissal from school for stealing on his upper middle class London family in starchy (look at those collars!) Edwardian times (1910). The plot would lend itself to a ‘Rocky’-style drama ending in the triumph of the good guys – the boy is cleared of any wrong-doing after Northam gets the House of Commons to put pressure on the Admiralty and the board of inquiry finds in his favor; and the film is very entertaining on that basic level; Mamet goes to great lengths to include numerous shots of Edwardian paraphernalia to situate the film as a period piece. But Mamet apparently follows the play in focusing on the drama of the affair’s impact on the Winslow family and then on the romance between Northam and Pidgeon that develops in the second half of the film. Hawthorne is a proud and loyal man, and when his son assures him that he is innocent, he goes to almost any length to have his name publicly cleared – greatly reducing the family’s income, withdrawing his older son from university at Oxford, on the verge of dismissing the family’s only loyal servant, exposing the family to public ridicule, causing strains in his relationship with his long-suffering wife, aging himself considerably by the last part of the film (he goes from walking with one cane to two canes). The most thrilling plot development is the romance between Pidgeon and Northam. Mamet conveys with great cleverness and reserve the attraction between them. Pidgeon shows little initial reaction, although it is apparent from her arms-length relationship with her fiancé and the family solicitor that she is on the prowl for a strong man who will challenge her – she does not want to fade into the domestic woodwork like a proper Edwardian girl. Although Northam is too aloof to show it out front, he is interested in her from the beginning; although he says that he will take the family’s case because he believes the boy is innocent, it is hinted on several occasions that he is trying to impress Pidgeon, despite his disagreeing with her about her political activities; their courtship is surreptitiously erotic – all in code (he expounds on the feminine quality of the flamboyant hat she wore to the House of Commons). The end is delicious: he comes to the Winslow house to tell Pidgeon about the favorable verdict; the two thrust and parry in their usual way (wonderful dialogue); at the gate Pidgeon shakes Northam’s hand saying that she doubts that they will meet again; he puts on his hat and as he walks away utters his famous line, “You know so little about men” with its promise of future requited love. ‘Winslow’ may be Mamet’s best film: he emerges from his plot-driven con puzzles, damps down the ‘Mametness’ of his dialogue, and delivers a film with full-blown, interesting characters and social issues but without sacrificing the uniqueness of his directorial vision. (2011)

Winter’s Bone 2010 Debra Granik 3.0 Jennifer Lawrence as “true grit” teenager caught in the web of a southeast Missouri drug clan in her determined quest to find her father; John Hawkes as Jennifer’s uncle who gradually becomes more sympathetic; Dale Dickey as sadistic, drastically unattractive hillbilly woman who beats Lawrence to a pulp and doesn’t hesitate to use a chainsaw to cut hands from a cadaver. Almost incredibly gritty, repellent, and realistic drama about a teenager who has to find her father, who is a fugitive from justice who has put up the family house as bond for his appearance; Lawrence, her mentally disturbed mother, and Lawrence’s two children will lose the house unless he shows up or is proven dead. The film starts off as a search for a missing person, but turns into a sort of murder mystery, when Jennifer finds out that her father has been murdered. The environment is the lowest socio-economic level of hillbilly: country hick accents, barely insulated houses, rusting

discarded appliances and old automobiles littering the yard, dirt roads, lots of woods, ragged clothes in the cold winter weather. At first Lawrence runs up against the power of the family clan that warns her about pressing her luck and then beats her up and barely spares her life when she persists. Desperate at the prospect of being evicted from her home with nowhere to go, she even explores the possibility of enlisting in the army (eyeing the bonus of \$40,000). Story ends happily with family trumping clan: the formidable Dickey has a change of heart and leads Lawrence to her father's body and cuts off the two hands to prove that he is dead; Lawrence and family keep the home, she receives the admiration of the local sheriff and the bail bondsman (who had come across as a jerk in a previous scene), and reconciles with her uncle (substitute father or possible lover?), who brings the kids a couple of chicks to show the celebration of life; even the money that some mysterious stranger had put up for the dad's original bail is returned to her. The film ends with a reprise of the haunting backcountry mountain ditty that we had heard in a previous scene as the kids play with their dad's banjo. Film moves at a slow pace that sometimes tries one's patience, and a lot of narrative questions remain unanswered – e.g., no justice to be done for the murder of the father? Nevertheless, Lawrence's performance is convincing; and her position caught between iron-like, irreconcilable forces lends the film an enduring sense of tragedy. (2010)

With Friends Like These 1997 Philip Messina 2.0 Robert Costanza as Gandolfini-like actor living in Hollywood; Adam Arkin as one of his best friends; David Strathair as another; Laura San Giacomo; Elle Macpherson Pretty awkward as a deceived wife; Amy Madigan; Bill Murray in amusing cameo role in beginning as producer coming to a party for free food. Mildly amusing, sometime annoying and flat comedy about a bunch of actors trying to get a job playing Al Capone for Martin Scorsese (who makes a humorless, flat appearance at the end of the film). Costanza is the best thing in the film -- big, bluff, good-humored, fond father and husband, too positive and attached to his friends to be truly annoyed by their plotting behind his back to get the Capone role. Some good routines and funny satirical situations about actors desperate for work but torn by their loyalty to one another, but also some bad acting. The three versions of Capone against flat backdrops at the end is amusing (Costanza's is the best). Views more like a TV movie. (2007)

Witness to Murder 1954 Roy Rowland 3.0 Barbara Stanwyck looking sharp in her long, pleated 50s skirt, successful interior designer, very persistent and “obsessive” (Merrill) about having seen George Sanders kill a woman in his apartment; Sanders as ex-Nazi Albert Richter – his usual suave, intelligent, insinuating, intimidating, womanizing self; Gary Merrill as laid-back police inspector, who discounts the initial story and then develops a romantic feeling for Stanwyck. Well-made minor LA murder mystery that stands out for the performances of Sanders and Stanwyck and a well-constructed narrative. The film initially resembles Hitchcock’s ‘Rear Window’ with Stanwyck witnessing a murder and then refusing to let go; it differs in that the perpetrator retaliates, suggesting that Stanwyck is mentally disturbed and should be confined to a mental institution. The romantic subplot has Merrill falling for Stanwyck, but remaining torn between not believing her story and wanting to protect her. After a fruitless ‘Dragnet’-like investigation of the possible connection between Sanders and the body of a young woman (probably a prostitute) found in Griffith Park, the film ends in a Hitchcock-like confrontation atop a LA skyscraper that has Sanders falling to his death in a shot reminiscent of the ending of ‘Saboteur’ and Merrill pulling Stanwyck up by the hand from a ledge, making the viewer think of ‘North By Northwest’; the stairs that Sanders and Stanwyck climb also recall the square-shaped stairs inside the belfry that James Stewart climbs at the end of ‘Vertigo’. Lots of dark, chiaroscuro-style shots obviously inherited from Film noir and an amusing scene in a mental hospital with Juanita Moore singing and a Nurse-Ratchet-style disquieting nurse injecting Stanwyck with a big hypodermic. Stanwyck’s character is rather weak and hysterical, intermittently convinced by the men around her that she is insane and probably only fantasized the murder. Merrill does not take her seriously until the end of the film; she is very frightened of Sanders. Sanders’ performance is bigger-than-life: in his book he writes in Nietzschean style about the future of the world, when the sniveling weaklings will fall under the domination of the elite; when he finally reveals his true colors to Stanwyck, he goes into a Hitler-style rant in German, shouting Nazi phrases in her face (recalling perhaps Hitchcock’s ‘Rope’). The film keeps one’s attention better than

most 50s detective films: the references to Nietzschean elitism and other thriller movies keep the viewer involved. (2015)

The Wolf Man 1941 (Universal) 3.0 Lon Chaney, Jr. as mild-mannered American son of local manor owner returned to England upon the death of his brother; Claude Rains as sympathetic, somewhat dull father of Chaney; Ralph Bellamy as bluff, unsympathetic American-speaking local police chief; Evelyn Ankers as earnest local beauty that Chaney pursues; Maria Ouspenskaya as gypsy woman who explains the wolf man curse to Chaney and the audience – she is usually seen riding around in a horse-drawn donkey cart; Bela Lugosi in bit role as gypsy man (also a werewolf) killed by Chaney at the beginning of the film; Warren William as doctor who constantly tells Chaney to get some rest. Effective, efficient, well-photographed version of the wolf man story. When Chaney is bitten by Bela, the werewolf, he turns himself into a werewolf (plot point taken from vampire films); (he roams when the wolf bane blooms and when the moon is full; he knows who his next victim is when he seems a pentagram on that person's hand); he becomes a senseless murderer; the poignant drama comes from the intense regret felt by the decent Chaney at the murders committed when he is under the spell. In the final hunt scene (copied from 'Frankenstein') the monster attacks Ankers, the woman he loves, and is then killed by his own father, who of course believes that he is striking an animal. Hardly fair that fate decrees that such a nice father must kill his own, equally nice, son. Some nice touches of cinematography, including a church scene, where the camera tracks up the middle aisle to show the intensely emotional faces of the congregation intercut with the suffering expression of the rejected Chaney. The entire film is shot on studio stages, which are extremely evocative and atmospheric, especially the outdoor sets (one wonders however why there is always fog on the ground); the cinematography is expressionist, usually eschewing unusual angles but suffusing the frame with contrasted light and shadow. The plot is played against the backdrop of a band of gypsies – exotic and pagan with all the trappings – and the bevy of town gossips, who try to drive Chaney out of town claiming that he is a criminal. The drama suffers some from the limited, sometimes heavy-handed active skills of Chaney (he also comes across as large, sometimes ungainly man) and the constant accompaniment of studio soap-opera music. Still a classy Universal-style B horror film. (2012)

Wolf Creek 2005 Greg McLean (Australia) 3.0 Nathan Phillips as innocent, unsuspecting backpacker setting out to cross the Australian western desert with two British chicks; Kestie Morassi as one of the two girl-victims; Cassandra McGrath as the other bird, who is practically undistinguishable from the first; John Jarratt steals the show as the charismatic, sadistic serial killer, Mick, who has a sly, bluff Australian sense of humor. Good slasher film obviously inspired by 'The Texas Chainsaw Massacre' and various mass Australian killings such as the Snowtown murders; the author tries to make us believe that the murders in the film were based on actual events. The film is an effective horror movie: the first part follows the progress of the three naive backpackers from their partying in Broome across the desolate, foreboding landscape to a meteor impact site at Wolf Creek (an actual location); the second part focuses on the terror and suffering inflicted by Mick on the innocent kids – the two girls are slaughtered, one with a knife (Mick makes her into a "head on a stick"), and the other shot in the back with a rifle as she tries pitifully to escape by crawling down the road. The horror and suspense is non-stop: one of the girls waking up to find her hands and feet bound; the other one shrieking continuously as Mick tortures and prepares to rape her; the hopes of the viewers are momentarily raised by escapes, but the utter isolation of Mick's lair and the perpetrator's relentless pursuit renders their efforts fruitless. Phillips is crucified in a cave, but he manages to extract his hands/arms from the (headless) nails and stumble out to the main road, where he is picked up by passing motorists and whisked off to safety. The director makes effective use of landscape, particularly the desolate otherworldliness of the crater site compounded by the unexpected bad weather – thunder and light rain all around, which might have had something to do with the kids' watches stopping and their car failing to start just before Mick shows up. One tires a bit of the director's penchant for handheld hyper-close ups of the victims suffering or attempts at escape. Jarratt is the best thing in the film – dominating, charismatic, sadistically humorous making film references, e.g., to 'Crocodile Dundee', and delighting inexplicably in dispatching his victims with

the maximum suffering. Another Australian film referencing mysterious, menacing forces outside the thin veneer of civilization on this vast continent. (2015)

The Wolf Man 1941 (Universal) 3.0 Lon Chaney, Jr. as mild-mannered American son of local manor owner returned to England upon the death of his brother; Claude Rains as sympathetic, somewhat dull father of Chaney; Ralph Bellamy as bluff, unsympathetic American-speaking local police chief; Evelyn Ankers as earnest local beauty that Chaney pursues; Maria Ouspenskaya as gypsy woman who explains the wolf man curse to Chaney and the audience – she is usually seen riding around in a horse-drawn donkey cart; Bela Lugosi in bit role as gypsy man (also a werewolf) killed by Chaney at the beginning of the film; Warren William as doctor who constantly tells Chaney to get some rest. Effective, efficient, well-photographed version of the wolf man story. When Chaney is bitten by Bela, the werewolf, he turns himself into a werewolf (plot point taken from vampire films); (he roams when the wolf bane blooms and when the moon is full; he knows who his next victim is when he seems a pentagram on that person's hand); he becomes a senseless murderer; the poignant drama comes from the intense regret felt by the decent Chaney at the murders committed when he is under the spell. In the final hunt scene (copied from 'Frankenstein') the monster attacks Ankers, the woman he loves, and is then killed by his own father, who of course believes that he is striking an animal. Hardly fair that fate decrees that such a nice father must kill his own, equally nice, son. Some nice touches of cinematography, including a church scene, where the camera tracks up the middle aisle to show the intensely emotional faces of the congregation intercut with the suffering expression of the rejected Chaney. The entire film is shot on studio stages, which are extremely evocative and atmospheric, especially the outdoor sets (one wonders why however there is always fog on the ground); the cinematography is expressionist, usually eschewing unusual angles but suffusing the frame with contrasted light and shadow. The plot is played against the backdrop of a band of gypsies – exotic and pagan with all the trappings – and the bevy of town gossips, who try to drive Chaney out of town claiming that he is a criminal. The drama suffers some from the limited, sometimes heavy-handed active skills of Chaney (he also comes across as large, sometimes ungainly man) and the constant accompaniment of studio soap-opera music. Still a classy Universal-style B horror film. (2012)

The Wolf of Wall Street 2013 Martin Scorsese 3.0 Leonardo DiCaprio as crazily manic financial manipulator, Jordan Belfort, obsessed with money and a sex addict; Jonah Hill sporting prominent teeth as nerdy stock broker converted to DiCaprio's lifestyle; Margot Robbie as strikingly sexy, blonde, perfect-model type who married DiCaprio and learned to hate him; Jean Dujardin as charming slippery Swiss banker who turns out to be incompetent; Kyle Chandler makes an impression as straight arrow FBI agent devoted to taking Belfort down; Rob Reiner droll as DiCaprio's ill-tempered dad -- he is fascinated that contemporary girls are clean shaven from their eyebrows to their toes. Over-the-top, usually excessive, long (three hour) film about manic anti-Wall-Street penny stock peddler who doesn't know where to stop. The film charts the beginning of his shady investment firm, punctuated with wildly cheering subordinates recalling drug-driven college pep rallies and equally wild pumping sex with prostitutes on office furniture; then the film follows Belfort's unstable, sex-obsessed relationship with Robbie and his increasing dependence on Quaaludes (remarkably excessive 10-minute sequence showing DiCaprio's and Hill's wild experience overdosing on them); and finally his pursuit and eventual arrest by Chandler, his cooperation with the investigation, and his condemnation to 36 months to a tennis court minimum security prison in Nevada. Obviously quoting from Belfort's book, the film is narrated from the ironic, smart ass point of view of the post-release Belfort. The film resembles an extreme 'National Inquirer' exposé with unremitting emphasis on sex, drugs, and an unrestrained and unending pursuit of wealth – no matter what, you never have enough. Scorsese punctuates the goings-on with his usual filming tricks – zooming in to catch the uninhibited greed of Belfort's minions, quick edits, slow motion, and an amusing voice-over usually from Belfort's post-prison perspective but often bringing in the thoughts of participants (e.g., Belfort and his aunt both wondering to the viewer if the other is hitting on him/her). The film doesn't even pretend to be moralistic: Scorsese luxuriates too much in the corruption and self-indulgence of the principals, and in any case Belfort serves only three years in prison, apparently enjoying a prosperous life in the public eye afterwards, writing a book, running get-rich seminar schemes

in New Zealand, and even appearing in the last scene of this film. DiCaprio succeeds in projecting Belfort's outrageous personality, as do his lieutenants with theirs. The best scene in the film is halfway through when Chandler visits Belfort's yacht, and the two have a tit-for-tat tough guy exchange, which ends with Chandler remarking that he is looking forward to enjoying the yacht himself after it is impounded by the FBI. Certainly not one of Scorsese's best. Technique and filming tricks do not serve the story or the moral; compare to Coens' 'Llewyn Davis' where technique serves a philosophical end, and Russell's 'American Hustle' where filming and sound track support a mesmerizing surprise-filled thriller plot. (2014)

The Woman in Green 1945 Roy Williams Neill (Universal) (Britain) 3.0 Basil Rathbone as good-looking, suave (fabulous profile!), relatively good-humored Holmes still playing the violin (pretty well); Nigel Bruce the perennial bumbling, rather dim-witted Watson; Matthew Boulton as the easy-going Scotland Yard inspector Gregson eager to call in Holmes to help with a case; Henry Daniell convincing as the fiendishly clever Professor Moriarty; Hillary Brooke as glamorous blond who hypnotizes Moriarty's victims. One of the late Rathbone Holmes films set in modern times but without reference to Britain's predicament in World War II. Film is short and simple (no exteriors), but well-produced and well-acted. Narrative focuses on a series of women murdered in London; they have one of their fingers severed. Upon investigation Holmes uncovers that the murders are the product of the infamous Moriarty, who we all thought had been executed for murder in Montevideo; the murders are just a means to the end of blackmail – the fingers are planted in the pockets of prominent hypnotized London men, who are prompted to pay large sums. Holmes outwits the hypnotist at the end when he visits her lair by substituting his own drug for the one she tries to give him; after his arrest Moriarty plunges to his death while trying to escape (will he return once again?). All performances – from the marvelous Rathbone, to the bumbling Watson, to the conniving Moriarty, to the attractive Brooke – are excellent. Perhaps due to the Hollywood Code, Holmes is a bit smooth around the edges – no outbreaks of ill temper (1980s BBC series with Jeremy Brett), no drug habit (Billy Wilder), no disreputable women – and the purist is offended by the motor cars and the references to telephones. The screenplay does not exclaim much over Holmes encyclopedic knowledge or his deductive magic. It includes the attempted murder of Holmes when he displays his faked profile in his window. Unlike the Conan Doyle stories, it does not confine itself to Holmes' activities, but leaves our hero behind to show us one of the murders and follows one of the male victims through a night club and the apartment of Brooke to set up the denouement. Entertaining show. (2014)

The Woman in the Window 1944 Fritz Lang 4.0 Edward G. Robinson as steady professor of Freudian psychology who appears to be happily married (if not with much passion) and who is at first determined to resist his libido; Joan Bennett quite glamorous and rather sympathetic as tall about-town party girl who puts the moves on Robinson; Raymond Massey as Robinson's friend in exclusive Manhattan club – he is the district attorney and adept at making Robinson nervous about the crime he has committed; Dan Duryea as lowlife blackmailer with a straw hat who puts the squeeze on Bennett after the murder of the man he was supposed to be protecting. Famous pessimistic, dark, noir-like thriller by Lang that does not disappoint. Film sets up the battle between respectability and the libido (Robinson says he is determined to avoid the latter, but he reads Solomon's 'Song of Songs'); and then, after being wakened up by the club waiter from a nap, Robinson goes into the street and gazes at the portrait of Bennett in the window of a shop; she then appears mysteriously as a reflection next to the image of herself in the portrait, and the two go off to have a drink. Robinson murders Bennett's lover in her apartment (it was legitimate self-defense), and then disposes of the body; the two agree to stay away from one another to avoid being caught. Massey's investigation is nerve-racking since he recounts it all to Robinson and even teasingly (?) points out the possible evidence against the latter; throughout their fascinating interchanges, Robinson acts nervous, as if he is trying to get caught (we of course think that the guilt imposed by his super-ego is asserting itself). Episodes in which Duryea talks at length with Bennett are somewhat long-winded, but the tension escalates with Robinson's increasing discouragement; looking wistfully at photographs of his wife and children, he takes an overdose of sleeping powders. When Duryea's is killed by police in the street, Bennett calls Robinson to tell him they are in the clear, but – irony – he is already

falling into his final sleep dressed in his bathrobe. The camera moves into a tight close-up of his face as his eyes close, there is a pause and ... gently the waiter in the club shakes him on the shoulder to tell him that it is time to wake up, and the camera tracks back to show Robinson dressed in his club clothes – the whole story has been a dream! Somewhere in the famous shot, there is an invisible dissolve. He leaves the club, looks with relief at the portrait in the street, rejects the advances of a prostitute, and goes home to revel in his salvation. The film is an anti-noir, warning us to stay away from illicit adventure and dangerous woman (there is surely nothing dangerous about his wife!). Film holds viewer's interest throughout. Conversation is efficient and concise; Lang's camera work is always efficient and concisely elegant (as in the shot from the inside of the car parked at the crime scene that shows Robinson worried and exhausted on the inside and Massey conversing confidently with the police officers outside before he returns to the nervous Robinson). The dream twist at the ending is not offensive, since the narrative action often seemed somewhat dreamlike, and in any case dreams are a classic place in Freudian psychology for erotic desires to surface, later of course to be rejected by one's rational and conventional self. (2008)

Woman of Straw 1964 Basil Dearden (Britain) 3.0 Sean Connery in his first non-Bond role as the emotionless author of a plot to get the money of ...; Ralph Richardson outstandingly expressive and believable as caustic and curmudgeonly but sentimental uncle of Connery – he is confined to a wheelchair and plays classical music (Beethoven, Berlioz, Mozart) on the loudspeaker system in his house; Gina Lollobrigida looking fairly dowdy (for her) but performing capably as nurse whom Connery recruits to seduce and marry his uncle; Alexander Knox competent and businesslike as police inspector. Entertaining, although somewhat inert, British murder mystery à la Agatha Christie that deals with murderous shenanigans among the upper classes. Settings are sumptuous at the least: majestic Longleat House (or the like) photographed extensively both inside and outside; equally extravagant yacht sailing in the Mediterranean to Majorca. When Lollobrigida arrives as Richardson's nurse, Connery hatches his plot to get his uncle's money by having Lollobrigida marry him and then inherit his money after his death (she promises to give him a million pounds). Things of course work out differently: citing a fib about having to register Richardson's new will on English soil before it becomes valid, Connery poisons Richardson to death and persuades Lollobrigida to wheel his cadaver (it looks pretty good) to his house so that Connery will have time to register the will; in the meantime, however, Connery makes it appear that Richardson died after he arrived at the house, thus incriminating Lollobrigida, who is the only person to have access to him after arriving there (Connery repeatedly reminds her to lock the door). She is subsequently convicted of murder and is awaiting execution, but, perhaps recalling 'Dial M for Murder', she is saved at the last minute by the diligent Knox, who incriminates Connery – somewhat unconvincingly – in the manor house; it appears that the grieving widow will live happily ever after. The film moves very slowly until the end sequences; the sequences dealing with Lollobrigida's courting of Richardson and the subsequent rolling of his body from the yacht to the house sometimes seemed endless. The film is severely overproduced with the camera lingering on Lollobrigida's décolletage and the palace and yacht décor. Adding to the sense of lifelessness is Connery's wooden performance: nary a glimmer of maliciousness in his interactions with the other two principals. However, the twists in the concluding sequences are handled deftly (the viewer gets a hint of what is happening just before it actually does); the color print is faultless and makes watching the scenery a pleasure; and Ralph Richardson's performance is compelling – he is so believable that the viewer accepts his rather contradictory character without demur. Enjoyable blockbuster-style film, if a bit lifeless at the core. (2009)

Woman of the Year 1942 George Stevens (MGM: Ring Lardner and Garson Kanin) 3.5 Katharine Hepburn as Tess Harding, aloof, egotistical, and highly sophisticated unmarried New York columnist married to her job; Spencer Tracy charming, down-to-earth sports columnist writing for the same newspaper and looking for love; Fay Bainter as Sam's wistful, preachy mom; William Bendix as Pinky, Sam's New-York-talking bar friend, a boxing enthusiast; Dan Tobin as Tess' snooty male secretary that Tracy gets a lot of laughs from through his slow burn. Classic romantic comedy that brought Hepburn and Tracy together for the first time. The two come from different sides of the tracks – Tracy is a regular guy, while Hepburn has a high-falutin' job, lots of international friends, speaks at least

a half dozen languages (good running joke), talks in a snooty accent, and lives in a carefully decorated 5th Avenue apartment. The two begin the movie with a heated argument through their columns; when they meet, they fall for one another and, after the very amusing baseball scene in which the frustrated Sam tries to teach the recalcitrant Tess the fundamentals of the game, they actually get married; since Tess seems to have little idea of what living together means, the marriage falters and breaks up with Tracy sleeping in the study; but Sam's apparent determination not to return and Tess' tearful witnessing of Sam's mother and dad's remarriage ceremony brings her sneaking back to his apartment. There she performs the famous kitchen scene, in which she shows herself utterly incompetent to make coffee, prepare toast (popping against the ceiling), crack eggs, and make waffles, where the comic opening-and-closing waffle iron further mocks her cluelessness. The film ends with a flourish, when Sam escorts the supercilious secretary out the kitchen door, and returns for the final romantic kiss with Tess after breaking the champagne bottle over his head. Even with some slow stretches (the romantic ones in the middle), the film is delightful: appropriately directed, great star impact (unless the viewer finds Hepburn annoying), flawless MGM-style sets (Tess' spacious, ornate apartment, Sam's "modern" kitchen with the view of the East River view out the back door). The sexual politics is a little ambiguous. Tess, presented as the model of the active, modern woman (proclaimed America's "woman of the year" by a bunch of matronly feminine activists), is faulted for not paying attention to family – her husband, whom she leaves at home without even telling him she is going to Chicago, and her foster son, who is reduced to growing up without a mother (she even forgets to get a baby-sitter when she and Sam go out at night). Sam, in the meantime, is the epitome of reasonableness and patience, as he waits for his wife to understand the meaning of the marriage bond. Bainter and her ex-husband present the party line with many preachy things about the sanctity of marriage and the devotion of husband and wife to one another. The final kitchen scene does not seem to mock the services that domestic wives provide their husbands, but it pokes fun at Tess' apparent inability ever to learn. In the end, Sam says he will be satisfied if she is just "Tess Harding Craig", i.e., just make some accommodations for her husband. A rather ambiguous ending, in which Tess will probably keep her job while making concessions to housework and husband-support (but perhaps not cracking eggs or cooking waffles). (2015)

Woman on the Run 1950 Norman Foster 3.0 Neat little thriller about the search for a man who witnessed a murder – with noir characteristics. Ross Elliott as witness to murder in the first scene – he is an artist owning a cute dog named Rembrandt; Ann Sheridan as his cynical, disillusioned wife; Dennis O'Keefe as aggressive, wise-cracking (apparent) newspaper reporter; Robert Keith as tough-talking police inspector. Sheridan is the star of the show: she reluctantly hooks up with newspaper reporter O'Keefe to track down her husband, who has fled for fear of being killed by gangsters – the chase is urgent since Elliott has heart issues that require medication. A strength of the film are the atmospheric shots of San Francisco – the Muni, the Bay Bridge, cable cars, steep streets, Union Square, Chinatown, Fisherman's Wharf, Telegraph Hill, City Hall, North Beach: the city looks much the same as 2017. The dialogue especially between Sheridan and Keith is smart, sharp, cynical, often confrontational. The cinematography is dark and deeply shadowed in the beginning, but after brightening up in the middle section, it is dark again in the long final sequence taking place in an amusement park, which appears to be the Boardwalk in Santa Cruz (not the one in Santa Monica that was constructed eight years after the film was released.). The final sequence resembles the ending of Hitchcock's 'Strangers on a Train' (released in the following year) with its runaway carrousel (roller coaster in this film). Because O'Keefe's credibility as a reporter is limited, the interaction of Sheridan with his character is rather hollow. The screenplay tips off the viewer that something is amiss –Elliott draws a picture of O'Keefe that is revealed to Sheridan, and O'Keefe constantly avoids meeting Elliott until the two can be alone. The reason is revealed in the carnival scene – O'Keefe is a gangster hit man using Sheridan to get to her husband to kill him. The narrative is resolved when Keith shoots and kills O'Keefe. Interestingly, the cynical Sheridan experiences a rediscovery of her love for her husband in the course of her ordeal: in contrast to the sarcastic criticism she delivers about him in the beginning (leading Keith to remark no wonder the world is filled with bachelors), toward the end she admits that she has not been much of a wife. The two embrace at the end, destined to live happily ever after: perfect Hays Code ending.

Entertaining, well-made pseudo-noir (no femme fatale, no fate); good performances by Sheridan and Keith. (2017)

The Women 1939 George Cukor (MGM) 3.5 Norma Shearer, Rosalind Russell, Joan Crawford, Paulette Goddard, Joan Fontaine. Not a man in the show; about sophisticated New York women, who have a hard time keeping their husbands attentive, and have to resort to divorce with trips to Reno, etc. Set in posh surroundings with hyper decorated NY apartments taken care of by maids, who generally know what is going on. Very gossipy; the women are very tough with one another, especially Rosalind Russell, who dressed in outrageous costumes, has classic ditzy role. Shearer's husband is straying into the arms of cheap scheming shop girl Crawford, who is interested only in getting her hooks into a rich man; she gets the husband, but she steps out on him with cowboy and loses him (back to the perfume shop!). Joan Fontaine is the sweet one, and Goddard is beautiful as a young woman Shearer meets on the train on the way to Reno. A lot of good crackling dialog with emphasis on the bitchy variety, and Cukor keeps whole thing moving at rapid pace. Shearer is glowing in her dignified beauty; we empathize with her plight (she emphasizes to her daughter how much she loves her husband); she counterattacks at the end, and wins him back in a rather facile conclusion. Throughout the movie is the question of how a wife should handle a straying husband; the general conclusion is to forget and forgive; men, who are maddening and often no good, will be men, and it is better for us women to be strong, tolerant and forgiving -- better than them, in other words; women too must hang together despite all the spite, jealousy, and gossip. A lightly cynical attitude that is a bit surprising for the heyday of the Hayes Code. (2005)

Wonder Boys 2000 Curtis Hanson (Steven Kłowes) 3.0 Michael Douglas saggy faced and weary looking as addled college professor, Grady Tripp; Tobey Maguire as baby-face, highly neurotic aspiring writer under the wing of Douglas; Frances McDormand pretty ineffective as Douglas' girlfriend – she is married to the head of the English Department; Katie Holmes as boarder in Douglas' house – she has a major crush on him; Robert Downey Jr. as Douglas' gay editor arrived from out of town to prod Douglas about the manuscript which he is having trouble (seven years!) finishing; Rip Torn in cameo role as successful writer who finishes his manuscripts and is thus despised by Douglas. Easy-going, sometimes slack, but amusing and observant film about the tribulations of a pot-head English professor in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The narrative has a twin focus: Douglas' affair with a married woman – McDormand – that announces to him in the beginning that she is pregnant, and his mentoring-championing of a misfit protégé, Maguire. Douglas, whose life is a tangled mess in the beginning (pregnant girlfriend, unfinished novel, attachment to confabulator Maguire), gradually straightens his life out: he tells McDormand's husband that he is in love with his wife, and the film ends with the two of them snug with their baby in their new home; it turns out that Maguire has written a novel that Downey agrees to publish, thus saving his own career; and since he has found authentication in the success of his understudy, Douglas doesn't care any more about his hopelessly prolix novel (Holmes says there is really no need for giving the genealogy of a dog character in the novel), and he gives it up. Douglas does a good job portraying his rather passive, befuddled character, with his tussled hair, light horn-rimmed glasses, and three day growth of beard. The rest of the cast is generally good, with the exception of McDormand; the radical lack of romantic chemistry between her and Douglas undermines the credibility of his happiness and satisfaction when he is finally united with her under the same roof. Many amusing sequences that often have little to do with the plot, but give us insight into Douglas' character and are often played for laughs: the initial classroom scene where other students mercilessly dis Maguire's suicidal story ("What's with you Catholics, anyway?"); the persecution of Douglas by the dog of McDormand's husband (some amusing growling, but Maguire's execution of him with his "cap" pistol is a bit over the top); Holmes' classic insensitive critique of the verbosity of Douglas' book; Douglas' scruffy, shambolic appearance and habits, e.g., his insistence on wearing his wife's pink bathrobe when he writes (tries to). Plot genre resembles a romantic comedy without chemistry between the principals. It is also rather unfocused with lots of asides, but they at least have the virtue of giving the viewer a full picture of Douglas' character and habits. Amusing, insightful film with a great cast and attention-getting songs, including an original song from Bob Dylan. (2012)

Wonder Woman 2017 Patty Jenkins 3.0 Superior comic book film that has an amazon from ancient times time traveling to World War I to try to save the world from self-destruction. Gal Gadot beautiful, statuesque, winsome, and (apparently) very athletic as Wonder Woman; Chris Pine as bluff American soldier who becomes her lover (PG-13?) when they reach the grizzled battlefields of Belgium; Danny Huston maniacally evil as Ludendorff, the German general intent on the destruction of all combatants; Elena Anaya as the disfigured German chemist developing for Ludendorff the unstoppable poison gas; David Thewlis as the British spy chief, who turns out to be a monster bent on the destruction of everyone, both good and evil. Gadot – to the delight of the viewer – inhabits the entire film from its beginnings in the Ancient Near East (next to the sea of course) through London, which she finds “hideous” (she speaks English effortlessly), to the battle fields of Belgium, where she falls in love with Pine and battles baddies constantly; first Ludendorff whom she dispatches with her sword through the belly, and then the battle royal with Thewlis, who hovers melodramatically over the whole western front, destroying soldiers by the hundreds, hurling armored vehicles effortlessly against one another, but finally succumbing to this ultimate Kick Ass Go Girl; she then flies away awaiting the release of the sequel. The film is careful to point out that the two evil maniacs victimize the Germans as much as the Allies. The romantic subplot ends heroically though sadly with Pine sacrificing himself when he destroys a German airplane filled with the poison gas. Interestingly Wonder Woman goes through significant character development: she starts off a great warrior (boy, can she jump and handle that sword!), but she is entirely ignorant of men, love (Amazons reproduce manually by molding clay), and male-dominated human society driven by the lust for power. The narrative has her falling in love and grieving after the death of her beloved (Gadot plays it well), and also experiencing a violent and chaotic introduction to the evils of human society. Instead of becoming entirely cynical, however, she concludes that humanity is a mixed bag – some good and some bad – and the struggle for good must be continued (to be performed in the sequel!). The extremely expensive-looking special effects during the battle sequences are tiresome and repetitious, and the escalating of evil geniuses makes the film drag on for too long. Still, dramatic with a strong performance from the memorable Gadot. (October 2017)

The World of Apu India 1959 Sanyajit Ray 3.0 Apu is struggling young man who weds out of confusion or some cosmic duty, falls in love with his bride, only to have her die in childbirth; then period of mourning/atonement, and final forgiveness of life and reunion with his child. BW photographed beautifully in countryside, but often in poor apartment in Calcutta set next to railroad tracks. Apu as idealistic struggling, innocent, who loses his innocence, almost gives up on life, and then forgives and moves ahead. Beautiful actor who is declared to resemble the God Krishna (?). Film is neorealism in style with mostly amateur actors. Very genuine with genuine evocation of strong and real emotion. You get vivid picture of India in the 1920 with mixing of old and new. Pace of movie quite slow, evoking slow change.... (2005)

The World's End 2013 Edgar Wright (Britain) 3.0 Simon Pegg as wild, manic alcoholic Gary King, the guy who gets all the guys to revisit their fabled post-high school pub crawl to 12 establishments in a hyper-quaint English country town; Nick Frost, Martin Freeman, Paddy Considine, Eddie Marsan as various of Gary’s more-or-less sensible friends snookered into accompanying him on his odyssey; as Sam, the girl that Gary and Stephen were in love with in high school. Often indecipherable, absurdist film that starts off as a comedy about the relationship of five guys to their past and their place in contemporary British society, but when a couple of them visit the men’s room in one of the pubs they suddenly discover that the inhabitants of their cute little town are either aliens that look like humans on the outside but are very fragile (their heads and arms come off very easily) and have blue instead of red blood – blue is splattered over everything. It turns out that they arrived from outer space years ago; they have taken over the town and forced the remaining humans to knuckle under and cooperate or themselves be turned into blue aliens. Bland and reassuring, the “robots” (they object strenuously to the term) want to bring more smiling cooperation and pleasantness to British society, but they turn violent with blinding searchlight-like eyes when they get mad. Much of the film is devoted to quick-cut action sequences, which are entertaining in the beginning with the surprise element, but which become tiresome from

repetition. The film seems to be satirizing the middle-class blandness of small-town British society. The similarity of the plot to the 1956 ‘Invasion of the Body Snatchers’ is unmistakable – the pods arriving from space, replicating and replacing humans, the hopelessness of fighting against them, except that ‘World’s End’ posits them colonizing the earth as an insipid overclass. When the exhausted and decimated little group arrives at the final pub, *The World’s End*, everything is explained to them and then Britain goes up in flames, putting an end to contemporary civilization and thrusting Gary into a Monty Pythonesque coda in which he leads some hated ex-robots into a pub for another good fight. It is difficult to get involved with the personal issues of the principals – their lives have gone flat since the high hopes of high school, two of them are in love with the same girl, one is separated from his wife, etc. One wonders why they are following the mad Gary around to begin with. Frequently clever, exciting, and absurd, although perhaps not as interesting as ‘Shaun of the Dead’. (2014)

The World's Fastest Indian 2005 Roger Donaldson (New Zealand) 3.0 Anthony Hopkins as Burt Munro, the 70-year-old New Zealander who itches to break the motorcycle record at the Bonneville Salt Flats, and a bunch of character actors who do a good job supporting him – the little boy who worships him back home, the cross-dressing motel desk clerk, the Salvadoran used car salesman who helps him build his trailer to drag the Indian to Utah, the Indian who befriends Burt and gives him an Indian concoction that is supposed to help him with his prostate problem, the older, free-spirited lady who beds him in her ramshackle house in the middle of the desert wilderness, etc. ‘Rocky’-style movie that charts Burt’s progress – from his lovable, maddeningly absent-minded self in New Zealand, to Los Angeles, across the desert, overcoming every obstacle in the way with the help of American odd-ball characters, and finishing with the inevitable triumph in Utah with Burt breaking 200 miles per hour despite the extreme hesitations of the race officials (Burt has not preregistered for the event, and everyone thinks his machine is unsafe, but he of course wins over the officials who end up cheering for him just as loudly as his friends). The stand-out of the movie is undoubtedly Hopkins, without whom it would not have worked – absent-minded, a bit befuddled thanks in part to his bad hearing, his angina problem (he has to take nitroglycerin pills) and his urination problem (a running joke all the way through), pasty and heavy, but absolutely determined to have his day in the sun in Utah. He is the life force – he beds two women and leaves them completely satisfied and hoping he will return soon, and not a person on the way can resist his insinuating charm, and no matter how negative in the beginning, they end up rooting for him. All the supporting actors do a good job, especially Paul Rodriguez as the good-natured Latino used car salesman in Van Nuys (he has only the cheapest cars). The Rocky excitement is extremely irritating: there is not a mean person in the USA – no matter how weird on the outside, we are all sweethearts on the inside and always rooting for the underdog – and there is not the slightest chance that Burt will not meet his goal: in the end everyone is smiling, laughing, flashing blindingly white teeth to show how thoroughly and completely Burt has triumphed. (2006)

The Wrestler 2008 Darren Aronovsky 3.0 Mickey Rourke in comeback role of his life as over-the-hill wrestler with physical and personal problems; Marisa Tomei as thin but still sexy stripper who is a friend and possible love interest for Rourke; Evan Rachel Wood as shrill skinny daughter of Rourke – she makes it shriekingly obvious that she hates his guts. Dramatic film centered around the new persona of Rourke – monstrous looking, reconstructed face hidden usually by long blond hair (he colors it for his ring role) or a sweatshirt hood, powerful, bulky body, now playing a sweet guy who keeps wrestling despite his age to maintain some income and trying to right the wrongs of his past life by reconnecting with his (apparently) lesbian daughter and friend/girlfriend Tomei. Rourke’s performance seems completely natural and unpremeditated – we wonder whether he is simply reflecting a new nice guy personality opposite from his bad boy image of the 80s or whether he has turned into a skilled character actor. A strong point of the film is the realistic, gritty texture: high school gyms, mobile home park, dingy back rooms in supermarkets, wintry defoliated saplings where Rourke sometimes wanders or works out. Aronovsky indulges in cinema vérité camera work – shaky, handheld style; we seem to spend an awful lot of time wandering around behind Rourke looking at the back of his head. The backroom look at wrestling is shocking and fascinating: the camaraderie of the players amazes the viewer considering the bloody abuse that they heap upon one another in the ring (the most unsettling incident is

the staples that an ugly, extremely violent bad guy opponent hammers into Rourke's skin). Second part of the film turns into a melodrama where we are invited to pity the wrestler for his inability to connect, retire, and make a home. His daughter rejects him definitively, and just when Tomei seems to be coming around to a romantic connection, he attempts a comeback match, where he appears to die from a recrudescence of his heart problem. Affecting performance and believable coarse environment, but a lot of empty moments and perhaps too much heart-tugging toward the end. (2009)

Written on the Wind 1956 Douglas Sirk (Universal International) 3.5 Over-the-top Sirkian soap opera focusing on intra-familial emotions but not displaying quite the visual punch of his top 50s efforts. Lauren Bacall steady as normal, responsible secretary that makes the mistake of falling for Stack; Robert Stack pulling out all the stops as alcoholic, perhaps impotent (?) Hadley family playboy that seduces Bacall with his fabulous riches; Rock Hudson adds manliness and male glamor as boyhood friend of Stack – his sensible reserve destines him for Bacall; Dorothy Malone (AA best supporting actress) letting out all the stops as sexy, free-wheeling Stack sister – her unrequited love for Hudson leads her into numerous sexual liaisons; Robert Keith as Hadley's sickly father. The film is set in a rich oil town (sometimes seems like California, sometimes Texas) with seedy bars and oil derricks all around. It is essentially a critique of the wealthy American family: spoiled playboy Stack never did a worthwhile thing in his life – all he does is womanize and drink; in love with Hudson, Malone refers constantly back to her girlhood days by the water hole with Hudson and her brother in the golden days of childhood (the Garden of Eden), but all her efforts to turn him on are fruitless. Hudson is glamorous, mature and sensible, as is Bacall, even though she starts off shakily when she decides to marry the feckless Stack. The film ends in extreme melodrama: Stack is shot in a scuffle, and after Malone tries to blackmail Hudson into marrying her, she clears him on the witness stand, indicating that the shooting was an accident. Dull in comparison with Malone's and Stack's pyrotechnical antics, Hudson and Bacall kiss sweetly at the end before they leave for a satisfying life together. Malone's acting is over-the-top, perfectly matching Sirk's genre: she poisons her brother's mind with lies and sly innuendoes, she smolders sexually (eyes, mouth, and body movement) when she thinks about Hudson, she dances the mambo in her room in her underwear (with quick-cutting leading to the death of her father, about whom she cares little); she comes into her own in the courtroom scene, where beautifully made up and in a black flying-saucer, broad-brimmed hat, she redeems herself by telling the truth about the murder; her last scene however emphasizes her loneliness as she strokes a model oil derrick at her deceased father's desk, apparently imagining it is Hudson's penis. The critique of American culture is apparent, if not as dominating as in 'All that Heaven Allows': the obsession with sex, the fear of infertility and perhaps impotence, the damning influence of riches, the frenetic dancing as a surrogate for sex, conspicuous consumption in the flashy sports cars and the showy becolumned mansions. To crank up the tension, Stack keeps a pistol under his pillow and his father keeps one in his desk drawer. No apparent relationship with reality in the provinces, what with the pumped-up colors, the perfect wardrobe, sometimes a "surreal artificial look". Style and direction triumph in this cultural artifact of the 1950s. (2016)

The Wrong Man 1957 Alfred Hitchcock 3.0 Henry Fonda as the low-key wrongly accused man at the heart of the story; Very Miles as his wife – she starts as a model 50s housewife (stays at home, takes care of the children, dresses conservatively, and worries about the finances), but then develops severe mental problems as a result of her husband's experience – her performance is exemplary and convincing; Anthony Quayle as Fonda's not-so-effective defense lawyer. The Hitchcock movie no one would pay much attention to if we didn't know he made it. The style owes much to Neo-realism: the stars go about their modest everyday life with no glamorization; the settings seem real and unadorned; the theme is about everyman falsely accused, who comes very close to being condemned and then loses his wife to madness in the process. Hitchcock's storyboarding and the camerawork however are precise and formalistic. The booking and incarceration scenes show the mixture of both styles – the pacing is slow, sometimes boring, but the camera subjectively and eloquently records the many humiliating details – the claustrophobic view from inside the cell, the handcuffs on the wrist, the fingerprinting routine, (the camera) staring down at the feet of the man walking in front of you, etc. The police are generally fair and gentlemanly, but in the investigation they are determined to get their man (later on however the blond one

notices the exculpating similarity between Fonda's double and Fonda, and he reports it to his superiors). The film has visible seams (in theme, style, etc.): the courtroom scenes seem abbreviated and roughly edited compared to the elegant incarceration scenes; and we the viewers are confused by the switch from Fonda's problems to Vera Miles' deepening paranoia and guilt and her commitment to an asylum. And the ending is well nigh inexcusable. After Fonda's discovery that his exculpation does not improve Miles' mental state (she keeps saying "You can leave now."), he leaves resignedly; and then a card comes up telling us that she was released two years later, and the whole family moved to Miami where they are now very happy! It would have been more dramatic to end on perhaps an ambiguous note about her recovery. The famous discovery scene is pretty thrilling: Catholic Fonda prays fervently in front of a picture of Jesus; the camera does a close-up of Fonda's face, bleed in a street scene with a man walking toward the camera, he gets close and closer until the man's features merge elegantly with Fonda's, Fonda's disappear, and the man enters a store where he attempts another robbery. Aside from its ingenious cinematography and editing, the scene introduces a religious element into the story – did Jesus set in motion a series of events that revealed the identity of the true guilty man? Do prayers work? A serious, documentary-style treatment of one of Hitchcock's favorite themes – the wrongly accused man; virtually no concessions to Hitchcock's mainstream thriller style. (2007)

X-Men 2000 Bryan Singer 2.0 Hugh Jackman, Patrick Stuart, Ian McKellen, Halle Barry. Pretty sad sack of a comic superhero flick, perhaps of interest mainly to the comic book fans (begun in 1963). Human mutants, each of which has special superhero powers (Halle Barry, who is scrumptious, controls the elements!). Pits good x-men (Stewart) against bad ones (McKellen), as latter tries to turn all the political leaders of the world into mutants (why is not clear to me). Most of movie is X-men displaying or explaining their powers, and then endless fights between groups of them as "extras get flung across rooms the size of school cafeterias." Best characters are two leaders confronting one another verbally and Wolverine (Jackman). Final scene is insipid fight scene in and around the Statue of Liberty (shades of Hitchcock?). Virtually nothing to hold the attention of adult of average intelligence; popularity of movie is pretty incomprehensible.

The Year My Voice Broke 1987 John Duigan (Australia) 3.0 Noah Taylor as duck-tailed, nerdy, 50s pop culture-struck teenager in small-town Australia in the 1960s; Loene Carmen as his childhood friend who does not return his romantic yearnings but turns to him in moments of need; Ben Mendelsohn as good-looking town bad boy that Loene falls in love with. Sincere coming-of-age drama set in small, very provincial, Australian town in the barren tablelands of New South Wales. Taylor is dreamy, disaffected 15-year-old who has had strong childhood friendship with Carmen until adolescence; they still meet and share their souls regularly in the mysterious rocks on the hill outside the town, but Carmen has romantic feelings for bad-boy Mendelsohn; Mendelsohn gets in legal trouble when he steals a lady's Mercedes and races it around the local track until it runs out of gas; he is sent to reform school, escapes, gets Carmen pregnant, and is then killed in an auto accident while he is running from the police; Carmen goes off to have her baby (she isn't real sure where) and Taylor goes back out to the mystic rocks to reflect on growing up and moving on; the film ends with the expressive freeze frame, apparently borrowed from 'The 400 Blows'. A la 'Last Picture Show' the small-town atmosphere in the Tablelands is beautifully established: run-down storefronts, the men hanging out, joking, and gossiping at the bar, the brown grasslands all around, the rocky promontory outside town (recalling the mystic location of Australian classic 'Picnic at Hanging Rock'), the shots of the clouds moving across the sky. The two protagonists are convinced that they can communicate by telepathy, Taylor thinks he can hypnotize Carmen to get her to have sex with him (she fakes going into a trance and then surprises him when he starts to pull up her dress), and there is much ado about a haunted house on the hill (Boo Radley's house in 'To Kill a Mockingbird') where the three kids meet since they don't fit in with the closed-minded provincial culture of the town. Film is fairly typical of the genre and steeped in film culture (as shown above), but it stands out for its sincerity and for some original tweaks, e.g., Taylor is often present while Carmen and Mendelsohn are making out (probably making love). Much ado on the soundtrack about 50s and 60s pop hits and references to John Ford's 'The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance'. They should have thought of another title. (2007)

The Year of Living Dangerously 1982 Peter Weir (Australia) 3.0 Mel Gibson convincing as Australian on his first assignment in an Indonesia in transition; Sigourney Weaver as his love interest, a British journalist on the verge of leaving – she is reluctant to get involved romantically; Linda Hunt as the mysterious (male) Billy Kwan, a half-Chinese photographer who keeps files on several people (including Gibson) and who takes Gibson under his wing. Interesting film set in a poverty-stricken Indonesia on the verge of civil war – Sukarno’s grip on the country is loosening, and the Muslin generals and the Communist party (PKI) are eyeing each other suspiciously; the exciting climax of the story is set off by the impending arrival of a shipment of arms for the Communists, and then the coup by the army, which begins executing large numbers of Communists. All the performances are excellent, although Weaver has less to do than the others. Billy’s character is a bit hard to fathom – he seems to be the conscience of the film, taking the deep poverty of Jakarta to heart (the journalists laugh about it and shrug it off), encouraging Gibson to become romantically involved with Weaver (is he a sort of cupid?); but one wonders why he keeps the files, which the viewer associates with spying. The film produces a gripping atmosphere – dark mise en scene suffused with reddish-orange light and lots of shadows; soldiers marching back and forth and looking suspicious and skeptical to produce a sense of impending disaster; the western reporters huddling in bars or hobnobbing at embassy receptions, obviously avoiding the seriousness of the situation. A bit much on the Hollywood touch: Gibson is a dedicated reporter, who is willing to risk his relationship with Weaver to get the story about the arms shipment; the expected break, however, is not permanent, since after an exciting and dangerous ride through the streets of Jakarta after the coup, Gibson bursts through the chaotic airport to join his beloved, who is waiting for him at the top of the access stairs of a Boeing 707 (it seems she arranged for it to wait for him). Breakthrough film for Gibson, Weaver and Weir. (2007)

The Yellow Sea 2010 Hong-jin Na (Korea) 2.5 Jung-woo Ha as down-in-his-luck taxi driver from Yanji hired by the vicious Myun-ga supposedly to assassinate some gangland personage in the Seoul region; Seong-Ha Cho as nattily dressed South Korean gangster. Almost incoherent, hyper-action, viciously violent and bloody Korean gangland thriller short on narrative intelligibility and identifiable characters. Ha goes to Seoul not only to carry out the murder contract but to try to find his wife, whose memory fills him with Angst since he thinks she is carrying on with other men (turns out he is right about that). His intended victim is actually murdered by Cho’s gang with perhaps (who knows?) the help of the South Korean police. The rest of the film is essentially a series of chases as the increasingly bedraggled and beleaguered Ha is pursue by both the Chinese and Korean gangs, as well as the massively incompetent South Korean police. The original assassination sequences are actually enjoyable – filmed in reasonably careful Hitchcockian style – but after a small dose of chasing, the viewer tires of the mayhem and expends the rest of his energy yearning for the end of the film; which happens in cinematically sensitive style, when Ha, after securing passage on a boat that will take him back to China, ironically expires from loss of blood in the cabin behind the captain. The narrative takes place in the most backward, run-down and depressing parts of China and Korea. The undeniable forte of the film is the action sequences, which are long (often ten minutes long), violent, and exciting. For some reason, the Korean and Chinese hoods do not use firearms, but only knives and hatchets, which serve the director’s central purpose of producing gory, disgusting images – e.g., a man expires with a hatchet buried in the middle of his skull and the camera pulls back to view a room strewn with 8-9 bloody, partially dismembered bodies all killed by the unrelenting Myun; lots of lurid shots with knives slashing the limbs or being thrust with a squishing sound into the guts of victims – they make a much bigger mess than gunshot wounds. The action sequences – mostly chases – are over-long and very dynamically edited: quick shots edited together for multiple viewpoints and dizzying maximum impact; enormous numbers of automobiles wrecked with maximum crashing and crunching. The film includes the typical South Korean mocking of the “Keystone” police, who are always arriving too late after wrecking half the cars in their fleet. The second half of the film is quite disappointing after a promising start. The sensitive ending on the boat deserves better narrative development to make us feel the tragedy of Ha. Good Korean thrillers do pay attention to character and plot. (2013)

Les yeux sans visage 1950 Georges Franju (France) 3.5 Pierre Brasseur as neurologist fascinated with transplants and obsessed with restoring his daughter's face; Edith Scob as his daughter – her face was destroyed in an automobile accident caused by Brasseur; Alida Valli as Brasseur's devoted and somewhat prissy assistant, who will do anything for him. Mythic poetic horror film about the obsession of neurologist Brasseur to restore the face of his damaged daughter. He is motivated in part by professional pride (in the beginning of the film he gives a lecture about his progress in organ transplants) and in part by guilt for having caused the damage to his daughter's face. The atmosphere of the film is quite poetic – it takes place in the Parisian area amidst wintry grey skies; many of the outdoor night scenes are illuminated with subtle floodlights; in the interior of the clinique characters often move from room to room opening and shutting doors; the stony basement of Brasseur's house contains a fully equipped surgical facility and a room filled with dogs cooped in unusual symmetrical cages. The film begins with Valli pulling up in her 2-CV (reference to 'Diaoliques'?) and dumping the body of one of the transplant victims in the Seine; Valli roams the streets of Paris in her quest of pretty brunettes whose faces might satisfy her master; two pretty ones are found, and we cringe as we wonder whether they will have their facial skin removed and then die of infection like the others. The scene in the middle of the film in which Brasseur cuts out and peels off the skin of one of the substitutes is quietly creepy and disturbing (again the transplant doesn't work). Perhaps most memorable are the scenes of the daughter wandering through the chateau: she wears a beautiful white mask with only her real eyes showing through the eyeholes and her lips barely moving when she speaks; evoking the female figures of Cocteau, she glides gracefully through the rooms of the house with her arms outstretched and looking lost and disconsolate. The well-meaning although ineffective police finally catch up with the culprits; Valli is stabbed in the neck by Scob and Brasseur is chased down and killed by his victim dogs when they are released by his daughter; Scob then wanders into the forest with a white dove (also from her father's collection). Film moves in a very deliberate place with a lot of time for characters moving from one space to another, thus producing a poetic and meditative atmosphere. Film is creepy and beautiful rather than exciting and truly scary; it is filled with images that will continue to haunt the viewer. (2011)

Yi Yi 2000 Edward Yang (Taiwan) 2.5 Long-winded, rather existentialist treatment of the fate of a multi-generational middle-class Taiwanese family. Nien-Jen Wu as the quiet, sensitive NJ, a businessman in Taipei; Elaine Jin as his fragile wife; Issei Ogata as the philosophic Japanese businessman that NJ negotiates with to keep his company afloat (he and NJ speak English together); Kelly Lee as his sensitive, shy daughter, Ting-Ting, negotiating the mid stage of adolescence with mother or grandmother – feeling that she is responsible for her grandmother's injury, she is the moral compass of the film; Jonathan Chang as NJ's adorable, wise 10-year-old son. Other major characters in this long movie (2:50) include the irresponsible, broke, superstitious brother-in-law borrowing money from his relatives; NJ's ex-girlfriend (and still his real love, he says), who is married to a wealthy American. The film follows the destiny of different members of the family over a short period. It takes place almost entirely in the urban atmosphere of Taipei – lots of traffic buzzing in the background, high-rise buildings, modern office and apartment complexes. The characters speak English when they speak to a non-Chinese person, they wear entirely western-style clothes, cook in western kitchens, and listen to western music with a particular fondness for classical music – except for the language, hardly a clue that we are in a Chinese culture. All the film's plot lines end in uncertainty and neutrality. It begins with a chaotic wedding, where the bride is pregnant, all the men are drunk, and a jealous young woman falls hysterically to the feet of Grandma begging her forgiveness for not marrying her son. Grandma has a stroke, lies in bed through most of the film (the inability of her family members to find something to say to her seems emblematic of communication deficiency); she dies in the end, even though the ever hopeful Ting-Ting has a fantasy sequences in which the two visit lovingly. NJ and Min-Min have a low-key relationship: Min-Min disappears to a religious retreat house through most of the film; NJ meets an old girlfriend by chance and the two spend a couple of days talking hesitantly when NJ is visiting Tokyo on business; literally nothing happens between them, and the film ends with husband and wife hesitantly picking up the threads of their relationship. Ting-Ting progresses hesitantly through the pangs of adolescence: her budding romantic relationship with the ex-boyfriend of one of her (cello-playing) friends collapses in recrimination – with her grandmother dead, Ting-Ting just has to keep soldiering on. Yang-Yang is the other simpatico child:

good friends with his dad, he seems to be observing, perhaps learning from, the unhappy behavior of his elders; almost tempted by suicide (he jumps into a pool while apparently not knowing how to swim), he takes photos of the backs of people's heads – the adult world does not make sense; he reads a heartfelt address to his grandmother while she lies in her coffin. The film has some moving scenes such as Ting-Ting's imaginary interview with her Grandma; it is a balanced, realist look at the ills that can befall a family; there is no redemption or solution at the end. It suffers some from a mushy narrative structure and sluggish editing: many times the camera photographs an empty room before someone enters or begins to talk (Ozu?); the scenes of conversation between NJ and Sherry are very long and don't go anywhere. (2015)

You Can Count On Me 2000 Kenneth Lonergan 3.5 Laura Linney in affecting, nuanced performance as a single mom raising only son in small town America; Mark Ruffalo also very good as lovable but elusive brother (the two had grown up together after the death of both parents in an auto accident); Matthew Broderick as essentially obnoxious, opportunistic mid-level manager brought in to run the local bank branch where Linney works; Lonergan excellent as local parish priest who is called upon to give Linney and Ruffalo advice; Jon Tinney as nice boyfriend who wants to marry Linney, but she finds him dull. Excellent small-time independent movie about personal and family dynamics in small, beautifully photographed upstate New York town (poetic shots of the Adirondacks). Unlike Hollywood, script is not pre-programmed to yield desired romantic payoff, but allows characters freedom to be themselves and not conform to a dominating script. Linney is a little "wild" and has affairs with two men at the same time (one of them married, and the other wanting to marry her). Broderick, in his hypocritical, self-indulgent way, is hilarious -- he insists that Linney quit taking so much time off to take care of her son, and yet he finds nothing wrong with having a wild sexual affair with her despite his attractive, pregnant wife. Linney is always juggling her life and her time to take care of her son Rudy. She adores her brother Ruffalo and is overjoyed when he returns to Scottsville. He is a free spirit, and little Rudy falls for him; they play pool together and Uncle takes Rudy to see his father (nasty fight ensues between Ruffalo and brother in law). Movie comes to a tentative conclusion when she kicks Ruffalo out of the family house: they part, but with affection convincing the viewer of the eternal bond between them. Lonergan as the priest carries the moral of the story despite modeling his counseling on situational ethics – he tells Ruffalo that you have to believe in yourself and have faith that somehow your life is important, even if you don't follow the straight and narrow. Linney is excellent as the central energy in the story – always natural, always true without forcing anything. Expert script often refers to issues and possibilities without having to solve everything: e.g., isn't the priest attracted in a quiet way to Linney (he would never follow up); isn't it possible that Linney's affair with Broderick was motivated in part by office politics (when he threatens to fire her, she replies that if she were him, she would be careful about firing the person he just had an affair with); isn't it apparent that in the end Linney is reconsidering whether the true blue boyfriend might be ok as a husband (she and Rudy need stability). Simplicity and truth are best ingredients to real feeling in a film. (2007)

You Can't Take it With You 1938 Frank Capra (Columbia: another Academy Award; written by Robert Riskin) 3.0 A famous screwball comedy with lots of plot complications demonstrating Capra's sentimental, populist views and his resentment against social snobbery and heartless businessmen. Edward Arnold as business executive who wants to buy out Barrymore's home in the middle of a city to make way for a factory – he thinks unemployment is an "emotional" issue and not the main problem in the Depression, but his "weak", human point is his love for his son; James Stewart thin, young, naively romantic, and totally sincere as the son of the business owner – he roars like a lion when he proposes to Arthur, "living with that family of yours must be like living in a world Walt Disney thought of"; Jean Arthur pretty (except for her flat upper teeth) as the almost normal daughter of Barrymore – she has doe-like eyes when Stewart is saying sweet nothings to her; Lionel Barrymore more light-hearted than usual as Grandpa (he broke his leg sliding down the banister), the head of a very eccentric, screwball, rambunctious, non-conformist family where they design, make, and test fireworks in the cellar; Spring Byington as Barrymore's batty daughter, who decided to take up writing when someone delivered a typewriter to the house by mistake, but who also dabbles in painting; Ann Miller

equally loopy granddaughter of Barrymore – she dances ballet when setting the table or answering the door; Rochester in his “Step ‘N Fetchit” role as boyfriend of Black cook – he is on relief; Dub Taylor as Miller’s xylophone-playing husband with an Alabama accent; Donald Meek as an accountant converted to the family – he pops out of corners and scares people with the masks he has made; Mischa Auer with usual Russian accent as Miller’s dance teacher – he arrives just in time for dinner and always says “it stinks”. Film is full of screwball bits. Visit of IRS agent to Grandpa and family is hilarious – he is driven out by Miller’s dancing, Taylor’s xylophone, and fireworks going off in the basement. The police arrive at the family house to arrest occupants for Communist propaganda and for having gunpowder (fireworks) in the basement – huge fireworks explosion into the street. Later the people in the courtroom good-heartedly and spontaneously raise enough money to pay the fine incurred by the Barrymore family for illegal manufacture of fireworks, while the judge looks on with a smile on his face and even contributes a bit of change. Narrative focus of the film is whether Arnold will get Barrymore to sell his house (thus driving out the neighbors too) and whether Stewart and Arthur can cross class barriers to marry.

Outcome of the narrative seems to depend on whether Arnold converts to the Barrymore point of view – the possibility of embracing alternative values is represented by a harmonica he carries with him. When he is feeling chastened, he meets with Barrymore and the two play a rousing rendition of “Polly Wolly Doodle” on the harmonica; they are of course soon joined by the xylophone and Ann Miller doing pirouettes. The dad melts, everybody squeals with delight, pandemonium and joyous confusion reigns. Message seems to be to lead a life of kindness, simplicity, and happiness. Barrymore denounces “isms”: when things don’t go right, people go out and get themselves an ism like Communism or Fascism; what we need is respect for the founding fathers (he enumerates them) and an interest in Americanism instead of the other (implied foreign) isms; he refuses to pay income taxes because “he doesn’t believe in them” and doesn’t think we get anything sensible from the government in return. Barrymore and others tell us to have the courage to follow your heart, march to a different drummer if you want to, be yourself and ignore social status, trust that the good Lord will take care of you, marry whomever you want regardless of social status, don’t go into banking or insurance sales unless that is what turns you on, don’t forget to have fun, collect stamps, play the harmonica and pursue other hobbies, laugh, dance, and value your friends. Sentimentally positive view of common folk, all of whom are simple, kind and good-hearted: the guys in the jail pass the time by playing American folk songs on the harmonica, while Arnold complains “I spend a quarter of a million dollars a year on attorneys and I can’t get hold of one of ‘em”, and calls poor people “scum”. Film ends with the two families now reconciled and united in the Barrymore dining room with Grandpa reciting one of his prosaic blessings. Good feelings and happiness over the top; not a bad person left in the lot. (2008)

You Only Live Once 1937 Fritz Lang (prod. Walter Wanger) 3.5 Henry Fonda as sincere and bitter Eddie, who loves wife with real passion, Sylvia Sidney as adorable, round face wife who adores Eddie and is loyal to him to death, Barton MacLane as Public Defender Stephen who supports Eddie even in extremis. Fonda is released from prison, tries to go straight, marries ideal wife Sidney, but is condemned to death, escapes, and then on the lam with his wife, finally ambushed by police at the end. Film is obvious precursor of ‘Bonnie and Clyde’ and ‘Getaway.’ It is shot entirely on the back lot on fairly cheap looking sets – detracts considerably from veristic texture that director tries to create (contrast with inappropriate glossy MGM finish in ‘Fury’). Attachment between Fonda and Sidney quite erotic in the beginning with long held kisses and passionate embraces (clothed) on the bed – their hunger for one another comes through. Film is quite critical of society’s inability to accept ex-convicts and try to reintegrate them into honest society – battleaxe innkeeper Margaret Hamilton throws them out of her hotel when she finds out that Fonda is a jailbird, the brutal attitude of the truck company boss is striking; also perhaps critical of the death penalty, which drives Fonda to do things (kill the priest in trying to break out) that he wouldn’t normally have done. Lang is very attentive to suspense, surprise, and then resolution at several points in the film – the face of the perpetrator is never seen when the deadly armored car heist goes over; will Fonda be executed; did Fonda escape from prison after he steps out of the camera’s range; will Sidney take the poison powder at the time of Fonda’s death (she is saved by Fonda’s phone call that he has escaped); what will happen to the baby? Irony abounds as when the warden shouts to Fonda during his jailbreak that he has been pardoned, but Fonda won’t believe him (he has lost all faith

in the system), and then he shoots the priest. Director focuses a lot on individual objects emblematic of narrative developments – e.g., Fonda’s prison cell that resembles a spider web, the cigarettes that Sidney buys at the end (she is observed while she does it and the motel proprietor calls the police for the reward), and then she and Fonda are shot by machine gun fire when she lights one of the cigarettes later in the car; many of the tragic final scenes (prison escape, meeting with Sidney after escape) are enshrouded in thick (moral) fog. Again, Lang-style fate seems to have caught the lovers in its machinery, and it won’t come to a halt until they are destroyed; the noble couple ground under the heel of society’s boot. The director’s siding with the doomed individual against big society perhaps reflects Lang’s experience with Nazi Germany. Although no narrative and no *femme fatale*, it is easy to see the roots of film noir in this film. (2006)

You Were Never Lovelier 1942 William Seiter (Columbia) 3.0 Fred Astaire his usual debonair, insouciant self as American dancer hanging out in Buenos Aires (supposedly – almost nothing genuinely Argentine about the film); Rita Hayworth in early ingénue role dancing expertly and looking innocently (?) sexy; Adolphe Menjou as her Buenos Aires entrepreneurial father, who plots to get her married to a worthy man, just not Astaire; Gus Schilling nervous and rather gay acting as Menjou’s personal secretary; Adele Mara and Leslie Brooks as cute younger sisters of Hayworth constantly manipulating the signet rings given to them by their boyfriends – they are nervous because according to family tradition, they may not marry until their older sister does first. Romantic comedy-cum-dancing-and-singing closely approximating the classic Astaire-Rogers vehicle of the 1930s. The plot is completely incredible with unmotivated twists and turns that keep the action moving; it begins with the usual frostiness between Astaire and Hayworth, thrives on the misunderstandings created by Menjou’s duplicitous campaign to get his daughter married (he writes her love notes pretending they are from an anonymous suitor – shades of unconscious incest?), continues with the duo gradually warming up to one another, until finally all the obstacles melt away in the final scene; the film ends with a disappointing brief series of dance turns. Most of the comic routines elicit only smiles – the gay-tinted antics of Schilling, the bubbly, cutesy capers of the younger sisters (they are however very cute), the frustrated bluster of Menjou, who is surrounded by people who pay him little heed. Sets are elaborate, although perhaps more traditional and decorated than the stark Art Deco sets of the RKO series, and the ladies’ gowns are, as usual, outstanding – the slim Hayworth looks smashing in her sumptuous dresses with their painted-on tops. The Jerome Kern-Johnny Mercer score is perhaps a little below par: The popular ballad “Dearly Beloved” is on the weak and humdrum side; the classic “I am old-fashioned” duet between Hayworth and Astaire is memorable, especially since it is followed by the best balletic dancing in the film; “Georgia Straight”, quick-step, swing begun by Astaire and then joined by Hayworth is the most rousing and rhythmic, not to mention that Hayworth looks sexy and energetic as she makes her quick turns in her short skirt. The narrative is Hollywood fluff at its most light-weight, but the artistry of the two stars makes the film a worthwhile watch. (2012)

You Will Meet a Tall Dark Stranger 2010 Woody Allen 3.5 Josh Brolin as frustrated novelist who doesn’t get along with his wife and has a roving eye for a young across-the-court neighbor; Naomi Watts pretty and plain as Brolin’s equally frustrated wife; Gemma Jones excellent as Watts’ loopy mom who falls under the influence of a fortune teller telling her that things will turn out ok; Anthony Hopkins as wealthy father of Watts who leaves Jones in search of a rebirth of youth; Lucy Punch as skinny-sexy call girl that Hopkins dates and then marries; Antonio Banderas in straight-man role as Watts’ boss when she decides to go to work; Freida Pinto young, dark-skinned and pretty as Brolin’s obsessive love interest. Entertaining Allen-style comedy of manners that includes a wry and relatively sunny cynicism about the possibility of finding stability and happiness at any stage of life. The film focuses on two couples – Brolin-Watts, Hopkins-Jones – and the opening and shutting doors of their romances, a la French farce. Jones and Hopkins are divorced before the beginning of the film; Hopkins teams up with his manipulative little prostitute, and with the help of the fortune teller Jones eventually finds apparent happiness with a spiritualist bookseller. Brolin throws over Watts to team up with Pinto because he found her undressing in front of the window to be “incredible erotic” (only in a Woody Allen movie would a woman respond to that line). Watts has an abortive romance with the ever serious Banderas, who chooses to be with another woman when he breaks up with his wife (Will Banderas fall in love with Watts? Will Pinto respond

to Brolin? Will the bookseller free himself of the grip of his dead wife? How will Hopkins react to the infidelities of his new wife?). Despite its complex narrative lines, the film entertains consistently with its well-known actors, ever-changing, unpredictable situations, and its sunny visuals of an attractive and interesting London. One wonders whether Allen now loves London as much as his beloved New York. The film is sometimes self-indulgent (e.g., having Pinto accept the erotic overture from a writer much like a young woman would react to a certain famous movie director) and sometimes almost self-critical (e.g., Hopkins refusing to accept his age and Brolin allowing himself to be tempted by a much younger woman; older men allowing sex to lead them into personal disasters). The comic high point is perhaps Hopkins telling an impatient Punch that he has to wait another three minutes before he makes love to her (he has taken a Viagra pill). The bottom line philosophically seems to be that personal happiness is a will-of-the-wisp (at the end Brolin's subterfuge about his book triumph about to be uncovered and Hopkins convinced that the baby that his wife is carrying is not his), unless you allow yourself to be deluded as in the case of Jones, her new boyfriend, and the fortune teller. One of the better recent light-weight Allen films; at least his pessimism is light-hearted with little existentialist breast-beating. (2011)

Young Adult 2011 Ivan Reitman (wr. Diablo Cody) 4.0 Charlize Theron pretty, neurotic, seriously alcoholic young Minneapolis writer of adolescent fiction determined to win back her old boyfriend; Patrick Wilson looking a little like Paul Newman as the decent, inoffensive guy she used to date in high school; Patton Oswalt as equally lost chubby loner that befriends Theron when she arrives in their small Minnesota town where they all went to high school. Amazingly sharp and cynical small movie from the same team that wrote the heartwarming 'Juno'. Theron has her best performance in years as the lonely (she has a relationship only with her little yappy dog) 35ish working woman with no friends and living in a wreck of an apartment in Minneapolis; receiving an email announcement of the birth of a baby to Wilson, she decides that to drive to her old home time and win him back, despite his being – to all appearances – happily married and a devoted father; despite her best efforts at seduction – drinking with him, initiating a small make-out session on his front doorstep, saying demeaning things about his wife in front of both of them, finally proclaiming desperately her passion for him to his face – her effort is a miserable failure. In the course of her campaign she meets a kind of platonic soul mate, Oswalt, in a bar, in whom she confides at every opportunity. The film ends with an astoundingly cynical denouement: after being rejected by Wilson, Theron is at first broken-hearted and inclined to make changes in her life, but after a conversation with the incredibly superficial sister of Oswalt (Collette Wolfe), who assures her that her life is what every girl dreams about, she hops in her car to return to the big city ('the mini apple') to continue her dead-end life. Theron's performance is compelling throughout: very pretty, scatter-brained, and impulsive, competent enough to write young adult novels, an alcoholic who usually can hold her liquor but who loses control toward the end of the film in front of Wilson's house, obsessively determined to win Wilson away from his settled, happy life in the teeth of any obstacle. The stubby, handicapped (beaten up when he was in high school since the class jocks thought he was gay) Oswalt is also excellent: he matches Theron with his loneliness and outsider status in society, but has a fundamental clear-headedness and decency that leads him to object to her home-wrecking campaign. A clever technique has Theron in voice-over reading from the high school novel she is working on and complaining about the unfairness of what is happening in her own life. An extremely sharp script that paints its characters accurately and fully and does not shy away from a cynical ending that contradicts all the expectations raised by the romantic comedy trope (Can't she change her life? Should she marry [impossibly] Oswalt?). Interesting mise-en-scène includes Theron spread three times fully clothed on her bed after a night of drunkenness, and several montages of her visiting department stores to modify her personality in preparation for her next assault on Wilson. An almost perfect small movie. (2012)

Young and Innocent 1937 Alfred Hitchcock (Britain) 3.5 Nova Pilbeam as pretty, slight daughter of chief constable who falls in love with De Marney; Derrick DeMarney as handsome unemployed screenwriter falsely accused of murder; Edward Rigby as decent street person who throws in his lot with the kids; Mary Clare amusing as nosy, suspicious aunt in the birthday party scene. Entertaining Hitchcock suspense/romance set in charming, small English country town somewhere probably on the south coast; film has Hitchcock's typical 30s British approach – light-hearted, safe thriller with innocent man caught up unwittingly in intrigue, use of a McGuffin, modest budget that shows especially in back screen projections and use of models to show railroad yards! Genre is wrong man

accused of murder, who is helped, at first reluctantly, by daughter of police chief constable; she of course relents, falls deeply in love with Robert, and they clear him and presumably live happily ever after. Very poor/cheap special effects, which are sometimes distracting (the model town with the toy train puffing through!). Has light touch all the way through – Pilbeam's troubles with her jalopy sports car and numerous family scenes in which children talk to adults cheekily and precociously; and we never fear for the fate of either protagonists. Hitchcock as usual has a deep humorous understanding of the habits, culture and speech of common folk (here English, and later American), even conferring on Rigby a certain loyal dignity. Robert's lawyer in the beginning is humorously casual, alternating between non-reassuring pessimism (oh dear, it doesn't look good for us, does it?) and hitting up De Marney for a two-pound down payment on account. Script focuses more on the romance – particularly the plight of Erica, who is caught between loyalty to her father and her developing affection for Robert – than on suspense and danger. Several memorable set pieces: 1) the riveting open sequence in which the murderer and his wife-victim are shouting at each other in a single-take close-up, followed by the discovery of the body, and the movement of suspect De Marney to the local police station; 2) the birthday party where the lovers are frustratingly delayed under the suspicious eye of Erica's aunt (game of blind man's bluff is particularly amusing); 3) the sudden and unexpected sinking of Pilbeam's quirky sports car in an abandoned mine with De Marney offering his hand tantalizingly to pull her to safety, and finally succeeding (the idea is reprised in 'Saboteur' 1942 and Cary Grant and Eva Marie Saint in 'North by Northwest' 1959); 4) the climactic scene – about 12 minutes – in the public rooms of the Grand Hotel; after a well-edited introductory sequence, a 1:10 minute aerial tracking shot closes in dramatically on the drummer in blackface finally showing his twitch – the McGuffin that Will and Erica have been looking for! Now the audience knows more than protagonists, and how will they find out!? By another sort of McGuffin – Erica, having been a girl scout and helped Robert when he fainted in the police station in the beginning, now goes to the rescue of the fainted drummer and notices the twitch. He confesses, and le voila! Film drags at times, and Pilbeam and De Marney never develop a convincing romantic chemistry; but good Hitchcock product that entertains and delights. (2008)

Young at Heart 2007 Stephen Walker 2.0 Popular documentary on a rock/r&b chorus composed of people at least 80 years old, focusing mostly on rehearsals in Northampton, Massachusetts as they prepare for their first concert of the season; the chorus, which was founded in Germany, had been in existence for about 25 years. The chorus is directed by the ever-frustrated, although understanding, Bob Cilman, who looks like a cross between a Jewish prophet and Benjamin Disraeli. The appeal of the chorus is not so much their performance, which is mediocre at best, but the warm feelings generated by a bunch of old fogeys refusing to lie down in their retirement homes and die; the contrast between the ravaged bodies and faces of the chorus members and their enthusiasm in singing such classics as James Brown's "I Feel Good" is sometimes amusing and sometimes rather depressing for a viewer in his mid-60s. Cilman gets some good laughs with his restrained frustration when one of his male lead singers can't remember his two lines from the above song. Major events are the deaths of two chorus members, who are practicing their parts and hoping to return up to the moment of their deaths; and the return for a special performance of an old member with a striking baritone voice – he is extremely fat, can barely walk, and must use an oxygen tube that makes hissing sounds during his song. One is torn between admiration for the old folks that refuse to fold up and a feeling that they should try an activity that does not require them to display their frailties in public. (2009)

Young Mr. Lincoln 1939 John Ford (writer Lamar Trotti) 3.5 Henry Fonda, although too good-looking – made up as much as possible to look like Abe Lincoln (deep eye sockets, artificial nose, hair piled up and mussed) and is pretty good at splitting logs; pretty Pauline Moore as Ann Rutledge; Marjorie Weaver as unrealistically pretty Ann Todd speaking in a Kentucky Southern accent; Donald Meek as the pompous, ridiculous prosecutor prosecuting the boys; Spencer Charters as the merry but fair-minded judge at the trial; Francis Ford (elder brother of John) as the town drunk; Ward Bond as one of the town's toughs, stupid and constantly drinking out of a jug; Arleen Clay as jaw-trembling, timorous mother of accused boys; Milburn Stone in cameo role as Stephen Douglas, who plays a small role in the film. Legendary bio pic about a fictitious event in the youth of Lincoln: two young men are accused of

murdering the town jerk, fledgling lawyer Lincoln agrees to defend them in court, and he gets them off the hook in a Perry Mason-like finale in which he forces a confession from the true murderer. The film focuses of course on a portrait of the future president without leaning explicitly on his coming greatness. Fonda gives very expressive portrayal of Lincoln: Noble! From a humble background, lanky and long-legged riding his horse into Springfield, shy, tight-lipped, quite anxious in polite company, does not know how to dance (shades of 'My Darling Clementine'; he also leans back in his chair as he would do on the porch in 'Clementine'), ambitious, hunger for books and learning, reflective, folksy way of talking; although somewhat melancholy, he loves to tell jokes and stories; resourceful and clever despite his awkwardness and his lack of knowledge of the law; presented as a compromiser and pacifier; stands for respect for law and order; likes to quote the Bible; kind and thoughtful; respect for humble, common people. The film paints a colorful and detail-rich picture of Illinois in 1830s; everyone seems to cook turnip greens and squirrel stew; drunken men wandering around the town and leading the charge to the town jail to lynch the kids; people love a good joke, laughing heartily at Abe's jokes; folksy frontier activities., e.g., Abe judging apple-pie contest, rail-splitting contest, tug-o-war that Abe cheats at, etc. Crisp black-and-white cinematography with many examples of Ford's trademark visual poetry and moving, iconic close-ups and medium shots of Fonda as Lincoln. With the exception of one indirect swipe, the film avoids reference to slavery. The sentimental, almost-non-stop musical score tires after a while. The final shot is sentimental, portentous and spine-chilling as Abe walks up a lonely road to the accompaniment of "The Battle Hymn of the Republic"; this man undoubtedly has a brilliant future before him. (2014)

The Young Victoria 2009 Jean-Marc Vallée 3.0 Emily Blunt pretty, pert, stubborn, determined as the young Victoria; Rupert Friend terminally sweet and attentive as Prince Albert with perfect flowing hair; Miranda Richardson as the grasping mother of Victoria, the Duchess of Kent; Paul Bettany perhaps a bit young and glamorous as Victoria's patron, the laissez-faire Liberal politician Lord Melbourne; Jim Broadbent very colorful and endearing as the garrulous old King William who publicly denounces his sister-in-law the Duchess of Kent for "stealing" 17 rooms of Kensington Palace; Mark Strong as Sir John, the Duchess' lover (?) and the villain of the piece; Michael Maloney as the dour Sir Robert Peel. Very enjoyable little drama about the coming of age of young Victoria: she starts as teenager stubbornly resentful of the domination of her mother and Sir John (the hated Kensington System whereby she has to sleep in the same room as her mother and always be supported by someone when she walks down the stairs); she resists the demand of her mother that she agree to a regency, and she succeeds to the throne after the death of her uncle, who is happy to live one year beyond Victoria's 18th birthday, her majority; she then falls under the sway of the manipulative Lord Melbourne, who uses his charm to guide Victoria - this enables him to stay in power even when the Conservatives gain a majority in Commons; she is courted by and courts Albert of Saxe-Coburg; she at first remains politically attached to Melbourne, the young couple have disagreements, but when Albert is wounded in an assassination attempt on Victoria, they are reconciled; the film comes to a satisfactory conclusion with Victoria depending on Albert for political counsel and her having her first baby. The film is pretty lightweight and "safe" – characters get angry, but they usually reconcile, e.g., the Queen's mother sends away Sir John and sidles back up to Victoria after Victoria banished her to a distant wing of Buckingham Palace. Victoria starts her reign as young, inexperienced and unprepared, but her independence and energy get her through, and she ends up happy in partnership with her husband and looking adoringly into her baby's eyes. The politics of the film is interesting -- the maneuverings of Conservatives (Peel, Wellington) and the Liberals (Melbourne), the mini-constitutional crisis when Victoria refuses to appoint some Conservative women as her ladies-in-waiting causing the resignation of Sir Robert Peel, King Leopold of Belgium pushing the marriage of nephew Albert with Victoria so as to secure stronger support from Britain for his newly created country. Art direction (Academy Award nomination), costumes, and music are very strong: "Zardoz the Priest" appears twice; contemporary court and diplomatic costumes are eye-catching; hairdos (especially of the King's wife) are over-the-top. Film begins strongly with the court intrigues surrounding Victoria's minority, although narrative flattens somewhat in the latter half after she becomes queen. Good show. (2010)

Your Friends and Neighbors 1998 Neil LaBute 3.5 Aaron Eckhart a bit chubby as more or less impotent husband of Amy Brennerman -- he admits that his best sexual partner is himself (but then he can't even complete masturbation at the end of the movie); Ben Stiller suitably annoying (always hesitates, always asks too many questions and explains himself excessively) as drama professor who lives with Keener and has a pointless and unfulfilled affair with Brennerman; Jason Patric really over the top as angry gynecologist of uncertain sexual preference (he has a wife, but he says his best sexual experience was the gang rape of a high school kid and he obviously masturbates a lot); Amy Brennerman as dissatisfied housewife (sex with Eckhart is a real yawn) who seems always unhappy and who has pointless affair with husband's best friend Stiller; Catherine Keener with the winning smile is psychologically removed from boyfriend Stiller (the thing she likes most about sex is the silence) and she strikes up a more satisfying relationship with Kinski; Nastassja Kinski as waif who works in an art gallery as "artist's assistant" and who pleads unsuccessfully with girlfriend Keener to talk to her in bed. Over-the-top misanthropic, cynical film about ultimately selfish people who think only of their own gratification, which in every case means sexual fulfillment; but no one ever seems to have a good sexual experience. Film takes place in cool domestic interiors with treatment only of the criss-crossing relationships among the six principals. An excellent cast that displays the young talent available in American independent movies in the late 90s; Jason Patric as off-center, incredibly self-indulgent character was the most striking performance. With its mindless chasing after happiness in sexual relationships, this film reminds one of Solondz's 'Happiness'; 'Friends' is less amusing and if possible more cynical. There is no redemption; at the end everyone is unhappy, frustrated and lonely – Eckhart can't even get himself off in phone sex; Keener still won't say anything to Kinski despite the latter's whining entreaties after sex; Stiller is completely alone having been rejected by his hoped-for lover and abandoned by his girlfriend – for a lesbian. In a surprise we learn that Patric actually has a wife (through most of the movie his ragingly angry monologues seem to be directed at imaginary partners – "I can't believe that you got your period right now and bleed on my 350 count sheets!"), who is pregnant; Patric's reaction is to insist on having sex right now, *this evening*, before she gets too big. Insightful and entertaining movie if you are prepared for the utter bleakness of the human landscape. (2009)

Zelig 1983 Woody Allen 4.0 Woody Allen as a New York Jewish clerk, who in order to fit in with his environment, to belong, somehow is able to metamorphose physically/personally/culturally into any person he wants – the human chameleon; Mia Farrow as Eudora Fletcher, young psychiatrist who is fascinated with Zelig and who eventually marries him. Film begins with dad telling Zelig that life is a meaningless nightmare of suffering and the only advice he gives him is to save string; he locks him into a dark closet and when he is really angry with him, he gets in there with him. The rest of the film is an almost magical recreation of traditional Hollywood documentary about a man who is so anxious to be liked that he turns into a replica of the person he is standing next to. Amazing technical wizardry: marvelous grainy, flickery black and white that perfectly reproduces newsreel footage from the 20s (Hearst Movietone News), booming narrator's voice (Patrick Horgan), all to the accompaniment of a large number of contemporary 20s songs. Film gives Allen the opportunity to dress up like anyone he wants to; Zelig becomes a 20s fad – new Charleston-like dance called the chameleon, huge traffic jams to see him; 1935 Warner Brothers film that dramatizes his condition . Allen is integrated into countless photographs and movie clips next to famous personalities in the 1920s – the US presidents, at San Simeon with various celebrities, standing in Times Square with all the old cars going by, next to Hitler in Germany. Zelig is denounced by both Communists (he holds five jobs) and the Ku Klux Klan that is upset about his turning into a negro; numerous hilarious popular songs with him as subject; he embarks on a wildly successful European tour, where his performance pleases many French intellectuals, who see in him a "symbol of everything." He performs with Josephine Baker at the Folies Bergère. The film has interviews with aged individuals who knew Zelig or others like Susan Sontag and Saul Bellow who pontificate a little on his significance: an academic interprets him as popular to Americans during the Depression because he represented boundless possibilities; other say he is representative of the Jewish experience in America in that he finds a new home and tries to integrate himself into it. Drama is that Zelig is extremely unhappy and lonely; he disappears from view, until he appears next to Pope Pius XI on a balcony overlooking St. Peter's Square. The big psychological question among the board of

psychologists investigating his case: psychotic or neurotic? Bruno Bettelheim says he is the ultimate conformist. Hilarious psychotherapy sessions with Farrow, in which Zelig decides that he is a therapist too and has to get back to the university where he is teaching a course on masturbation (he is afraid that if he doesn't get back, his students will start without him). When under hypnosis, he either says inane things (he loves baseball, he is a Democrat, or everybody beats everybody in his family) or insults Eudora for her bad cooking, etc. Zelig's progress under Eudora's care is inconsistent. At one point Eudora lifts Zelig's self-esteem so high that he violently attacks other people. Although quieted down, he again runs away where he is spotted in newsreels standing next to Hitler at Nazi Party rallies. Big adventure at end: rescued from Nazi Party rally by Eudora; they escape in a plane that Zelig pilots upside down across the Atlantic; the two eventually marry and live happily ever after. Ingenious film whose main theme seems to be the efforts of the Jews in diaspora to fit into the society where they settle. (2007)

Zero Dark Thirty 2012 Kathryn Bigelow 4.0+ Jessica Chastain deserving an Academy Award as attractive young CIA investigation obsessed with tracking down Osama Bin Laden; Jason Clarke as her boss, a genial yet ruthless interrogator kicking off the film with horrifying torture scenes of El Qaida detainees; Reta Kateb unforgettable as the tortured detainee Ammar; Kyle Chandler as Pakistan bureau chief who is sent back to Washington when his identity is uncovered; Jennifer Ehle as Chastain's only friend, who is killed in the infamous assassination of American operatives in Afghanistan; James Gandolfini quite heavy as CIA chief in Pakistan who is impressed with Chastain's drive and honest profanity ("Motherfuckers"). Outstanding single-minded docudrama about the tracking and killing of Osama Bin Laden that generates enormous narrative momentum and a deep sense of satisfaction in the American viewer. The first two-thirds of the film follows Chastain and Clarke through Afghanistan and especially a volatile Pakistan in their search for the perpetrators of 9/11. Chastain begins her tour of duty somewhat chastened and intimidated by the violence of Clarke's interrogations, but she then applies herself to the investigation with unstoppable energy, often brushing aside the caveats and hesitations of her superiors who think the inhabitant of the compound might be a Gulf drug dealer (when delays bedevil the attack of the Bin Laden compound, she writes the number of days elapsed since its discovery on the office window of her superior). When the US authorities finally order they attack, they bring in the more discreet Seals as opposed to using a bomb as recommended by Chastain. The attack on the compound is almost as exciting as the investigation is fascinating. The Seals (called 'canaries' in the film) are genial, serious, and incredibly well-trained and well-equipped; the crash of one of the two original helicopters doesn't hamper the operation since the commanders are able to send others to back up the men; the viewer follows the night-vision-goggled Seals step-by-step into the compound, blowing open doors with explosives, coolly executing along the way anyone who opposes them, and finally shooting down Bin Laden without warning when they burst into his bedroom. The film ends quietly back at the base with Chastain solemnly viewing the body of the 9/11 mastermind and then crying silently when she boards a plane to take her back to Langley, Virginia. The film is compulsively linear from Chastain's arrival at the "black" site in Afghanistan to the dispatching of Bin Laden – no flashbacks, no subplots, no romance, only a hint of friendship between Chastain and Ehle. Despite its two and a half hour length and deliberate pacing in the investigative section, the film never drags, in part because of the picturesque locales (Pakistani cities!) and the well-delineated personalities, in part because the obsessive focus of the film mirrors the icy determination of its heroine, and in part because the American viewer, outraged by the butchery of 9/11, is deeply committed to retribution against El Qaida. The ending of the film engenders national pride and admiration for the guts and determination of people like the character played by Chastain. One even wonders whether the use of torture was a justified expedient for tracking down the bad guys (US authorities deny that torture was used in the locating of Bin Laden). Wonderfully well-made docu-thriller. (2013)

Zodiac 2007 David Fincher 3.5 Jake Gyllenhaal as naive-acting, obsessive cartoonist for the *San Francisco Chronicle* (Robert Graysmith) who becomes fixated on the infamous Zodiac killings (1969-74) in the Bay Area; Paul Ruffalo as young, by-the-book investigator of the SFPD who also becomes obsessed with the case; Robert Downey Jr. unrecognizably thin and bearded as disheveled, alcoholic crime reporter, Paul Avery, for the *Chronicle* who covers the story and resents Gyllenhaal

looking over his shoulder; Anthony Edwards as clean-cut Inspector working with Ruffalo; John Carroll Lynch suitably creepy as prime suspect Arthur Leigh Allen. First-rate, long (2:37) docudrama – half police investigation and half newsroom story – about the search for the Zodiac killer: the viewer is afflicted with three grisly murders in the beginning followed by the famous letters and cryptograms sent to the Chronicle by the (apparent) perpetrator, but after that investigations dominate – first the police investigation by Ruffalo and Edwards, and after their failure even to identify clearly the prime suspect, the dogged, even obsessive investigation of Gyllenhaal, who sacrifices his family relationships to come up with convincing evidence against Allen, whom he is convinced is the guilty party. Gyllenhaal finally writes a couple of books on the subject, and although Allen dies before he can be prosecuted, the author appears to make a good case against him; however, there was never any forensic evidence (e.g., handwriting seems different, his fingerprints did not match the partial one left in the San Francisco cab, and postmortem DNA testing also was negative). The film avoids genre expectations by not giving the viewer the booking and conviction of the true killer. Despite the film's length, the viewer's attention never flags: the characters are deeply drawn where appropriate, e.g., the boyish charm of Graysmith that covers a rather dysfunctional obsessiveness that alienates his patient wife (Chloe Sevigny) and turns his living room into a mess reminiscent of Howard Hughes' urine room in 'The Aviator'. Most of the film follows the dogged footwork of the various investigators as they cover different counties in Northern California (Solano, Sonoma and San Francisco), deal with false leads and rivalries among various police departments, as well as California state handwriting experts locked in their own theories that lead to the exculpation of probably the guilty person; it follows also the drama in the city room of the Chronicle and in the police department, as Graysmith has tense relationships with Avery and is then fired from the newspaper, and in the SFPD, where Edwards is demoralized by their lack of success and resigns from the case. The film recreates vividly the appearance, culture and atmosphere of Northern California in the epoch, what with picnics by Lake Berryessa, being threatened by a motorist on a small Valley highway, parking in a lovers' lane next to Lake Herman (Benicia), or a spectacular shot that appears to be made from one of the towers of the Golden Gate Bridge. The film might have benefitted from some editing: although the red herrings in the investigation give an accurate picture of the frustrations of police investigators, following fewer of them might have helped the movement of the film. (2011)

The Zookeeper's Wife 2017 Niki Caro (New Zealand) 2.0 Sentimental, crowd-pleasing film about saving Jews in the Warsaw Zoo during World War II. Jessica Chastain pretty, sincere but sugary-sweet with fake Polish accent as zookeeper Jan Zabinski's wife; Johan Heldenbergh (Flemish actor) as the equally sincere zookeeper, Jan Zabinski; Daniel Brühl as initially helpful German army officer who is hesitantly in love with Chastain. Film aims to be a crowd-pleasing treatment of Schindler-type campaign to save Jews from the jaws of the Nazi extermination machine. Film begins with adorable-style treatment of Chastain's love of animals, most of whom she affectionately calls "My love" or "Sweetheart"; she sleeps with skunks and lion cubs; a baby camel follows her around the zoo; she hyper-charms the viewers by saving an elephant newborn from suffocation to the amazement of all onlookers; she is usually cooing with affection. At one point she tells the viewer that she trusts animals much more than humans. The zoo however loses most of its animals once the Germans arrive, and Zabinski turns it into a hog farm to cover his campaign to save Jews caught in the Warsaw Ghetto. The film says they saved 300 Jews, but with the exception of perhaps a dozen in the Zabinski's basement, it is unclear where they stay or are sent. The viewer never gets to know any of them individually (one girl raped by German soldiers is a silent exception), but they just hang out quietly in the basement (never checked by the Germans) and drift smilingly into the upstairs living room when Chastain plays the piano (very elementary technique). An important subplot is Chastain having to put up with the romantic gestures of Brühl to keep him on their side; since he does not succeed in seducing her, we must admit that he is more patient than most German officers. The film ends in scenes of devastation at the end of the war: Zabinski participates in the Warsaw Uprising (no transition to his military activity), he is shot in the neck, his family thinks he is dead; and as the mom and two kids are comforting one another in the zoo (they rescue a wild bunny), he suddenly appears to create a four-way embrace and a happy ending; credits roll about the Zabinski's achievement. One reviewer sums up the movie as a Disney version of the Holocaust: sure, the Holocaust was terrible,

but look at what this sweet couple was able to achieve, and anyhow who can resist the faces of those lion cubs. (August 2017)

Zu Dou 1990 Zhang Yimou (China) 3.0 Gong Li innocently beautiful as young bride abused by her elderly husband; Baotian Li as her lower-class, rather plain-looking, although passionate lover; Wei Li as the insecure, impotent, and cruel older husband who is desperate to have a son. Slow-moving, visually emphasized drama set in a dye works in a small Chinese town in the 1920s. The first part of the film is the most entertaining: Gong Li looks around for comfort and finds it in Baotian Li – the two make a child together; they show true delight in being with one another and in each other's bodies. However, they pay the price for their actions. Wei Li is crippled (by a stroke?) and spends the second half of the film paddling around in a wheeled barrel filled with hatred for his wife and her paramour; he dies when the child accidentally (?) pulls him into a vat of red dye. The two lovers – desperate – sneak into a basement where they are almost suffocated; the film ends with the now teenage son (it is now the 1930s) throwing Baotian Li into the same vat and then hitting him with a piece of firewood to keep him from climbing out; all the while, Gong Li is crawling down the stairs emitting her usual shrill complaint. Although the film has enough scandal and violence for a potboiler, it comes across as measured and self-conscious because of the emphasis on symbolic visual imagery. Many of the scenes have a dark blue tinge to symbolize, one supposes, the murky moral realm which the main characters inhabit; more common are the brilliantly colored strips of cloth hung up to dry in the dye works – the reds, oranges, and bright yellows appear to represent passion and the blood (retribution) that comes out of it; the cloths often fall on the characters when they are dying. The film appears to be a statement about the repression and tradition in Chinese society; society watches you and it defends the family and the family line and condemns you if you don't follow the rules; on several occasions the town elders meet to instruct the family on what to do (e.g., Gong Li and Baotian Li have to make a show of stopping Wei Li's funeral procession 49 (!) times to show their loyalty to her dead husband!). At times the viewer feels that the tragedy is simply fated and there is no clear villain; more often one senses that the director is attacking the rigid traditions of Chinese culture, pointing out the human cost of applying them. The justiciar of the system is Gong Li's teenage son, who never says a word but turns to violence and murder to carry out the decrees of society; even your child is imprisoned by unforgiving social values. Carefully made film with much beauty, but it lacks spontaneity. (2008)