

Dr. Ed's Movie Reviews

2011

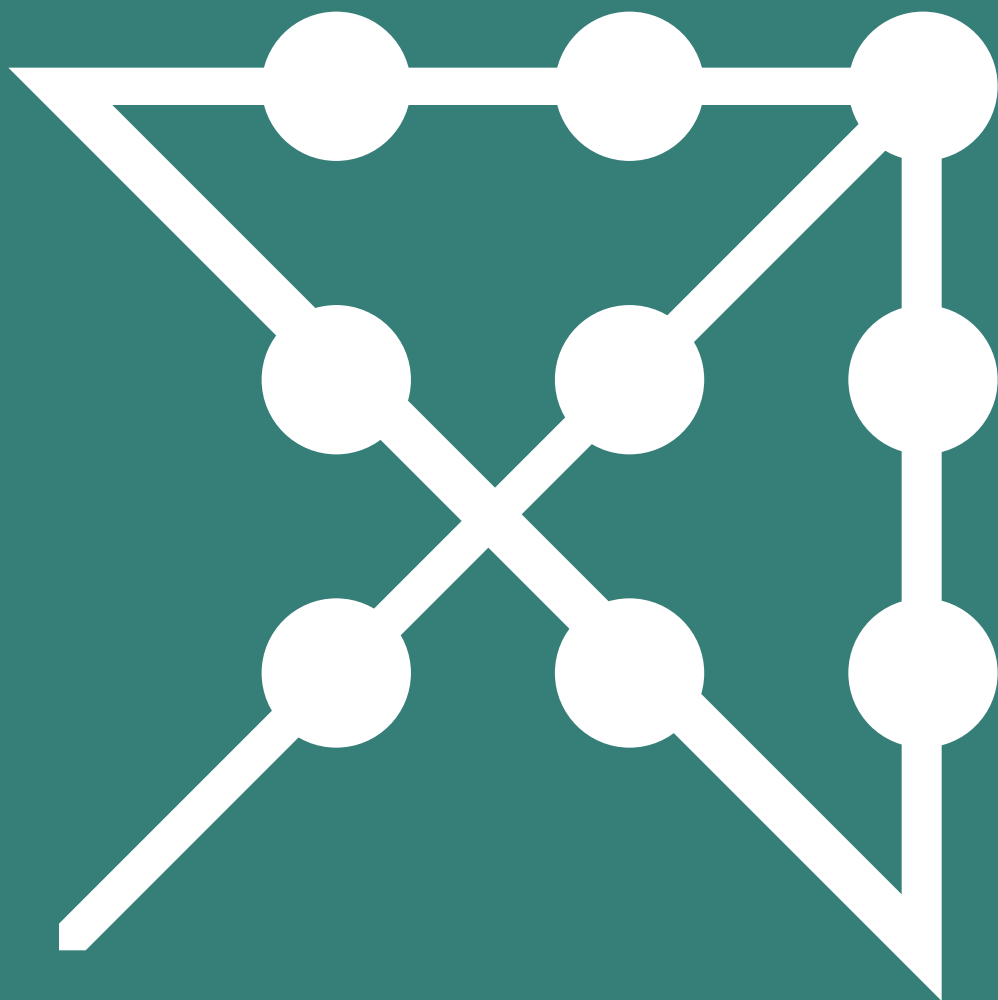
Yardeni Research, Inc.

December 14, 2011

Dr. Edward Yardeni

515-972-7683
eyardeni@yardeni.com

Please visit our sites at
www.yardeni.com
blog.yardeni.com



thinking outside the box

A Better Life (+ +) is about an illegal Mexican worker in Los Angeles. He has a great work ethic. He also has an American born son, whom he is raising by himself. His dream is to give his son a better life. His challenges are to avoid getting deported and to keep his son from joining a gang. The movie isn't for or against illegal immigrants. It is about the universal struggle for a better life, especially for our kids. A better life is not likely if we saddle them with trillions of dollars of debt.

Incendies (+ +) is about a civil war in a stylized Arab nation most like Lebanon, though the country is never mentioned. The central theme is that war completely dehumanizes humans and that our only real achievement is to survive it. It is a very intense film with a harrowing plot twist. The movie also supports the main point of a front-page article in the 5/22 *NYT* titled, "Promise of Arab Uprisings Is Threatened by Divisions: Religious and Clan Tensions Hinder Effort to Build a Broader Sense of Identity."

Inside Job (+) is a documentary about who caused the financial crisis. It won an Academy Award in March. Charles Ferguson, who directed the film, lamented during his acceptance speech that no one has gone to jail for all the fraud that was committed leading up to the financial meltdown. Ferguson has described the film as being about "the systemic corruption of the United States by the financial services industry and the consequences of that systemic corruption." Wall Street did it! That's where all the money came from that corrupted everyone else including politicians, regulators, rating agencies, mortgage brokers, and academics. The Fed contributed to the crisis mostly through its laissez-faire approach to all the corruption. I have to agree. I also have to agree that nothing has changed. The big banks are bigger than ever, and probably more corrupt.

J. Edgar (+ + +) is an outstanding movie, starring Leonardo DiCaprio as the man who created the FBI. It was directed by Clint Eastwood. J. Edgar Hoover was a controversial public figure, who managed to stay in power as head of the agency for 37 years, under six presidents. He reportedly frequently crossed the line professionally and in his personal life. Nevertheless, he dramatically increased the crime-fighting resources of the FBI by hiring forensic scientists and centralizing the collection of fingerprints. He was overly paranoid about political dissenters and activists, viewing them all as terrorists. But that doesn't mean they weren't out to get us.

Lincoln Lawyer (+ +) is a very entertaining murder thriller starring Matthew McConaughey as a slick defense lawyer who has to defend a slick defendant. McConaughey does a fine job with the role in this fast paced, but well crafted, movie with some good plot twists.

Margin Call (+ +) is one of the better dramas and documentaries about the origins of the financial crisis. The cast is top notch, including Kevin Spacey, Jeremy Irons, and Demi Moore. It revolves around the key people at an investment bank, which seems to be a blend of Bear Stearns and Lehman, over the 24 hours leading up to its collapse. Actually, it seems that Jon Corzine must have read the script and decided to take MF Global down the same road to overleveraged oblivion.

Midnight In Paris (+ +) is Woody Allen's 62nd film. This one stars Owen Wilson playing Woody Allen playing a successful screen writer who aspires to be a novelist and live in Paris. The only obstacle to achieving his dream is his fiancé who wants him to remain gainfully employed so they can afford to live in Malibu. Our conflicted protagonist resolves his dilemma by channeling great American writers who caroused in Paris during the 1920s. The basic theme is that past Golden Periods are overrated. Maybe so, but I still have fond memories of the 1950s and 1990s.

Moneyball (+ +) shows how the quants changed baseball. The film is based on the bestselling book by Michael Lewis. Brad Pitt plays Billy Beane, the general manager of the Oakland Athletics baseball team. He rejected the advice of his scouts and relied on statistical analysis generated by a young economist trained at Yale, whom he hired to pick players and their positions. It worked, and was soon widely copied by other teams. Hey, I was trained at Yale as an economist. If this doesn't work out, I can try baseball. However, high frequency traders may soon spoil that business too.

Mother (+ +) is a 2009 drama film that is available on video. It is a murder mystery about a doting mother who can't believe that her mentally challenged son killed a high school girl. Her investigation of the crime is much more thorough than the one conducted by the police. There are lots of interesting twists to this twisted plot.

Mozart's Sister (+) is a very interesting French movie about Maria Anna Mozart. She was Wolfgang's older sister. He idolized her and was inspired to study music by observing his father's instruction of his sister. Apparently, she was very talented, but was no longer allowed to pursue a career in music once she reached a marriageable age.

My Week with Marilyn (+ +) is a great tribute to Norma Jean Baker, a.k.a. Marilyn Monroe, who died at the young age of 36 after a short, but spectacularly successful career as an actress, singer, model, and showgirl. The movie recounts the time she spent filming a movie with Laurence Olivier in 1957 titled, "The Prince and the Showgirl." Michelle Williams is outstanding playing Marilyn with her unique blend of talent, seductiveness, and insecurities. Now we need a movie about the suspicious circumstances that led to her untimely death.

Sarah's Key (+ +) is about a reporter who pieces together the harrowing experience of a young Jewish French girl who was rounded up along with her family and other Jews in Paris by the French police during World War II. One memorable moment: When she asks one of her colleagues what he would have done if his Jewish neighbors were rounded up, he said that he would do the same as he is doing now about the atrocities in the world today. In other words, nothing.

Snow Flower and the Secret Fan (+ +) is an outstanding Chinese chick flick. It is about the strong bond between two young women growing up in modern-day Shanghai and the pressures that test their friendship. Their story runs parallel with that of two women living in 19th-century China, Snow Flower and Lily, who were matched as "laotong," i.e., soul sisters for eternity, when they were growing up. When the going gets tough, it's good to have a laotong to count on.

Source Code (-) is a combination of "Run Lola Run," "Groundhog Day," "Unstoppable," and every movie ever made about terrorists. Jake Gyllenhaal plays a soldier who has eight minutes to identify the terrorist who blew up a commuter train in Chicago before he blows up all of Chicago with a dirty bomb. The movie lasts more than eight minutes because the explosion happens over and over again, and every time the train blows up, our hero must be sent back to have another look until he uncovers the evil doer. We can all rest easy because according to this PC Hollywood plot, the terrorist isn't from the Middle East. He is one of us, and could be a member of the Tea Party.

Super 8 (-) is basically a sequel of Steven Spielberg's "E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial." It is produced by him and directed by J.J. Abrams, who left millions of his "Lost" television viewers totally lost when the show ended without any plausible ending. The alien—who is older, less charismatic, and has more feet—is back on Earth and once again wants to go home. He does so with the help of a bunch of kids who foil the plot of US army villains to keep him caged up.

The Company Men (+) is a predictable movie about what it's like to be unemployed if you've lost your job earning \$160,000 at a conglomerate that is downsizing. Ben Affleck plays the lead role with his usual unemotional style, though he does get convincingly choked up when he has to sell his Porsche. To make ends meet in between jobs, he works in construction for his brother-in-law, who regularly mutters the usual anti-business stuff required by Hollywood. In the end, capitalism works, and our hero finds another job, though making only half as much. That's why I like country music: When you play it backwards, you get your job back your house back, your dog back, and your wife back.

The Conspirator (++) is about Mary Surratt, the lone female charged as a co-conspirator in the assassination trial of Abraham Lincoln. Robin Wright plays the role with stoic style. James McAvoy commendably portrays her reluctant lawyer, who rises to the challenge of representing such a controversial defendant. The film was directed by Robert Redford. It's the first one by him or any other Hollywood director that glorifies the Constitution of the United States in recent memory.

The Debt (+) has a great cast and a weak plot. Three Mossad agents are sent into East Berlin at the height of the Cold War to bring a Nazi war criminal to justice in Israel. The plan doesn't go according to plan, and the agents decide to change it in a way that adversely complicates the rest of their lives. I see parallels with the plan for monetary unification in the euro zone.

The Descendants (+ +) stars George Clooney in a movie about a real estate lawyer living in Hawaii. He notes that people living in paradise have the same problems and troubles as people living anywhere else. He does the best he can to overcome the personal travails that have upended his family life. At the end, his personal loss allows him to have closer relationships with his daughters and to save Hawaii from developers.

The Fighter (+) starring Mark Wahlberg and Christian Bale is one of those based-on-a-true-story movies. It's about boxer "Irish" Micky Ward's Rocky-like road to the world light welterweight title. His career was first hindered and then helped by half-brother Dicky, a boxer-turned-trainer who rebounded in life after nearly being KO'd by drugs and crime. Bale's supporting role was devilishly whacky, and he should get an Oscar for it.

The Guard (++) is a very witty Western. It is about an eccentric cop in a small town on the western coast of Ireland. He is pursuing a gang of drug smugglers, who are also intent on killing him before their shipment of cocaine arrives by boat. Brendan Gleeson plays the lead role like Gary Cooper in "High Noon," in a film that pays homage to the directing style of the Coen brothers.

The Ides of March (+) suggests that Hollywood and Lake Como are disenchanted with politics. Lake Como is where George Clooney hangs out when he isn't making films for Hollywood. He wrote and directed this film about an idealistic campaign manager, who quickly learns about dirty politics and how to play the game. I wonder if Clooney's Hollywood cronies are as disappointed with the Democrat in the White House as he seems to be.

The King's Speech (+ + +) is a remarkably good film with an extraordinary cast. Colin Firth should receive the Oscar for best performance by a leading male actor, hands down. There was a time not too long ago when good men and women confronted evil ones and defeated them. In our time, as confirmed by Wikileaks, we seem to be plagued with moral ambiguity and go to great lengths to negotiate with evil doers.

Thor (-) is an action superhero flick based on the Marvel Comics character and directed by Kenneth Branagh, who has appeared in numerous films and is fond of Shakespearean plays. There was a hint of the classics in the movie as Thor struggles to prove to his father, the King, that he is a worthy heir to the throne, while his adopted brother is plotting against him. Nevertheless, the movie is just the latest really loud and annoying addition to this comic book genre. Based on the coming attractions, there are lots more coming. It reminds me of the Republican party with all of the comic action heroes that are showing up to challenge the one in the White House.

Too Big To Fail (+) is an HBO docudrama based on Andrew Ross Sorkin's book of the same name. It is an account of how Hank Paulson, Tim Geithner, and Ben Bernanke triggered a near financial meltdown during the week of September 15 by refusing to bail out Lehman, and then scrambled to stop the resulting contagion. The basic message is that all three did the best they could under the circumstances. However, the result is that the banks are bigger and riskier than ever.

True Grit (+) is a remake of the John Wayne classic. This one stars Jeff Bridges as "Rooster" Cogburn, a drunken, hard-nosed US Marshal who helps a stubborn young girl track down her father's murderer in Indian territory. The Coen brothers, who are the directors, are known for their off-beat movies. They played this one straight, though their Rooster is drunker and less loveable than the original. Where is John Wayne when we need him most?

Unknown (+) stars Liam Neeson in a cookie-cutter thriller with lots of twists and turns in the plot and in the obligatory car chase scenes in downtown Berlin. There are assassins and explosions, of course. The funniest part of the movie is that an oil-rich Arab prince is generously funding research by a Berlin biotech professor to produce a hardy strain of corn, which will end world hunger. The prince and the professor intend to provide the genetic formula to the world as a humanitarian gift. Truly heartwarming stuff. Also heartwarming was that all my picks for the Oscars won, except the one for best foreign film.