

Dr. Ed's Movie Reviews 2012

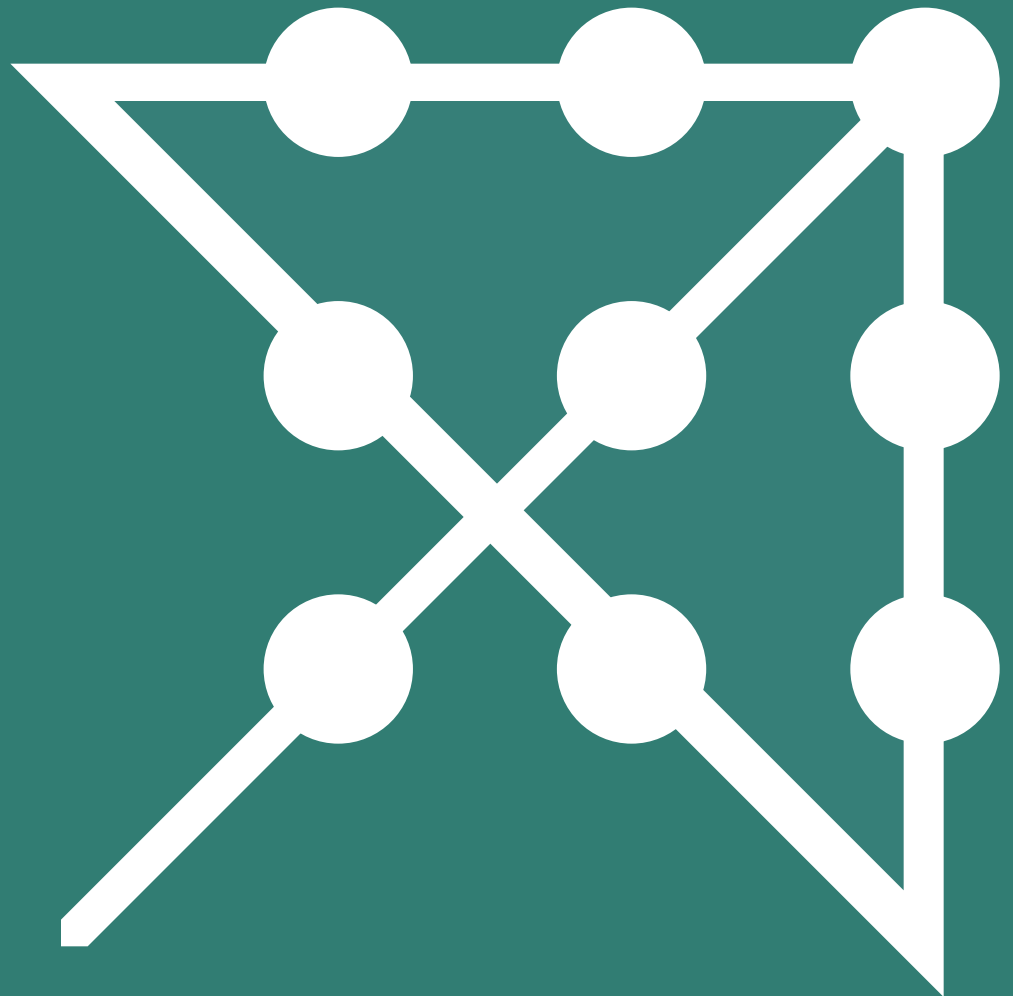
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thinking outside the box

A Separation (+ +) is an Oscar contender for Best Foreign Language Film. The movie is about the unhappy consequences caused by the separation of an unhappy middle class Iranian married couple, who have a teenage daughter. One thing leads to another, making everybody equally miserable. While the country's Mad Mullahs are scrambling to develop a nuclear bomb, it's nice to know that life goes on in Tehran and that Iranians can be just as miserable as the rest of us. Why is it so hard for us all to get along in our personal and geopolitical relationships?

Argo (+ + +) is a film by Ben Affleck about a CIA plot to rescue six US staff members of the US embassy in Tehran. They managed to escape just before it was overrun by students, which led to the 444-day hostage crisis. The six found refuge in the home of Canada's ambassador to Iran. The hostage crisis started on November 4, 1979. That was a very bad year in other parts of the Middle East as well. On November 20, Islamic dissidents seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca, Saudi Arabia. In Iran, Ayatollah Khomeini blamed "American imperialism and international Zionism" for the attack. Anti-American demonstrations followed in several Moslem countries. The day following the takeover of the mosque, the US embassy in Islamabad, Pakistan was overrun by a mob, which then burned the embassy to the ground. A week later, this anger swept to the streets of Tripoli, Libya, where a mob attacked and burned the US embassy there on December 2, 1979. Russia invaded Afghanistan on December 24, 1979.

Beasts of the Southern Wild (+ + +) is an extraordinary film starring an exceptionally talented six-year-old girl, Quvenzhané Wallis. She could win the Oscar for her role as Hushpuppy, a child living with her dying father, Wink, who is also played by an astonishingly gifted first-time actor. They struggle to survive in a southern Delta community, which floods during severe storms. Hushpuppy's stoic ability to deal with adversity is downright heroic, and so is the performance of the child actor who plays her.

Dark Shadows (+) is about a vampire played by Johnny Depp, who is very funny in the role. The plot has him waking up during the very retro 1970s after spending 200 years cooped up in his casket. In many ways, this movie is a sequel to "Edward Scissorhands," a true classic also starring Depp and also directed by Tim Burton. Both are about an awkward and loveable monster, who is trying to fit into human society. The Obama campaign recently tried to portray Mitt Romney as a vampire, but he doesn't seem to fit the part.

End of Watch (+) is hard to watch. It's an extremely violent and graphic depiction of the daily routine of two young police officers patrolling the mean streets of LA, where the Mexican drug cartels impose lawlessness and disorder. The acting, action, dialogue, and hand-held filming are fast paced and intense.

Hitchcock (+ + +) features a fabulous performance by Anthony Hopkins playing Alfred Hitchcock when he was filming "Psycho." Helen Mirren admirably co-stars as the great director's very supportive wife, Alma Reville. Hopkins put on some weight to play "Hitch," a role that he clearly had fun doing and is fun to watch.

Hope Springs (+) is a light comedy with some heavy actors. Tommy Lee Jones and Meryl Streep play a married couple who occupy the same house, but sleep in separate bedrooms. The magic is long gone. So they go to a marriage counselor who assigns them specific exercises to bring the magic back. The audience at my theater was quite geriatric, and one elderly gentleman kept asking his wife out loud, "What are they doing?"

In Darkness (+ +) was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film. It is based on a true story and relates the harrowing experiences of a group of Polish Jews who survived during the last 14 months of World War II in the sewers of Warsaw with the aid of a "righteous gentile." It's a reminder of man's inhumanity to man, which continues to this very day in Syria, Iran, and other nations ruled by corrupt and brutal regimes. If the West's economic war against Iran succeeds, perhaps this will provide a new approach to bringing down such regimes, or at least to stopping them from acquiring nuclear weapons.

Life of Pi (+ +), directed by Ang Lee, is a beautifully filmed movie about struggling to survive rationally in an often irrational world. Is the meaning of life to be found in faith and religion? Or is it best to be rational and guided only by reality as we know it and can perceive it? But what if reality is what we choose it to be? Sounds like investing in stocks.

Lincoln (+ + +) is a great film about a great president. Directed by Steven Spielberg, it is based on the book by historian Doris Kearns Goodwin titled, "Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln." Torn between ending the civil war or ending slavery, Lincoln pursues the latter course. Daniel Day-Lewis deserves all the credit he has already received for his outstanding performance in the leading role. One of the insights of the film is that Congress was just as corrupt back then as it is now; politics was just as dirty.

Red Tales (+) is an interesting movie about the 332nd Fighter Group of young African-American USAAF fighter pilots during World War II. They were stationed in Italy flying worn-out Curtiss P-40 Warhawk aircraft and were assigned to ground attack missions against enemy trains and trucks. Near the end of the war they finally saw lots of fighter-to-fighter action against the Luftwaffe. Ultimately, the airmen were awarded the Presidential Unit Citation in honor of their achievements.

Robot & Frank (+) is a light comedy set in the near future about a retired cat burglar, played by Frank Langella. He is showing symptoms of Alzheimer's, but prefers to live alone in his house in the woods. His son, who can only visit one day a week because the commute is a long one, buys his dad a robot programmed to be his companion and caretaker. They become partners in crime.

Safe House (- -) stars Denzel Washington as a rogue CIA agent and Ryan Reynolds as a rookie agent, and you know the rest in this all too predictable and consistently dull thriller. If you have the urge to see another implausible car chase and lots of dizzying fast forward hand-to-hand combat close up, this movie is for you. Once again, our heroes manage to dodge machine gun bullets and to run faster than the bad guys leaping from one roof to another roof in an urban slum.

Savages (- - -) is one of the worst movies I've seen in a long time. It got lots of good reviews, but the dialogue and the acting were uniformly awful in my opinion. Blake Lively wasn't lively in this movie about a Mexican drug cartel and high-octane pot grown in California. The actors must have all been smoking some of the props on the set while Oliver Stone was directing them. He seemed to be trying to make a sequel to "Pulp Fiction," which was much better and directed by Quentin Tarantino. The only star was Laguna Beach.

Searching for Sugar Man (+ + +) is an amazing documentary about the remarkable story of Rodriguez, an extraordinarily talented Motown singer, who flopped in the US, but was bigger than Elvis in South Africa. It's truly shocking to see what happened to this gifted musical poet who seemed to have the potential to be as great as Bob Dylan.

Silver Linings (+) is an amusing love story about two people who are on medication for mood disorders. It stars Bradley Cooper and Jennifer Lawrence, who prove that love is better than psychotherapeutic drugs for restoring mental health. Let's face it: Love will not bring all those bipolar Democrats and Republicans together to work out a deal to avert the fiscal cliff. Putting them all on medication might help to restore our sanity, if not theirs.

Skyfall (+ +) is the latest James Bond film. I am somewhat ambivalent about this one in the series of 23 movies made about the British secret agent. That's because for the first time, 007 hints that he is ambivalent about his sexuality, drinks beer, and can't pass his physical exam. On the other hand, it's a better character study of a more introspective Bond, with fewer distracting gadgets and vixens, than any of the previous movies.

The Artist (+ + +) is a very special movie that is a nostalgic tribute to the movie industry when it was radically transformed by the introduction of sound tracks. These days, though, I sometimes wish that this technology was never introduced, as my hearing is impaired by the high-decibel noise of trailers for "The Transformers" and other awful mutations of the art form.

The Avengers (-) is the latest superheroes flick out of Hollywood. It's been a huge box office success. I'm not sure why. It is too long, too predictable, and too loud. Movies are an escape from reality, which is populated by too many dimwits running our governments. Rather than leaders, who fight for what's right, we have appeasers, who cave in whenever challenged. I suppose we have a craving for superheroes because they wouldn't disappoint us if they existed.

The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel (+ + +) has a great cast, great story, and great insights into the meaning of life. A small group of British retirees goes to India to reside in the Marigold Hotel, which turns out to be a dump. However, only one of them is disappointed by the experience and leaves. Judi Dench is great as always. However, Maggie Smith steals the show in the same way she does in the hit TV series, "Downton Abbey."

The Bourne Legacy (-) is the legacy that just won't quit. It's a reread of the previous three Bourne movies starring Matt Damon, who must have lost interest in making yet another sequel. This fourth film in the legacy stars Jeremy Renner, who is a good actor lost in a pointless rehash of a tired and boring genre.

The Grey (+) stars Liam Neeson in this movie about the odds of surviving a plane crash in the middle of a frozen wilderness with constant snowstorms and a pack of wolves hunting for another human to have for dinner. The odds are not great. But Liam's character makes it to the end of the movie. The other men who are stranded along with him are not so lucky. The movie reminds me of 2011, when the goal for most investors was to survive till the end of the year. It was a year of living dangerously.

The Hunger Games (+ +) is a mash-up of "Rollerball," "Star Wars," and "The Truman Show." It's a mix of the TV series "Survivor" and "Rome." If the current economic and financial turmoil all ends badly, as feared by Wall Street's doomsayers, then the post-apocalyptic world could have a Capitol surrounded by 12 districts that must each send a boy and a girl between the ages of 12-18 to an annual fight-to-the-death to entertain the masses. (In this scenario, the district headquarters could occupy the former regional Fed offices, I suppose.) Such a bloody sports extravaganza would be the authoritarian government's way of distracting the masses so they don't revolt over the shortage of food. The Hunger Games could be the much feared Endgame.

The Queen of Versailles (+) is a “riches to rags” documentary about a billionaire couple. He made his fortune selling timesharing units. Together, they spent it on an opulent lifestyle that included the construction of the biggest house in America, modeled after Versailles. When the financial crisis hit in 2008, the credit that fueled their business and lifestyle evaporated, leaving their palace a huge empty shell. It’s a larger-than-life morality play about how Americans used and abused credit.

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy (+) is about the good old days of the Cold War, when spying was old fashioned. It depended on crafty spies on the ground rather than high tech drones up in the air. Back then, the biggest threats to our intelligence gathering organizations were moles sent by our enemies. Now it is cyber-attacks. This movie is a bit slow, but that was the pace of spying during the Cold War before it went high tech.

To Rome With Love (+) is Woody Allen’s latest cookie cutter movie set in the European city that is named in the title. It’s funny sometimes, and tedious other times, especially when Alec Baldwin has something to say. Most of the actors play their parts as though they are Woody Allen, who wrote and directed the movie.

Trishna (+ +) is based on Thomas Hardy’s classic novel Tess of the D’Urbervilles, but set in modern-day India. The young lady is convincingly played by Freida Pinto, who also had the female lead in Slumdog Millionaire. Life is hard when you are poor and come from a rural background. It doesn’t necessarily get any better when you are shown the good life by an abusive cad with money.

Trouble with the Curve (+) stars Clint Eastwood as an aging baseball scout for the Atlanta Braves. He doesn’t talk to any empty chairs, though he is losing his eyesight in the movie. But at the same time, he is finding out how to get closer to his daughter, whom he neglected when she was growing up. One of the messages of the film is that computer models can’t beat common sense. I hope Ben Bernanke goes to see the film and gets this point.