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3:10 to Yuma (- -) has a great cast (Russell Crowe and Christian Bale), but a really lame plot. Actually, I've never seen a plot with so many logical holes from beginning to end, starting with why the bad guy, played by bad-boy Crowe, waited around in town to be arrested by the local sheriff. The dialogue was also lame. Crowe tosses the bounty hunter, played by Peter Fonda, over a cliff after he insults his mother, and says, "Even bad guys love their mothers."

A Mighty Heart (+ + +) is an intense docudrama recreating the events leading up to the execution of Wall Street Journal reporter Daniel Pearl by Islamic Jihadists in Pakistan during 2002. Angelina Jolie was outstanding as Mariane Pearl, Daniel's extraordinarily strong wife, who was six-months pregnant at the time. The movie depicts Karachi, Pakistan's largest city, as a teeming and sweltering geopolitical hot spot. Yet, the Karachi stock exchange hit a record high at the end of last week. It is up 37.2% ytd, the third best among the 35 stock markets we track around the world.

Amazing Grace (+ +) is a wonderful movie about how abolitionist William Wilberforce maneuvered his way through Parliament in 18th century England to end the slave trade in the British empire. My only regret is that I didn't stop by to pay my respects at Westminster Abby when I was in London last week. He is buried next to his friend Prime Minister William Pitt the Younger, who was also against the slave trade. I was asked by one account in London if I had seen "The Queen." I did indeed, and I gave it three pluses. I asked my British friend why Helen Mirren's face appears on the country's currency.

American Gangster (+) has a great cast (Denzel Washington and Russell Crowe) and a great director (Ridley Scott). Though given all this star power, it wasn't as great as I expected. Perhaps I've seen too many gangster movies. It was a bit like a mix of "The Godfather" and "Scarface." Then again, it is based on an amazing true story. Well, actually, the true story is that Harlem's drug lord wasn't the nice charismatic family man portrayed by Denzel. Hollywood always manages to find something nice to say about gangsters, while characterizing Wall Street tycoons as greedy SOB's. They might be right about Wall Street.

Becoming Jane (+) is about events in Jane Austin's formative years that made her such a great writer. The movie is a bit slow and self-absorbed. Today, we are watching "Becoming Ben." We are seeing how Ben Bernanke is responding to the turmoil in the capital markets. If he does it well, he will be judged to be a great Fed chairman. He has already written a great deal about how monetary policy should be conducted to target a low inflation rate and to avoid another Great Depression. I predict that he will cut the federal funds rate a couple of times and that there will be a happy ending.

Black Book (Zwartboek) (++) , written and directed by Paul Verhoeven ("Basic Instinct" and "Robocop"), is an intense movie about heroes, villains, and collaborators at the tale end of World War II in Nazi-occupied Holland. Some critics found it too violent, vulgar, and morally ambivalent. Maybe so, but it was World War II after all.

Breach (+ +) is a really fine film based on a true story about how the FBI finally entrapped Robert Hanssen, the most notorious mole in the agency's history. For years, he sold the Soviets some of America's top secrets. Ironically, he was even assigned to head a task force to find the mole. He was caught in 2001, obviously requiring resources that might have bolstered the FBI's investigation of Al Qaeda.

Breaking and Entering (+) is about the meaning of life and relationships. Jude Law is perfectly cast as the guy who cheats on his girlfriend, but means well. He acts the part as though he has lived it. Still, he is a good actor, and so are costars Robin Wright Penn and Juliette Binoche.

Catch a Fire (++) is a gripping film set in the 1980s about a South African freedom fighter. The most remarkable aspect of this story is how he forgave his tormentors who robbed him of his job, his family, and many years of his life. He lived by Nelson Mandela's principle that one must learn to forgive to be truly free. We could use more of that attitude today, especially in the Middle East.

Death at a Funeral (+) is really quite funny if you enjoy British humor, which I generally do. However, I skipped the latest Mr. Bean movie, after my kids saw it and told me, "Dad, it was boring and not very funny."

Eastern Promises (++++) is about the Russian mafia in London. It is as riveting as "The Godfather." It is almost as though director David Cronenberg is kissing the ring of Francis Ford Coppola. Both mafias like to cook (tomato sauce or borscht), murder their rivals (with machine guns or by slitting throats), and treat women very badly. Viggo Mortensen is as intense as Al Pacino was in the lead role. One day, a movie will be made about Vladimir Putin, the Godfather who runs Russia.

Fracture (+) is another film noire set in Hollywood, where most film noires seem to be set in recent years. Anthony Hopkins saves the film, though barely, by reprising his genius-for-murder character in the Hannibal flicks. This time he doesn't get away with it, or does he? There is room for a sequel, though they better get a better script. This one has too many fractures.

Goya's Ghosts (+) is Milos Forman's artistic film about the famous Spanish artist, who survived the violent self-serving fanaticism and fascism of the inquisitors empowered by the Spanish Inquisition and the liberators unleashed by the French Revolution. Both of these groups murdered countless innocent people in the name of god and freedom. Today's jihadists are just the latest incarnation of these evil psychos who believe that nonbelievers must be killed. At the end of the movie, the Anglo-Saxons save the day.

La Vie en Rose (++++) is a French film about the greatly talented and greatly tortured singer Edith Piaf. Like the country/western song says, if she didn't have so much bad luck, she wouldn't have had any luck at all. Perhaps all that suffering explains why her songs seem to drill into your soul. My personal favorite is "Non, Je Ne Regrette Rien," which I listen to whenever my forecasts are embarrassingly wrong.

Letters from Iwo Jima (++++) is an outstanding film directed by Clint Eastwood with an amazing performance by the amazing Japanese actor Ken Watanabe. However, the 140 minute movie is as painful to watch as the first 20 minutes of Spielberg's "Saving Private Ryan." Both realistically depict the ultimate horrible sacrifices made by soldiers during wars.

Live Free or Die Hard (+) is the latest aging action hero movie. Bruce Willis demonstrates that there is life even in a fourth sequel. Stallone probably takes the record with Rocky 6. Next is Harrison Ford with Indiana Jones 4. Bill Clinton is campaigning with Hillary, hoping he can get terms 3 and 4 at the White House. Al Gore's sequel to "An Inconvenient Truth" was a series of save-the-Earth-from-global-warming concerts this past weekend. One fan at Giant Stadium said, "I'm here to, you know, save the Earth, one beer at a time." By some estimates, artists traveled a total of 223,000 miles to get to the events, mostly by private jets. Al reportedly gets \$175,000 per speech on his favorite subject. It beats working in the Oval Office.

Margot at the Wedding (- - -) is one of the worst movies I have seen in a long time. The indoor scenes are filmed without the benefit of good lighting or a good microphone. So bring a flashlight and a hearing aid. Jack Black should stick to movies like King Kong and Nacho Libre that are best for his shtick. What a waste of Nicole Kidman's talents, though her talents have been going to waste in some really awful movies that she's made lately. Don't waste your money on this one.

Michael Clayton (-) is a genre flick: Hollywood exposes greedy corporations that kill their customers by covering up internal memos by company scientists who find that the stuff they are selling is poisonous. Of course, the companies hire greedy lawyers who will stop at nothing to stop plaintiffs. George Clooney plays the one lawyer who can't be bought. Business evil, Hollywood good. Al Gore has discovered that winning an Oscar and the Nobel Peace Prize beats running the country or a company. Maybe it should be renamed the Nobel Do-Gooders Prize, then Jimmy Carter can still keep his. Arafat's wife may have to return his, if she can get someone from Hamas to send it to her.

Mr. Brooks (+) isn't the best serial killer movie ever made, but it is among the most entertaining ones in the genre. Kevin Costner plays a really nice guy and family man, who has an irresistible urge to murder randomly every now and then. He is driven to mayhem by his alter ego played by William Hurt. Together, the two actors seem like they had a really good time making the movie together and that's what makes this movie fun to watch. There are several dead bodies, of course, but the real stiff is Demi Moore, who plays the cop and has clearly spent too much money on plastic surgery.

Namesake (+) is a touching movie about the trials and tribulations of a married couple from India who move to the United States. They have an older son and a younger daughter. The son is saddled with a strange first name, i.e., Gogol. The movie is also about the great contribution that immigrants have always made to the American society and economy. The father is an expert in fiber optics and the son is an architect.

No Country for Old Men (- -) and **Before the Devil Knows You're Dead** (+) are two movies littered with lots of dead bodies. The first, directed by the Coen Brothers, was disappointing. The second was much better and could easily be mistaken for a Coen Brothers movie, though it was made by Sydney Lumet. Both are about a crime gone terribly haywire. The killer in the first is just a killing machine who enjoys letting his victims toss a coin before he blows them away. How he manages to track the man who grabbed his suitcase full of cash everywhere he runs to is a stretch. The only problem with the second flick, which has lots of clever plot twists and flashbacks, is that it could use some editing to keep the pace going.

Notes On A Scandal (++) features two stunning performances by Judi Dench and Cate Blanchett. The movie is a geriatric version of "Fatal Attraction." My pick for the Oscar for best actress is Helen Mirren for "The Queen." However, Judi Dench could get it for her intense and perfectly demented performance.

Once (-) has the feel of an MTV video clip shot by students studying at NYU's film school, or Dublin's equivalent. Basically, boy meets girl. They sing together. They make a demo tape of some high-pitched whiney songs that are almost catchy, but they don't make out. Nothing happens.

Rendition (+) was entertaining and a bit more ambiguous in its anti-American spin compared to some of Hollywood's recent flicks suggesting that the world would be a more peaceful planet but for American foreign policy. The movie's basic premise is that the CIA outsources the torture of suspected terrorists. That's how President Bush can claim that Americans don't do that to our prisoners; someone else does it for us. Actually, Bush gets our captured terrorists to confess by threatening to send them hunting with Dick Cheney. Perhaps we should send Alan Greenspan on a rendition trip to get him to admit that he had something to do with the housing and mortgage credit debacles.

Rescue Dawn (++) is a combination of Man vs. Vietcong and Man vs. Wild. Written and directed by Werner Herzog, it is based on a true story. Christian Bale is outstanding in the lead role playing Dieter Dengler, a US Navy pilot shot down over Laos during the Vietnam War. He was captured, managed to escape, and was rescued. (Discovery Channel is re-evaluating one of its most popular series, "Man vs. Wild," after allegations surfaced that its survival-expert host was staying in motels when he was supposed to be surviving out in the wild.)

Shooter (- - -) is a really badly shot movie. Everyone involved with making it should be shot. Too bad, because I do like Mark Wahlberg, though I now realize he really can't act. The plot is lame and so is the dialogue.

Silk (+) is a slow-paced period piece set in the 19th century. It is saved at the end by an interesting plot twist. However, watching the protagonist trudge from France to Japan three times to purchase silkworm eggs was almost as tiresome as it must have been for him.

Spiderman III (- - -) was really bad. Everything about it was really bad. I knew it would be, but there was nothing else to see on Friday. I really can't review it since I only saw the first half before leaving the theater. The dialogue was awful. One of the many villains actually says, "I'm not a bad guy. I've just had some bad luck." Spidy's girlfriend tells him, "Everyone needs help sometimes, even Spiderman." Let's hope there isn't another sequel. I'm sure there will be, though, since the latest movie was a big hit at the box-office.

The Bourne Ultimatum (+) is like the stock market. It's a wild rollercoaster ride, and a neck brace is recommended. The hand-held camera technique was a bit nauseating, kind of like some of the recent volatility in stock prices. Maybe they should start giving VIX ratings to movies.

The Hoax (++) is a very entertaining movie about how Clifford Irving faked an autobiography of Howard Hughes. He was caught and sent to jail for a couple of years before the book was actually distributed. The film suggests that Watergate was instigated by Nixon's paranoia that the Democratic National Committee might have received copies of some damaging documents about payoffs from Hughes. However, since the movie is based on Irving's account, this may be a hoax too.

The Kingdom (+) is loosely based on the 1996 bombing of Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia by terrorists, who may have received support from Osama Bin Laden according to the 9/11 Commission. A huge truck bomb destroyed the housing complex, which was located near Aramco's headquarters. In the movie, a small team of FBI agents convince the Saudis to let them investigate a similar attack, and are given only five days to do so. This fast-paced movie isn't as anti-US as *Syriana* (2005) with George Clooney, though it does start with a rapid-fire selection of documentary clips suggesting the turmoil in the Middle East is all attributable to America's unquenchable demand for oil. It seems to me that the clash of civilizations between Christianity and Islam started well before the gasoline engine was invented. On the other hand, our unquenchable demand is certainly one reason why the price of oil is over \$80, providing a huge windfall to some of our most dangerous foes. In his book titled "My FBI: Bringing Down the Mafia, Investigating Bill Clinton, and Fighting the War on Terror," former FBI Chief Louis J. Freeh claims that President Bill Clinton dispatched the FBI to track down the Khobar Towers bombing, in which 19 Americans were killed. However, the Administration frustrated the investigation once the FBI found evidence linking the attack to Iran because it was hoped that the election of an Iranian moderate as president in May 1997 might lead to a more normalized relationship with Iran.

The Last Legion (-) is a cheesy mishmash of cheesy films about the Roman Empire and the myths surrounding King Arthur's famous sword, Excalibur. Ben Kingsley plays Merlin. My wife and I enjoyed it enough to follow it up by watching "300" on pay-per-view. It is another recent cheesy epic about the blood-splattered battle of Thermopylae between 300 Spartans and a cast of hundreds of thousands of deformed mercenaries working for Xerxes, the Persian would-be King of the World. The producer also made "Sin City" and "RoboCop 2."

The Lives of Others (++++) won the Oscar for best foreign film. It was well deserved. It is one of the best movies I've seen in a long time. East Germany's Stasi had four decades in which to perfect its machinery of oppression, espionage, and international terrorism and subversion. To ensure that the people would become and remain submissive, East German communist leaders saturated their country with more spies than had any other totalitarian government in recent history. The Soviet Union's KGB employed about 480,000 full-time agents to oversee a nation of 280 million, which means there was one agent per 5,830 citizens. The ratio for the Stasi was one secret policeman per 166 East Germans. When the regular informers are added, there would have been at least one spy watching every 66 citizens! Including part-time snoops, the result is one informer per 6.5 citizens.

The Nanny Diaries (-) with Scarlett Johansson as the nanny, is very light and only worth seeing if you live on Park or Fifth and have a nanny. The plot line: A college graduate goes to work as a nanny for a rich dysfunctional NYC family. Along the way, she finds the meaning of life. Skip it.

The Painted Veil (++++) is a wonderful film about how tough it is to be married in the middle of nowhere in the middle of China during a cholera epidemic in the middle of the 1920s. This is an independent film co-produced by Edward Norton and Naomi Watts with both playing the two leads. Naomi's performance was outstanding, especially following her goofy role in "King Kong."

Valley of Elah (+), about the murder of an Iraq War vet when he returns to his base in the US, has Tommy Lee Jones in the lead role. He should get a nomination for an Oscar.

Waitress (++++) is a bittersweet film about life and death. Adrienne Shelly wrote, directed, and acted in this gem of a movie celebrating the ability of an unhappily married waitress in the Deep South to start fresh and find happiness in her newborn daughter and in her own pie shop. It is as sweet as a chocolate pie and full of life. The bitter reality is that Shelly was murdered in her Greenwich Village home office last November.

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