



**12 Years a Slave (+ +)** is a tough film to watch, though the acting is superb all around. The brutality of slavery in America is depicted with recurring graphic violence. The sheer terror inflicted on the slaves is unrelenting. The masters, who sought to dehumanize their slaves, became increasingly dehumanized themselves.

**42 (+ + +)** is about the inspiring life story of Jackie Robinson, a truly great American hero. The legendary baseball player broke the color barrier in baseball. Also getting credit for making this happen is Branch Rickey, the general manager of the Brooklyn Dodgers. In May 1947, on Cincinnati's Crosley Field, Robinson endured racist taunts, jeers, and death threats that would have broken the spirit of a lesser man. Pee Wee Reese, the captain of the Dodgers, walked over to his teammate and stood by his side, silencing the taunts of the crowd. That moment is captured in a statue in Brooklyn's Keyspan Park. At the end of the movie, the audience clapped.

**The Attack (+ +)** is a gripping movie about an Israeli Arab who is a very successful surgeon working and living in Tel Aviv. He is highly respected by his Israeli colleagues and has a few friends among them. His comfortable world explodes when his wife turns into a suicide bomber and kills 17 Israelis in a restaurant. Sadly, the conclusion is that no one can remain sane and humane in a world full of insanity and inhumanity. This miserable reality seems increasingly to be consuming the entire Middle East.

**Blue Jasmine (+)** is Woody Allen's latest movie that is really a character study of yet another neurotic character who reflects his neurotic personality. The result is a caricature of his main character, who seems to be playing Woody Allen. Making movies seems to be his therapy. Although he has made so many of them, they don't seem to have been very therapeutic since he continues to make the same neurotic ones over and over. In any case, they are amusing to watch. This one is based on Ruth Madoff's fall from her fabulous life on Park Avenue and in the Hamptons to a park bench in San Francisco. Cate Blanchett does an admirable job of playing the not-so-admirable wife of the great swindler, played by Alec Baldwin, who doesn't even seem to be acting.

**The Butler (+)** was a timely way to end our family vacation in South Carolina and Georgia last week. We visited the Magnolia Plantation near Charleston and toured the cabins and the rice fields where the slaves lived and toiled. We drove by Macon, where the semi-fictionalized main character of the movie, played by Forest Whitaker, grew up as a young slave on a plantation. He worked in the cotton fields and later served as a butler in the main house. Eventually, he landed a job in the White House as a butler for seven presidents. The movie is a good way to introduce kids to the civil rights movement that led to the election of President Barack Obama.

**Captain Phillips (+ +)** is an entertaining, fast-paced film starring Tom Hanks, who ably commands his role as the commander of a container ship seized by Somali pirates in 2009. It is based on a true story, except that the actual crew of the ship is disputing the heroic spin given to the captain in the movie's plot. Sadly, we live in an age without heroes, or with faux heroes pretending to be what they are not. Needless to say, there are no heroes in Washington these days--or even anyone pretending to be one.

**Closed Circuit** (-) rounds up the usual suspects of terrorists, MI5 secret agents, lawyers, and politicians in a movie that should have been made for cable rather than the big screen. The plot was all too predictable and slow paced. The conclusion was that fighting terrorism can have unintended consequences, which then must be hushed up with more unintended consequences. The problem is that the frequency of horrible headlines out of the Middle East lately has made everyone all too jaded about the senseless killing of large numbers of innocent civilians on a daily basis.

**Dallas Buyers Club** (+ +) is based on the true story of a Texan infected with HIV who successfully battles the virus to stay alive for much longer than predicted by his doctor. He does so during the mid-1980s mostly by battling the FDA to get the medications he believes he needs to stay alive based on his own research and instincts. Even today, it seems that the government's desperate efforts to manage our health is making us all sick. The performance of Matthew McConaughey is likely to get him an Oscar nomination for best actor.

**Django Unchained** (+) is a spaghetti western set in America's Deep South in the 1850s. It's Quentin Tarantino's latest depiction of violence in America. The non-stop mayhem and racism in his movie reflect the brutality of slavery. Christopher Waltz is great playing a German bounty hunter. Jamie Foxx accounts for much of the body count in the movie and underplays his role. On the other hand, Leonardo DiCaprio overplays his part as an inglorious racist owner of a slave plantation.

**Emperor** (+) is an interesting movie about General Douglas MacArthur's decision not to indict Emperor Hirohito as a war criminal. It would have been more interesting if it focused more on Tommy Lee Jones' fine portrayal of the brash brass rather than the star-crossed romantic relationship of his key subordinate on the case. In any event, the movie pins the blame for the war on paranoid old shoguns running Japan's military and gives Hirohito credit for having the guts to surrender rather than to fight to the death as they wanted to do. Today, similarly unhinged characters seem to be in charge of North Korea's military. The difference is that North Korea's young leader is probably as nuts as the older guys.

**Fruitvale Station** (+) is a gripping film about the fatal Oakland shooting of Oscar Grant, an unarmed young black man on a subway platform on the last day of 2008. He was shot in the back by a policeman, who said that he meant to use his Taser, not his gun, to subdue Grant. As for all docudramas, some of the scenes aren't based on the facts and are included for dramatic effect. The release of this movie happened to coincide with the end of the Zimmerman trial and the resulting controversy about whether justice was served in the case. There's no controversy about Michael B. Jordan's exceptional performance as Grant.

**Gravity** (+ +) reminds us that this invisible force keeps us down to Earth and how helpless we can be without it. Sandra Bullock stars in this tension-packed movie along with George Clooney. They both do a fine job. However, the real star is the Zero-G cinematography. Too bad that there is no gravity in Washington, as our political leaders seem to be floating in outer space.

**The Great Gatsby** (+) is good fun, old sport, as long as you don't mind Leonardo DiCaprio saying "old sport" at the end of each sentence for 2 hours and 23 minutes. Baz Luhrmann's production is over-the-top, which is the way he likes to make movies. One of the main themes of the movie and the great novel is that money can't buy happiness, but it can buy everything else. Carey Mulligan was especially good as Daisy, the emotional vacuum head who clearly preferred money without Jay Gatsby's love. She did admire his fine shirts though.

**The Hunger Games: Catching Fire** (-) is more like a remake than a sequel of last year's first movie in the series about the dystopian world run by an autocratic government. It's all quite dark and depressing since it mirrors today's reality where autocratic governments continue to master their art of crushing rebellions. Besides, as we've seen all too often in history and recently, it's not obvious that liberty-loving rebels really love liberty.

**Hyde Park on the Hudson** (+) is based on love letters between Franklin Delano Roosevelt and his distant cousin Margaret "Daisy" Suckley. Apparently, they had an affair, as evidenced by countless letters between the two of them about how they planned to furnish their little hide-away cottage near Hyde Park. I'm truly amazed how our great leaders (like General David Petraeus) find the time to write so much to their girlfriends. Bill Murray comes across as Bill Murray doing an impression of FDR. The plot revolves around the visit during June 1939 to Hyde Park by the King and Queen of England, who were invited as part of FDR's campaign to enter WWII as an ally of the UK. To show that they were all like most folks, Eleanor and Franklin treated their royal guests to a picnic featuring hot dogs. The next day, page one of The New York Times observed, "King Eats Hot Dog, Asks for More."

**The Impossible** (+ +) is the true story of a family that was swept away by the tsunami that devastated Thailand on December 26, 2004. The parents (played by Ian McGregor and Naomi Watts) survived the horrible ordeal along with their three young boys. The star of the film is really Tom Holland, who plays the oldest of the boys. You should see it. You can skip "Broken City." I like Mark Wahlberg, but I really didn't like his film with its very broken plot line.

**Man of Steel** (+) may be the last action hero movie that I will ever see, or acknowledge that I saw. It was actually one of the better ones of the genre. But these action-packed movies are extremely loud. Seeing them in 3-D is sensory overload. The comic books left much more to the imagination, and didn't impair one's hearing. This film about Superman was actually relatively cerebral until it turned into a Transformer pyrotechnics show during the last half hour. The villain seems to have been modeled after Syria's Assad. Both are willing to commit genocide to protect their regimes. Superman grew up in Kansas, and is an all-American boy. Where is he when we need him most?

**Mud** (+) is an interesting film about two young teenage boys growing up in Arkansas and their learning-about-life-and-love adventure with a man on the run from the law, played by Matthew McConaughey. Think of it as Huck Finn meets Reese Witherspoon. If you don't know who she is, neither did the cop who stopped her and her DWI husband recently.

**The Place Beyond the Pines** (+ +) is all about lots of dysfunctional characters, with solid performances by Ryan Gosling and Bradley Cooper. Most of the boys grew up without their dads, reminding me of the boyhoods of some of our recent presidents. The movie is a bit long, but that's to be expected when the plot focuses on how one generation messes up the next one. That reminds me of what our dysfunctional leaders in Washington are doing now, accumulating huge debts to leave to our children.

**Prisoners** (+) has some great acting by Hugh Jackman (the father), Jake Gyllenhaal (the detective), and Paul Dano (the suspect). However, it is a bit too long, with a predictable plot about a deranged kidnaper of little children. I recall growing up when our parents let us kids roam free outdoors until dinner time. Unfortunately, like all parents these days, I regret that those days are gone. Kids are now getting shot in crossfire between opposing gangs in cities like Detroit and Chicago. Stop-and-frisk has worked to reduce this insanity in NYC. However, progressive politicians and judges are aiming to make this police tactic illegal.

**Quartet** (+) is a movie that reminds us that "old age isn't for sissies," as Bette Davis proclaimed in interviews. It was directed by Dustin Hoffman (who is 75 now) and has a great cast including Maggie Smith, Tom Courtenay, and Billy Connolly. They play the residents of a home for retired musicians. Their music allows them to rise above their physical and mental infirmities. I wonder if economics will do the same for me when I retire.

**Renoir** (+ +) is a French film about the great French impressionist painter and his relationships with his three sons. The father was obsessed with capturing the natural beauty of his models on canvas, while his two older boys were getting shot at in the trenches during WW-I. Both were seriously injured. One of them, Jean, returned home to recuperate, fell in love with Dad's latest model, reenlisted, and then married the young lady when the war ended. He went on to become a famous French director, whose *Grand Illusion* (1937) is one of the masterpieces of cinema. The title is similar to a 1909 book by economist Norman Angell titled *The Great Illusion*, which argued that war between industrial countries is futile. No one wins and everybody loses because war harms the economies of all the participants. Angell won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1933. The creation of the euro zone was inspired by his thesis. That monetary union seems like a great illusion, but it certainly beats trench warfare.

**Rush** (+ +) is director Ron Howard's recreation of the intense and nearly fatal duel between famed Formula 1 rivals James Hunt and Niki Lauda during their death-defying races in the 1976 season. The movie is a rush. The competitive hate/respect relationship between the two drivers with distinctly opposite personalities is compellingly portrayed by the two actors. Great competitors make for a great sport. By the way, the same can be said for capitalism.

**Side Effects** (+ +) is an entertaining flick about insider trading, psychotherapeutic drugs, and domestic violence. Those are the three pillars of our modern culture. The plot is clever with some interesting twists. The movie, masterfully directed by Steven Soderbergh, stars Rooney Mara (as the psycho), Jude Law (as the shrink in NYC), and Catherine Zeta-Jones (as the psycho shrink in Greenwich).

**Star Trek Into Darkness** (+ +) was better than I expected. The plot was interesting and fast paced. Director J.J. Abrams and his writers did a particularly fine job of developing the characters and relationships of the familiar cast of characters. Captain James T. Kirk makes a bold decision to join forces with one of the villains to fight another even more dangerous one, rationalizing his decision with the axiom that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend.” Spock warns Kirk that this saying was an Arab proverb coined by a prince who was soon decapitated by his “friend.” Fact checkers have already raised some serious doubts about the reliability of Spock’s assertion. Sadly, we live in an age when our role models are seldom as wise as they pretend to be. Even the elite cast of characters in command of the Starship Fed seems to have lost control.

**The Way, Way Back** (+) is a funny movie that is a very sad commentary on our times. It’s about coming of age in an age of weak moral standards. It’s about how teenagers learn to grow up by watching the grownups around them behaving very badly. The adults need adult supervision, or even to be supervised by their teenage kids. Sadly, there are no good role models for these kids to look up to other than the sarcastic and ambition-less manager of a local water park.

**Zero Dark Thirty** (+ + +) was rightly nominated for best picture at the Academy Awards. What’s not right is that Kathryn Bigelow, the director of the movie, was not nominated. Apparently, the Hollywood community believes that her movie, about the CIA’s hunt for Osama bin Laden, endorsed waterboarding and loud rock music as the best means of collecting information. Bigelow denies that. However, the movie does make the case that without such intel (obtained by seriously stressing detainees), the chances of capturing bad guys are remote. That’s even if they aren’t hiding in remote areas, but rather less than a mile from the West Point of Pakistan.