

Dr. Ed's Movie Reviews 2015

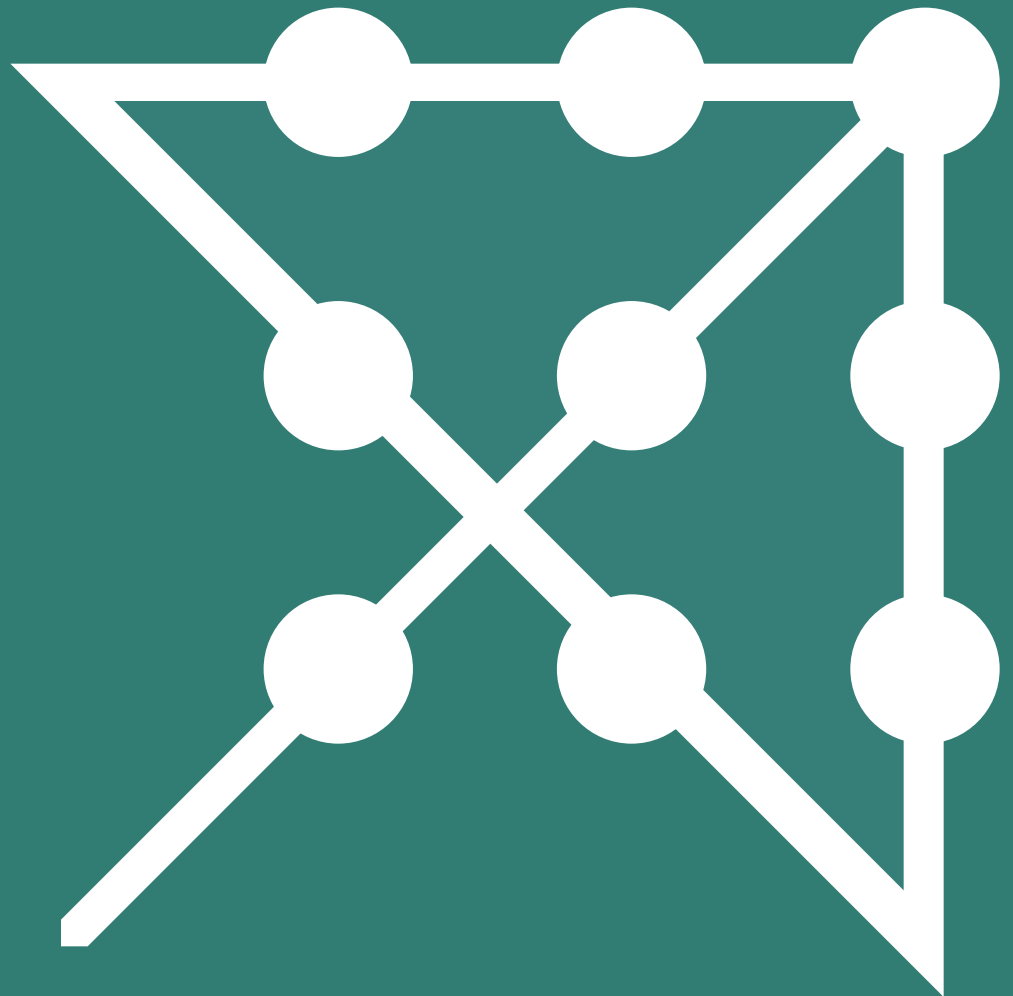
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thinking outside the box

American Sniper (+ +) is an intense movie based on the extraordinary true story of Chris Kyle, a US Navy SEAL who served four tours in Iraq as a lethal sniper committed to protecting his comrades-in-arms. He is commendably played by Bradley Cooper, who produced the film, which was well directed by Clint Eastwood.

Birdman (+) received nine Oscar nominations including Best Picture and Best Director. In addition, Michael Keaton, Edward Norton, and Emma Stone all earned acting nods for Best Actor, Supporting Actor, and Supporting Actress. Keaton plays a washed-up actor, who once played an iconic superhero, i.e., Birdman. He attempts to make a comeback in a Broadway play. The movie is a bit off-beat, and not as awesome as suggested by all the nominations. But I can see why the Hollywood crowd might love this self-absorbed movie since many of them are self-absorbed and fear being washed up. Keaton's career stalled after he played Batman (1989 and 1992).

Black Mass (+ + +) is based on the amazing true story of Whitey Bulger. Played to menacing perfection by Johnny Depp, this psychopathic killer was the most infamous violent criminal in the history of South Boston. He cleverly used the FBI by acting as an informant to take down a Mafia family invading his turf. The FBI let him run wild in his neighborhood in exchange for helping the agency nail the Mafia. An even more amazing true crime story is the one featured in Netflix's "Narcos" (+ + +) about the life and death of Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar.

Bridge of Spies (+ +) is a Cold War thriller directed by Steven Spielberg and inspired by the exchange of spies between the US and the Soviet Union after Francis Gary Powers was captured when his U-2 spy plane was shot down by the Soviets in 1960. Wouldn't you know it? A Yale economics student almost screwed up the exchange of spies. If you miss the thrill of the Cold War, it seems to be making a comeback ever since Barack and Hillary pressed their "reset" button for our relationship with Russia a couple of years ago. Tom Hanks, who plays a defense attorney in the film, has some very good lines defending the basic principles that make the US exceptional. His liberal friends in Hollywood and Washington should listen. Our country was founded by God-fearing people who believed in government by the people, the rule of law, and the separation of church and state. Amen!

Effie Gray (+) is a Victorian-era film about the scandalous love triangle between art critic John Ruskin, his teenage bride Effie Gray, and Pre-Raphaelite painter John Everett Millais. It's a bit slow, but then there aren't too many fast-paced movies about the Victorian era. The script was written by Emma Thompson, who also has a small role in the film. This famous Victorian love triangle has been dramatized in plays, films, and an opera. I hope that's the end of it.

Everest (+ +) caused me to remove climbing the world's highest peak from my bucket list. If it is on your list, do it last because people have died making the climb. It's not clear why people do it given how dangerous it is to trek up the mountain. "Because it's there" covers lots of other dangerous ventures that no one ventures to do. I prefer the hills that are alive with the sound of music. Maybe if would-be climbers saw this movie first in 3D, there might be less congestion on the trail to Everest's peak. Now I have to go see "The Walk," based on the story of French high-wire artist Philippe Petit's walk between the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center on August 7, 1974.

Ex Machina (+) is in some ways the sequel to "The Imitation Game," which was about British mathematician Alan Turing, who cracked the Nazi code with a computer he designed. He posited the "Turing Test" of a machine's ability to exhibit intelligent behavior equivalent to, or indistinguishable from, that of a human. In this movie, a programmer is selected by his boss--a Google-type of entrepreneur--to judge if a beautiful female he created with artificial intelligence can pass the test. When I saw the latest "Planet of the Apes," I rooted for the apes. In this movie, I rooted for the A.I.

Foxcatcher (-) is based on a true crime story. It is also truly slow, bordering on boring. Nevertheless, the film was nominated for five Oscars at the 2015 Academy Awards. In 1986, multimillionaire and wrestling enthusiast John E. du Pont recruited the 1984 US Olympic gold medalist wrestlers (and brothers) Dave and Mark Schultz to help coach US wrestlers for national and world competitions. Steve Carell plays du Pont as a cocaine-addicted and maniacally deranged control freak. It's a good performance, though bordering on boring like the film.

House of Clinton (+ + +) is the yet-to-be-made movie loosely based on actual people and events. As it opens, Madam Secretary of State is the newly elected President of the United States. She won despite a series of scandals involving a home server used for her emails, which she mostly deleted, and a family charitable trust rife with conflicts of interest. Major spy agencies around the world downloaded her emails, having hacked into her unprotected server before she scurried to erase them. Some of their governments were major contributors to the family charity, and also paid her husband, a former President, more than anyone has ever been paid for a speech. The movie exposes how those governments are able to leverage what they know about the First Family to wield influence over the White House without investing another dime. Conspiracy theories always make for good theater.

The Imitation Game (+ + +) is a truly extraordinary true story about how math whiz Alan Turing, who was recruited by MI6, cracked the Nazis' secret code, which was code-named "Enigma." He essentially invented the first computer in order to do so. Benedict Cumberbatch delivers an outstanding performance as the socially challenged professor whose accomplishment shortened World War II by two years, by some estimates.

Leviathan (+ + +) received an Oscar nomination for best foreign-language film, but lost to "Ida," a Polish contender. Both are top-notch. This movie is a cinematic version of George Orwell's "Animal Farm." It's a scathing attack on corruption among both the political and church elite in Russia. It's a tale of a Job-like common man crushed by the omnipotent corrupt state. Russia's Ministry of Culture, which helped fund the movie, has threatened to impose new rules to impede the production of such films. State television decided not to broadcast the Oscars live this year. The movie includes a key scene during which a picture of smirking Vladimir Putin is visible behind the shoulder of the corrupt mayor, who is the villain of the movie. Late on Friday, Kremlin critic Boris Nemtsov was murdered on the street in Moscow. Reuters reported: "National investigators who answer to Putin say they are pursuing several lines of inquiry, including the possibility that Nemtsov, a Jew, was killed by radical Islamists or that the opposition killed him to blacken the president's name." We live in Orwellian times. Leviathan is bigger than ever everywhere.

Love & Mercy (+ + +) is an extraordinary movie about Brian Wilson of the Beach Boys. In the late 1960s, he stopped touring with them to produce "Pet Sounds," regarded as one of the most influential albums in the history of popular music. At about the same time, he began to lose his grip on reality possibly as a reaction to LSD. Wilson's girlfriend, who became his second wife, saved him from the sway of a controlling therapist. The cast is superb, and the true life story is fascinating.

The Man from U.N.C.L.E. (+) is director/writer Guy Richie's homage to the TV series (1964-1968) about the teaming up of CIA agent Napoleon Solo and KGB operative Illya Kuryakin to fight evildoers intent on taking over the world during the 1960s. Maybe we really all could have gotten along better if we had a common enemy back then. If ISIS can't do that today, then maybe only an alien invasion can unite us Earthlings. The movie is fun, with a wry sense of humor.

The Martian (+ +) is a very entertaining film. One of the central messages is that if you go to Mars, bring lots of plastic drop cloths and duct tape. Actually, that's probably a smart thing to do almost anytime you travel in outer space. Turns out that there is life on Mars, and it consists of Matt Damon and his organically grown potatoes. I liked this film much better than "Gravity."

Mission Impossible--Rogue Nation (+) is the latest installment of the Tom Cruise secret agent franchise. He is working for a super-secret rogue offshoot of the CIA. It is tasked with fighting the Syndicate, which is a super-secret rogue organization of bad guys who strike at various targets around the world. It's all very predictable, though still entertaining. Odds are that any future sequels won't ever portray the Chinese as the bad guys. The movie is Alibaba Pictures' first-ever Hollywood investment with an undisclosed co-financing agreement with Paramount for the latest installment.

Mr. Holmes (+ +) stars Ian McKellen as the retired detective, who hasn't lost his extraordinary powers of deduction but is losing his memory in his old age. He desperately tries to piece together what he can recall about his last case many years ago. What he discovers is that there is more to life than logic. That's elementary to most of us, but Sherlock figured that one out late in life according to this entertaining film with a great performance by McKellen.

No Escape (- -) is a movie that all members of the FOMC should see. Most of us go to the movies for an escape from reality. This movie might not be so for Fed officials, who've been looking for the exit door from their ultra-easy monetary policy for a very long time. In the movie, an American engineer arrives with his family in an unnamed Asian country that borders on Vietnam, just in time for a revolution. He just happens to be one of the prime targets of the rebels. It's non-stop action from start to finish, as mom and dad dodge bullets and bombs while running with their two little girls clutched in their arms. They should have checked with Trip Advisor before they left. There is no plot, just a frantic run for any exit door in sight.

Pawn Sacrifice (+ + +) is a really outstanding movie about chess master Bobby Fischer, played flawlessly by Tobey Maguire. He won one of the major battles of the Cold War, when he defeated Soviet Grandmaster Boris Spassky at the 1972 World Chess Championship in Iceland. It's too bad that world political leaders resort to military means so often to sort out their conflicting interests. Why can't we all get along simply by sending our chess masters to fight it out on their chess boards? The Cold War heated up not only lots of regional wars, but also the space race and even the chess world.

Spectre (- - -) got terrible reviews. The reviews were right. It was terrible. Actually, it's been downhill for the James Bond franchise ever since "Goldfinger" (1964). He was the last well-drawn villain. Bond films rarely develop the personalities of the bad guys, giving them a chance to tell us their side of the story. They should be more interesting characters to counter the all-too-predictable Bond. Daniel Craig is the most unappealing and unwitty actor to play Bond so far.

Spotlight (+ + +) is an intensely disturbing movie about the child abuse scandal in the Catholic Church exposed by the *Boston Globe*. It shows the power of responsible investigative reporting in uncovering the corruption of an important institution in our society. We can use more of such investigative reporting to root out corruption elsewhere as well.

Steve Jobs (+ +) is an intense film about an intense entrepreneur. An uncompromising visionary, Jobs was the Howard Roark of the computer industry (hero of Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*). Jobs passed away prematurely on October 5, 2011. Set backstage at three iconic product launches, the movie is literally a behind-the-scenes look at the personal computing revolution inspired by Jobs. He wasn't a particularly nice man, according to the movie, but he certainly was a great technology revolutionary. Michael Fassbender is superb as Jobs.

Straight Outta Compton (+ +) is all about babel in the music industry, particularly following the big success of N.W.A. members Easy-E, Dr. Dre, and Ice Cube. Their hip-hop group popularized gangsta rap. I've always liked the beat of rap, but I could never follow the fast-paced lyrics. The movie, which I really enjoyed, helped me focus on the words, which certainly cut through the babel. While much of it expresses a great deal of raw anger, Dr. Dre should be singing a song about how America is a great country after all following last year's purchase by Apple of his company Beats for \$3.2 billion. He's the second-richest man in hip-hop, according to Forbes.

Taken 3 (- -) is the third action movie in this thriller franchise starring Liam Neeson. The action is boring. It's not thrilling. Neeson is clearly in it for the money and not the acting challenge. The original was entertaining. The second was less so. The third will keep me from going to the fourth and so on. In a similar fashion, the Greek drama is getting tiresome. The other members of the Eurozone aren't likely to be taken by the Greeks' latest attempt to walk away from their debts.

Terminator Genisys (+) is more of the same from Arnold Schwarzenegger. It's more of the same fun, and just in time for the Fourth of July weekend. Arnold keeps promising "I'll be back," and he keeps his promise. He plays a self-mending machine again, but the flesh that allows the machines to impersonate humans still ages. Arnold will probably be back in two more sequels, though he may need a walker for the last one.

Timbuktu (+ + +) is an extraordinary flick. Abderrahmane Sissako, who happens to be a Muslim, is the director of Mauritania's Oscar-nominated film. It dramatizes the stifling fascism imposed on daily life in the Malian city of Timbuktu by jihadists who occupied it in 2012. The director said, "I try to explain that Islam was kidnapped by a few people with a very short vision of the world. Nobody comes (into) life with a Kalashnikov or beard." The movie is reminiscent of another excellent one titled, "Osama" (2003), made in Afghanistan by Siddiq Barmak. The film follows a pre-teen girl, living in Afghanistan under the oppressive Taliban regime, who disguises herself as a boy, Osama, to support her family.

Trumbo (+ +) is a very interesting movie about famed screenwriter Dalton Trumbo, who was blacklisted in Hollywood after the House Un-American Activities Committee nearly destroyed his career in the communist witch hunt of the 1940s and 1950s. He was a communist, though he was never involved in any illegal activities other than to be in contempt of the committee, which got him some jail time. With the benefit of hindsight, there were probably more communists in Washington doing real damage to national security than in Hollywood. The cast led by Bryan Cranston as Trumbo is outstanding.

Unbroken (+ +) is based on the true story of an American Olympic athlete whose bomber was shot down over the Pacific Ocean during WWII. After 47 days in a raft with two fellow crewmen, he was caught by the Japanese navy and sent to a prisoner-of-war camp. Very well directed by Angelina Jolie and written by the Coen Brothers, the movie received three Oscar nominations including cinematography, which was also well done. Jolie should have been nominated as well, but the film might have been too patriotic for the politically correct crowd in Hollywood.

Wild (+ + +) is a gripping movie about a woman's 1,100-mile solo trek on the Pacific Crest Trail. Reese Witherspoon is outstanding in the starring role. It is based on the true story of Cheryl Strayed, who went on the long walk to clear her head after a catastrophic loss in her life. If Charles Evan's catastrophe scenario for the Fed plays out, we all may need to take a hike.

Woman in Gold (+ +) is based on a very interesting true story. In 1998, Maria Altmann, a Viennese-born resident of Los Angeles, battled the Austrian authorities for ownership of the eponymous Klimt painting, stolen from her Jewish family by the Nazis. The attorney who helped her was the grandson of the Austrian composer Arnold Schoenberg. Helen Mirren shines in the lead role, as does the painting, which is on permanent exhibit at the Neue Galerie in NYC.