

Dr. Ed's Movie Reviews 2019

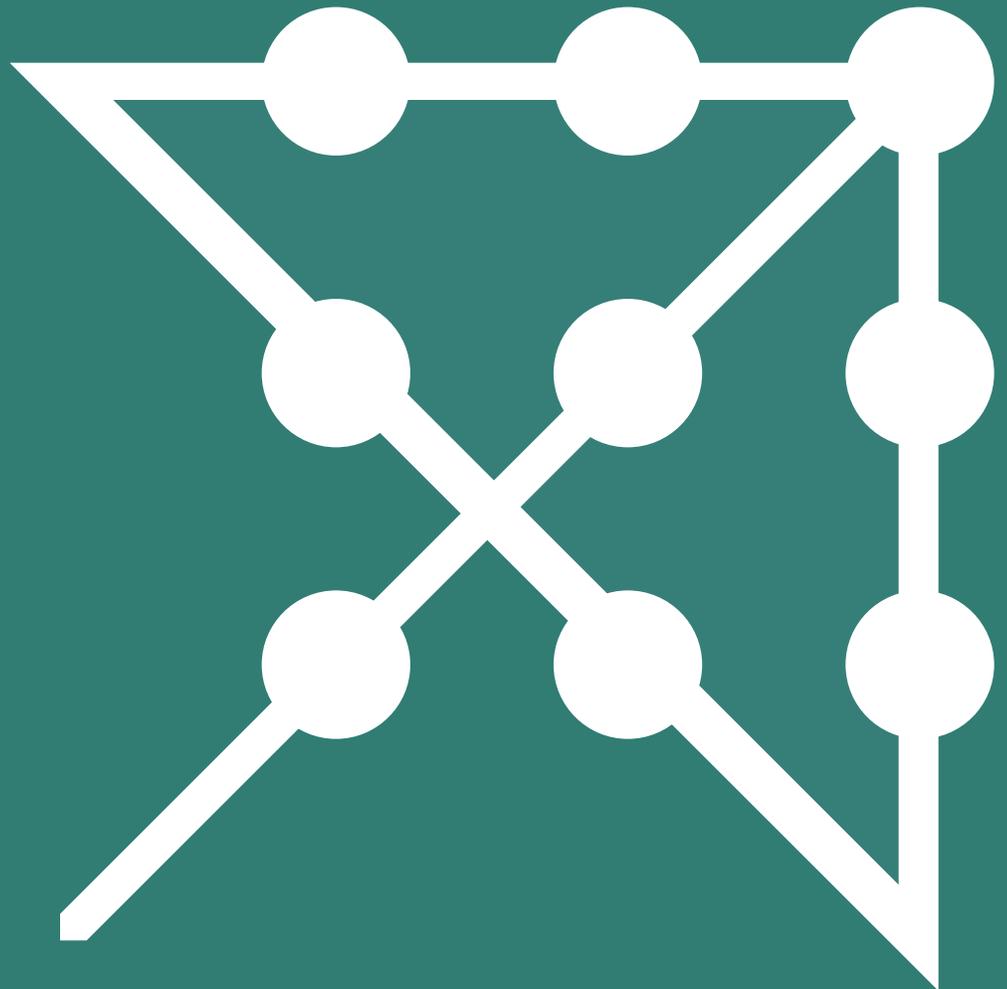
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thinking outside the box

“A Beautiful Day in the Neighborhood” (+ +) stars Tom Hanks as Fred Rogers. The film is also about Tom Junod, a journalist who wrote an Esquire profile of the television celebrity. Junod said Rogers changed his perspective on life. Hanks was born to play Rogers, who was born to help kids feel better about themselves and manage their fears. He was also a big promoter of kindness. He had an amazingly calming demeanor about him, reflecting his own inner peace, which he shared with others. He taught that everyone is special. His critics claim that his popular TV show for kids turned Baby Boomers into self-centered brats, perversely setting the stage for today’s widespread incivility. We have only ourselves to blame for today’s bitter partisan divide. Mr. Rogers did all he could to promote kindness. Perhaps, we all need to sit down and watch the reruns.

“Blinded by the Light” (+ +) is yet another very entertaining movie about rock stars. This year, movies about the Beatles (“Yesterday”) and Elton John (“Rocketman”) came out. Last year, there was one about Freddie Mercury and Queen (“Bohemian Rhapsody”). The latest movie in this genre is about Javed, a teenage boy whose parents moved from Pakistan to Luton, England for a better life. The film is set in the 1980s, when unemployment was high. Javed’s father loses his job, stressing the entire family, which also faces anti-Pakistani harassment. Javed takes joyous refuge from his bleak environment in the music of Bruce Springsteen, which inspires him to write lyrics for a local band. He struggles to resolve the tension between his father’s very close-minded traditional values and the mind-opening poetry of the music he loves. I wonder when they will start making movies about economists.

“A Star Is Born” (+ +) is a remake of the 1954 classic with Judy Garland and the 1976 remake with Barbara Streisand. It stars Lady Gaga and Bradley Cooper, who also directed the film. The movie is a bit slow at times, but Lady Gaga really is an amazing singer, and also a very good actress in her first movie role. Cooper is convincing as a self-destructive rock star heading toward oblivion. Coincidentally, FRBNY President John Williams recently suggested that the star quality of the neutral rate of interest, or r-star, is fading: “[A]t times r-star has actually gotten too much attention in commentary about Fed policy. Back when interest rates were well below neutral, r-star appropriately acted as a pole star for navigation. But, as we have gotten closer to the range of estimates of neutral, what appeared to be a bright point of light is really a fuzzy blur, reflecting the inherent uncertainty in measuring r-star.” Williams had been one of the biggest promoters of the star; now, he’s saying it’s a has-been!

“Capernaum” (+ + +) is an amazing movie about kids growing up in a ghetto in Beirut. The Lebanese filmmaker Nadine Labaki depicts how they spend most of the day simply trying to survive. Their goal is to eventually die of natural rather than unnatural causes. Sadly, many do not do so, partly because they are exploited by other adults, including their parents—if their parents are still alive. None of the kids in the cast is a professional actor, but their performances are compelling because they are living lives like those depicted in the film. The lead actor is only 12 years old. He plays his part with a remarkable moral compass that puts the adults in the movie to shame. While the film has a story line, it feels like a gritty documentary.

“Downton Abbey” (+ +) is a feel-good movie about the good old days in Britain, when people were more civil to one another than they are today. Everyone knew their place in society and was comfortable with it. Everyone did their job with pride, even those who were the downstairs servants of the upstairs aristocrats. That’s a rather simplistic portrait

since there are always tensions that keep societies perpetually in flux. The movie is basically a sappy reunion of the British television show's cast of mostly likable characters.

“Ford v Ferrari” (+) is a film about American car designer Carroll Shelby and driver Ken Miles, who build a race car for Ford and challenged Ferrari at the 24 Hours of Le Mans race in 1966. It's about American ingenuity that triumphs despite the obstacles imposed by corporate honchos at Ford. Matt Damon plays Shelby, and Christian Bale plays Miles. Both performances are solid. Breaking land speed records can be fatal. In late August, Jessi Combs died attempting to do that in the Alvord Desert when the front wheel of her jet-powered car malfunctioned after hitting something, causing the front-wheel assembly to collapse. The crash happened at speeds near 550 mph.

“Free Solo” (+ + +) is an edge-of-your-seat documentary about Alex Honnold, a daredevil rock climber. The film won Best Documentary Feature at the 91st Academy Awards. Alex climbs sheer precipices around the world without any ropes, which is called “free solo.” He views himself as a warrior who must go into a fight to win or accept the fact that he will die. Several of his peers have died in recent years when they lost their footing. The movie shows Alex preparing to achieve his lifelong dream, climbing the 3,000-foot El Capitan in Yosemite National Park. There's even a touching love story along the way, as Alex's girlfriend remains amazingly understanding of Alex's need to achieve perfection even though the alternative is certain death. Sometimes, my job raises the same stark choices, though I always wear a parachute just in case.

“Hotel Mumbai” (+ +) is a gut-wrenching movie based on the terror attack by Jihadists from Pakistan on various sights in Mumbai, India during 2008. They carried out a series of 12 coordinated shooting and bombing attacks lasting four days across Mumbai. The focus is on the chilling and merciless rampage that took place during the siege of the Taj Mahal Palace Hotel. Once again, as in “The Invisibles,” we can see how evil can bring out the best in the victims of such monsters. In this case, many of the hotel's staff, who could have escaped, chose to stay to protect the hotel's guests from the terrorists. Many of them died doing so.

“Joker” (+ + +) is a very disturbing movie about a very disturbed man, Arthur Fleck, played brilliantly by Joaquin Phoenix. It is about the formative years of Batman's arch enemy. But it's really much more than that. Like “Natural Born Killers” and “Network,” it is a searing examination of numerous destructive forces in our society including the arrogance of the ruling class, the decline of civility, and the media's obsession with ratings at any price. Mostly though, it is about the awful consequences of mental illness when it isn't properly diagnosed and treated. Fleck is on several drugs for his psychiatric disorder. His psychiatrist tells him that because of budget cuts in public assistance, she can no longer see him, leading him to ask how he will continue to get his medications. Early in the movie, he asks her: “Is it me, or is it getting crazier out there?” The movie leaves it up to us to decide. Hint: It's easy to feel sorry for this Joker.

“Luce” (+ +) is an intense mind-game thriller about a white couple who adopted a young boy from war-torn Eritrea. At first, he had lots of issues adjusting to his new home, but 10 years later he turned out to be an all-star high school student. His African-American history teacher promotes him as a great role model for other black kids in the school. However, she comes to suspect that he might be capable of turning violent given his past. The acting by Kelvin Harrison Jr. in the lead role is superb, as is that by Octavia Spencer as his teacher.

“Maiden” (+ + +) is an outstanding documentary about Tracy Edwards, a 24-year-old cook on a sailing ship who aspired to enter the 1989 Whitbread Round the World sailing competition with the first-ever all-female crew. She had no problem putting together a crew of 10 first-rate female sailors. But getting a boat and financial backing were huge struggles, since sponsors feared that an all-female crew would die at sea and generate bad publicity. She and her crew reconditioned a used boat and received some financial backing from Jordan’s King Hussein. The sheer guts of these remarkable women is awe-inspiring. The movie is a reminder that everyone is capable of great things even if the stupid biases of others stand in their way.

“Mary Queen of Scots” (+) has a great cast working with a disappointing script that is rife with historical inaccuracies. Top-notch performances are delivered by Saoirse Ronan as Mary Stuart and Margot Robbie as Elizabeth I. There’s lots of bad blood in the relationship of these two royal sisters, especially since Mary was a Catholic and Elizabeth was a Protestant. The movie does remind us that as awfully uncivil as our political divisions have become in the US today, it was often much worse in the past when monarchs reigned supreme. There was constant intrigue, deception, and backstabbing both in and among their courts. It hasn’t gotten that bad yet in our nation’s capital. Then again, as George Santayana observed, “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it.”

“Midway” (+ +) is an action-packed movie about the action that was packed into the major battles in the Pacific between the US and Japan from Pearl Harbor at the end of 1941 to Midway during June 1942. The acting and dialogue are uniformly lame. However, the true story about so many American heroes is awe inspiring. It certainly puts us to shame today for all our petty domestic political intrigues and conflicts. The heroes of World War II selflessly and courageously defended and spread our democracy, while they tear it apart in a selfish and cowardly manner. In today’s bitterly divided political circus, partisans on the left and on the right claim that their goal is to save our democracy, while they selfishly and cowardly tear it apart. Fortunately, there are still plenty of heroes in our military, as evidenced by their effectiveness in crushing ISIS.

“On the Basis of Sex” (+ +) is an interesting, if formulaic, biopic about the life and times of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. The film stars Felicity Jones in the title role of a young woman who excelled at Harvard Law School, but couldn’t find a job at a law firm. Instead, she accepted a teaching position at Rutgers. However, she teamed up with her husband, a prominent tax attorney, to bring a precedent-breaking case before the US Court of Appeals. They won their case, overturning a century of gender discrimination. The movie reminds us of the importance of the rule of law in America. When the rules become antiquated and even oppressive, it’s good to be reminded that there is a very civil legal process for adapting them to conform to our society’s changing needs. It may be a slow process, but it beats the alternatives of radical change.

“Once Upon a Time ... in Hollywood” (- -) is a weird film directed and written by Quentin Tarantino, who has a knack for directing and writing weird films. I enjoyed some of them (“Kill Bill,” “Inglourious Basterds,” and “Pulp Fiction”), but not this one. The performances of Leonard DiCaprio, Brad Pitt, and Margot Robbie all were top notch, but the script is just odd. It’s a retrospective on Hollywood’s film and television industry during the late 1960s. The tragic murder of actor Sharon Tate by Charlie Manson’s cult of crazed hippies plays a strangely prominent role in the film. One of the hippies

observes that they grew up on shows mostly about murder, so why not kill the people who turned murder into an entertainment industry?

“One Child Nation” (+ + +) is an extremely disturbing documentary about China’s horrible one-child policy from 1979 to 2015. It resulted in the mass forced sterilization of women and involuntary late-term abortions. It led to human trafficking in babies, who were placed in overseas homes, many under the false pretense that they were orphans. The Orwellian government campaign to control the population’s growth rate was deemed necessary to avoid nationwide starvation. It included incessant propaganda, a widespread network of informants, and the conscription of medical professionals to execute the government’s dirty deeds. Among the people interviewed in the documentary, a few condoned it, but most did not and seemed to have been deeply traumatized by it. Everyone said they had no choice. The legacy of that policy is that China is rapidly turning into the world’s largest nursing home as the population ages without enough young adults to support the elderly.

“Rocketman” (+ +) is a biopic about the early career of Elton John. His meteoric rise occurred in his 20s thanks to his amazing collaboration with Bernie Taupin, who wrote the lyrics that Elton put to music. As he rocketed to international super-rock-stardom, he did what many superstars have done, i.e., turn to drugs and drink to dull the pain of loneliness. In Elton’s case, he felt that his mom and dad didn’t love him. Eventually, he entered rehab, found his true life partner, adopted two boys, and lived happily ever after. The movie juxtaposes Elton’s great hits in a way that relates them to what was happening in his life. It’s all about the fantastic music.

“Parasite” (-) got very good reviews for no good reason, in my opinion. It’s a Korean movie about a family of four grifters that takes advantage of a family of four that’s well off. It’s certainly offbeat. Like Quentin Tarantino movies, it’s a dark comedy mixing slapstick and violence. Unlike Tarantino movies, there are no likable characters. I suppose that in some ways it might be a commentary on income inequality and the social divide between the rich and the poor. If so, it might get lost in the translation between the English subtitles and the Korean dialogue on the screen. My hunch is that the movie’s producer picked the title to make the audience question who the real parasites are. The answer might very well be “all of the above” after watching this pointless film. Then again, this film may be yet another sign of our uncivil times.

“Serenity” (+) is a controversial movie. Some reviewers loved it, while others hated it. I thought it was interesting. The first hour is slow and quirky. But then it starts to make sense, though it remains somewhat contrived. The fun is seeing how early on you can figure out the premise of the movie. On a remote island, Matthew McConaughey plays a fishing boat captain who is obsessed with catching a big fish he calls “Justice.” His ex-wife, played by Anne Hathaway, tracks him down over the Internet and begs him to kill her current abusive husband for the sake of their son, who is a computer geek. The movie is reminiscent of “Body Heat,” “Moby Dick,” “Tron,” and “Key Largo” (with Bogart and Bacall).

“Stan & Ollie” (+ +) is a very sweet movie about two sweet comedians, Laurel & Hardy, played with great affection by Steve Coogan and John Reilly. They remind us of bygone days when people laughed at jokes, slapstick, and skits that weren’t political, crass, and vulgar. They were very close friends, which occasionally led to disappointments and inevitable reconciliation. We need more of their simple humor in our lives and close friendships even with people with different political views.

“The Current War” (+ + +) is a docudrama about the AC/DC war during the late 1800s between Nikola Tesla and George Westinghouse—who championed alternating current (AC)—and Thomas Edison and JP Morgan, who pushed for direct current (DC). AC electricity won because it was more reliable and much cheaper to produce and distribute. The movie should be required in every school to demonstrate how capitalism benefits us all by providing the capital to fund great innovations that improve everyone’s lives at the lowest cost. Progressives long have impugned the achievements of the great capitalists of the so-called “Gilded Age” by calling them “Robber Barons.” They’ve failed to appreciate that these capitalists financed the invention and widespread use of kerosene and gasoline (Rockefeller), steel (Carnegie), and electric power and lights (Westinghouse and JP Morgan).

“The Farewell” (+ +) is a heart-warming film about love, family, life, and death. So it covers lots of ground and also provides some great insights into the cultural similarities and differences between Americans and the Chinese. Billi, a young independent woman, emigrated with her parents to the US from China more than 25 years ago. They return to China under the guise of a fake wedding to stealthily say goodbye to Billi’s beloved grandmother, who has only a few weeks to live but doesn’t know it—and is the only person in the film who doesn’t.

“The Highwaymen” (+) is a Netflix production based on the story of a pair of Texas Rangers who came out of retirement to hunt down the notorious Bonnie and Clyde and riddled the outlaws with bullets. Bonnie and Clyde were national celebrities during the early 1930s because they robbed banks, which were despised for foreclosing on homes during the Great Depression. But they also killed cops and innocent civilians at small stores and gasoline stations. The aged lawmen, played by Kevin Costner and Woody Harrelson, outsmart the FBI agents assigned to the case with all of their latest technologies, including wiretaps and aerial surveillance. Their story may hold a lesson for us today: Don’t underestimate common sense—it should continue to give human intelligence an edge over artificial intelligence.

“The Invisibles” (+ + +) is a docudrama about four Jewish people who managed to survive in Berlin during World War II by hiding in plain sight. They tell their stories, which are portrayed by actors in the film. While Goebbels infamously declared Berlin “free of Jews” in 1943, more than 1,500 of them managed to survive in the Nazi capital. They were helped by decent German citizens, who have earned a place as “The Righteous Among the Nations,” honored by Israel’s Yad Vashem: The World Holocaust Remembrance Center. The Righteous are non-Jews who took great risks to save Jews during the Holocaust. The movie weaves the accounts of the survivors and their protectors very effectively, reminding us that the human spirit has an amazing capability to resist and overcome evil.

“The Irishman” (+) is another Mafia movie directed and produced by Martin Scorsese. It’s a very long movie. The first hour was very slow and boring, but it did get better during the remaining two and a half hours. The movie alleges that hitman Frank Sheeran, played by Robert De Niro, was the killer of Joey Gallo and Jimmy Hoffa, played by Al Pacino. Joe Pesci plays mob boss Russell Bufalino. All three actors look their age and give the movie a nursing-home quality. The movie also implies that John F. Kennedy won the presidential election thanks to the mob in Chicago. The mob expected reciprocation via the Bay of Pigs invasion of Cuba, which would have liberated the Cubans from Castro and returned the island’s casinos to the mob. However, it failed,

and insult was added to injury as Kennedy's brother Bobby, appointed Attorney General, insisted on going after the mob and jailing Hoffa. The movie implies that JFK was assassinated by the Mafia for double-crossing them. Needless to say, much of the story is Hollywood folklore. Sheeran most likely didn't kill either Gallo or Hoffa, and the Kennedy assassination remains a hot topic for conspiracy buffs.

"The Mustang" (+ +) is about Roman Coleman, a tough inmate in a Nevada prison. He participates in a rehabilitation program that trains wild horses so they can be auctioned off to farmers and the border patrol rather than put to death. The spirited mustang Roman has been assigned seems to do a better job of taming Roman than Roman does of taming the horse. I have to admit that in movies with animals pitted against humans, I more often than not root for the animals. This is probably my reaction to the increasing incivility in human society.

"They Shall Not Grow Old" (+ + +) is a truly remarkable documentary about World War I directed by Peter Jackson. He and his team transformed 100 hours of mostly low-quality black-and-white footage of the war into a crisp color film that documents the horror of trench warfare. The carnage is graphic. The dedication of the soldiers, who were mostly in their teens, to one another is inspiring. That's especially in the face of the horrendous conditions of living and dying in the trenches. The film is about the Western Front and is narrated by men who fought there. After the credits, Jackson spends about 30 minutes discussing how his film was produced and the choices that were made. He has enough material left for several more documentaries about the war effort. The movie should be required seeing for all of us.

"Tolkien" (+ +) is a biopic about the life of J.R.R. Tolkien, the author of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*. He had a difficult childhood. His father died when he was young, leaving him, his younger brother, and mother penniless and dependent on the charity of their local pastor. When his mother died at an early age, the pastor arranged for room, board, and education for the Tolkien brothers. J.R.R. was very bright and was accepted at Oxford, but had to interrupt his studies to fight in the trenches of WWI. The products of his remarkable imagination undoubtedly were inspired by some of his adversities. The human spirit often excels the most when confronted with the most challenging of circumstances.

"Vice" (-) is another historical docudrama that is rife with inaccuracies, which reduces its credibility. The movie is about the political life of Dick Cheney, who served as vice president under George W. Bush. The movie's unflinching theme is that Cheney was power hungry and was directly responsible for the war in Iraq, waterboarding, global warming, and everything bad that has happened to us since 9/11. At the end of the movie, Cheney's character, played eerily well by Christian Bale, addresses the movie's audience directly. He snarls and growls that he does not care how he is portrayed because he made the country safe. One person stands out as able to have stood up to Cheney, Secretary of State Colin Powell. He gave a speech at the UN on February 5, 2003 to drum up support for overthrowing Saddam Hussein. It was based on flimsy intelligence, and Powell knew it. In September 2005, Powell was asked about the speech during an interview with Barbara Walters and responded that it was a "blot" on his record. Imagine if he had refused to support the war.

"Yesterday" (+ +) is a feel-good movie about The Beatles. The rock group doesn't exist in the movie. After a brief global power outage, only one person ever heard of The Beatles, and he happens to be a wannabe rock singer. He starts singing their catchy

tunes (like “Hey Dude”) to bigger and bigger audiences on his way to becoming a global phenom with the help of Ed Sheeran. It’s nice to recall a time when we all enjoyed singing the same Beatles songs together and feeling good about one another. Actually, even their happy lyrics didn’t do much to bring us quarrelsome lot together during the 1960s and 1970s, which were just as divisive as current times in many ways. By the way, Coke doesn’t exist in the movie either, so no one heard of “I’d Like To Teach The World To Sing (In Perfect Harmony).”