

# Dr. Ed's Movie Reviews 2020

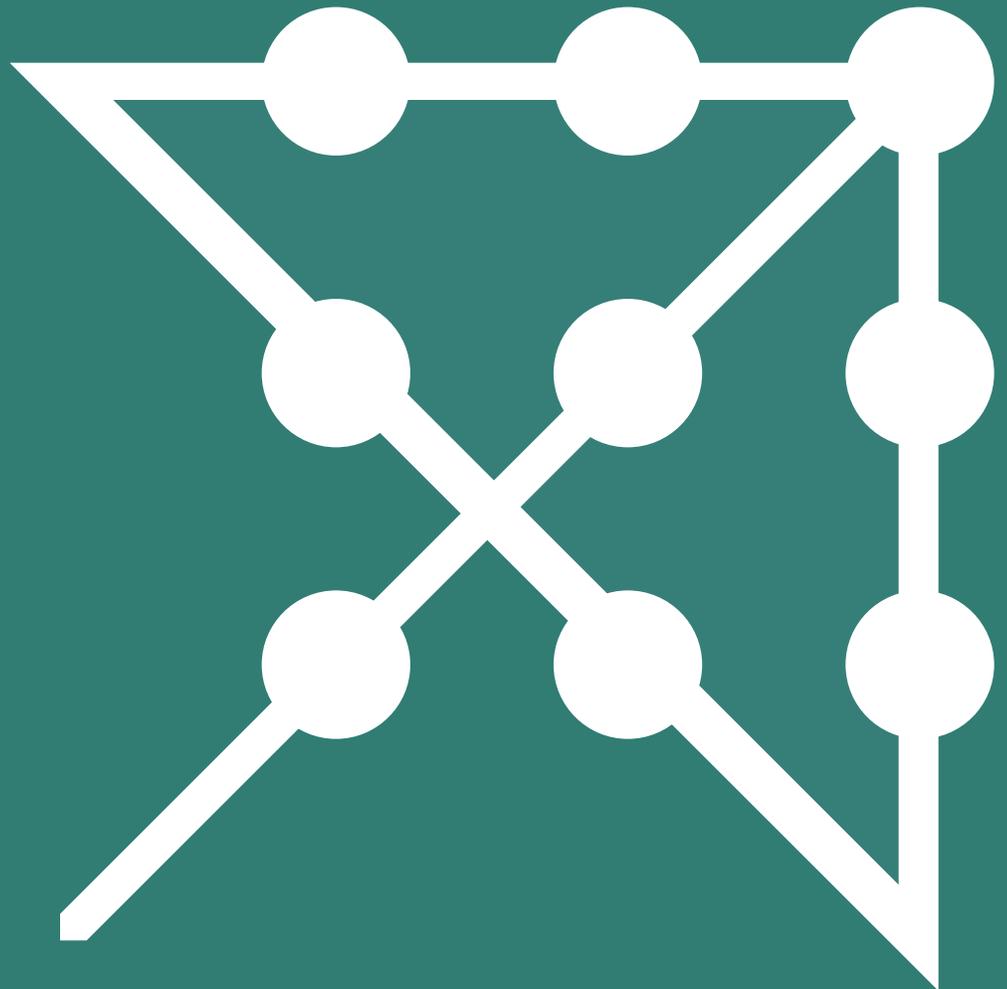
Yardeni Research, Inc.

**Dr. Edward Yardeni**

516-972-7683

eyardeni@yardeni.com

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*thinking outside the box*

**“1917” (+ +)** received the Best Picture award during the Golden Globe Awards held on 1/5/20. It was well deserved. Directed, co-written, and produced by Sam Mendes, the film is about two young British soldiers during World War I who were ordered to deliver a message deep in enemy territory to save 1,600 of their compatriots from an ambush by German forces. The acting is excellent, and the cinematography is outstanding, with very long camera shots creating the impression of one continuous take. The depiction of war’s horrors was also exceptional. Even more exceptional was the 2018 documentary “They Shall Not Grow Old,” directed and produced by Peter Jackson. That film was created using original WWI footage that had been digitally restored. The agony of war, particularly trench warfare, was remarkably graphic.

**“Away” (+)** is a binge-able Netflix series about an American astronaut, played by Hilary Swank, embarking on a dangerous mission to Mars as commander of an international space crew with representatives from China, India, Russia, and Ghana. The first season spends more time on the emotional toll of being away from family and loved ones on a three-year roundtrip to the Red Planet than on the actual journey, which obviously doesn’t go so smoothly with plenty of technical and interpersonal problems along the way there. So it’s a touchy-feely Mars movie. Meanwhile, here on Earth, Elon Musk is planning on colonizing Mars. According to a Friday report, the would-be Martian King ruled that his colony won’t be ruled by any “Earth-based government” — and will instead adhere to its own “self-governing principles.” May the force be with Elon. Let’s see how far Elon gets. Netflix hasn’t renewed for a second season.

**“Bombshell” (+)** is a docudrama based on the accounts of several women at Fox News who exposed CEO Roger Ailes for sexual harassment. The movie stars include Charlize Theron, Nicole Kidman, and Margot Robbie playing reporters Megyn Kelly, Gretchen Carlson, and Kayla Pospisil. John Lithgow plays Ailes, who was a creative genius and a slime ball. A far better account of this sordid affair along with a fascinating examination of Ailes’ career at Fox News is Showtime’s seven-part series, “The Loudest Voice.” Russell Crowe is amazingly good at portraying Ailes. The series is based on Gabriel Sherman’s 2014 book, *The Loudest Voice in the Room*, and depicts the pivotal years in the rise and fall of Ailes. It covers when media mogul Rupert Murdoch hired him to launch the Fox News Channel and when Ailes took charge on the morning of 9/11 and promoted Bush’s post-9/11 policies. Also covered in detail is the sexual harassment case brought against Ailes by Gretchen Carlson (played by Naomi Watts), who filed a lawsuit that led to his downfall.

**“Chernobyl” (+ + +)** is five-part 2019 HBO docudrama about the nuclear power plant disaster of April 1986 and the cleanup efforts that followed in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic of the Soviet Union. In effect, the power plant turned into a nuclear bomb when the plant’s managers were conducting a badly botched safety test. The fail-safe mechanisms obviously failed. The Soviet government’s attempts to cover up the cause of the meltdown might have caused an even bigger disaster were it not for the courage of the managers and the bravery of the workers assigned to clean up the horribly dangerous mess.

**“Da 5 Bloods” (+ +)** is a Spike Lee movie about four black US Army veterans who fought in the Vietnam War together. Several decades later, they return to Vietnam to find, recover, and bury their comrade in arms, who died in a firefight. In addition, they hope to find a pile of gold bars that they had stashed in the jungle. The film includes lots of real-life footage of the turmoil and racial unrest at home during the war. Needless to say, the movie is especially relevant today as racial tensions in the US have intensified. Lee is a great director who pays homage to “Apocalypse Now” in his film as well as to

the quirky style of director Quentin Tarantino.

**“Defending Jacob” (+ +)** is a mini-series drama on Apple TV+ about a 14-year-old boy who is accused of stabbing to death a fellow schoolmate who had been bullying him. It’s actually a bit of a psychological thriller. Chris Evans plays a respected assistant district attorney whose son Jacob, is accused of the murder. In the third episode, we discover that Jacob’s grandfather is serving a life sentence in prison for murder. This raises the possibility of using the “murder gene” defense. One study published in the Journal of Molecular Psychiatry in 2014 analyzed the genes of 895 Finnish criminals, and found that the majority of violent criminals carried the genes known as “MAOA” and “CDH13.”

**“Driveways” (+ +)** is a bittersweet movie about an Asian-American single mom who moves with her nine-year-old son into a suburban house she inherited from her older sister, who passed away. The next-door neighbor is an elderly man, who is a lonely widower and Korean War vet. While the initial interaction of the new neighbors is tense, they quickly come to be friends. There really isn’t much of a plot in the movie. It’s a quiet and slow-paced film that is about the bitter and the sweet moments in life. Brian Dennehy provides his usual first-class acting performance. Sadly, he passed away a few months after the movie was made.

**“Fear City: New York vs The Mafia” (+ +)** is about the Commission, which essentially hijacked New York City during the 1980s. The Commission consisted of the heads of the five Mafia families that extorted billions of dollars from various New York City industries. Among the most lucrative businesses for the Mob back then was concrete. There was a skyscraper building boom in NYC during the 1980s. Developers like Donald Trump were forced to pay a big markup for the essential building material from the concrete industry that was monopolized by the five families. New York State Attorney General Rudi Giuliani, with the help of lots of wiretap evidence collected by the FBI, was able to charge, arrest, and indict the five Mafia bosses all in one sweep.

**“Godfather of Harlem” (+ + +)** is a television drama series based on the tumultuous life and times of crime boss Bumpy Johnson. In the early 1960s, he returned from 10 years in Alcatraz to his home in Harlem, which was run by the Italian mob. There, Bumpy took on the Genovese crime family to regain control. The resulting battle is epic, and so is the acting and directing. Notable personalities with important roles in the saga are Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell, Muhammad Ali, Frank Costello, and Joseph Bonanno

**“Grant” (+ + +)** is a three-part docudrama on the History Channel. It provides great insights, not only into the life of Ulysses S. Grant but also into the Civil War and the post-war Reconstruction Era. Grant was the general who won the war for Abraham Lincoln by defeating the forces of General Robert E. Lee, who surrendered the Confederate army to Grant at Appomattox Court House, Appomattox, Virginia on April 9, 1865. From 1861 to 1865, it is estimated that 620,000-750,000 soldiers died along with an undetermined number of civilians. Lincoln was assassinated five days after the end of the war. Vice President Andrew Johnson succeeded Lincoln as president until March 4, 1869. Then Grant was elected President and served for two terms through March 4, 1877. Sadly, the legacy of Grant’s turbulent era in many ways haunts Americans to this very day.

**“Greyhound” (+ +)** is a film written by and starring Tom Hanks. It pays homage to the brave Allied sailors who manned the naval convoys that crossed the North Atlantic during WW II with American supplies for the war effort in Europe. They were relentlessly attacked by Nazi U-boats, and were particularly vulnerable in the “Black Pit,” where the convoys couldn’t be protected with aerial support. The Battle of the Atlantic was the

longest continuous military campaign in the war, running from September 1939 to the defeat of Germany in May 1945. For a few months in 1941, British codebreakers at Bletchley Park led by Alan Turing were able to rout convoys around the U-boats.

**“Irresistible” (+)** is a comedy about our dysfunctional political system. It’s remarkably low key given that Jon Stewart wrote and directed it, and given how loud and angry partisan discourse has become in our country. Steve Carell plays the Democrats’ top strategist, Gary Zimmer. After Gary sees a video of Jack Hastings—a farmer who’s also a retired Marine Colonel—standing up for the rights of his town’s undocumented workers, he pushes Jack to run for mayor of his small rural town in Wisconsin. Gary believes he has found the perfect candidate to win back the Heartland for his party. The Republicans send their own top campaign manager. The funniest part of the movie is a campaign ad that shows the ex-Marine firing a heavy machine-gun into a lake, scowling into the camera and saying, “My name is Jack Hastings, and I endorse this message.” The movie is a bit slow and dull most of the time, but still worth watching all the way through to the happy ending if you have nothing better to do. At least it will distract you from watching the partisan free-for-all on the news.

**“Jojo Rabbit” (+)** is about a 10-year-old boy who aspires to be a member of the Hitler youth movement. It’s a quirky movie that takes a look at World War II through the eyes of a child. Jojo quickly recognizes that there is a big difference between the propaganda that is all around him and the facts on the ground, as he sees them. It reminds us that propaganda (a.k.a. fake news) isn’t a recent development. It’s been around as long as tyrants have been shoving their version of the facts into our collective consciousness. What’s different now is that social media and artificial intelligence provide autocratically inclined people with more tools to shovel their lies more efficiently. I’ll leave it to you to decide who those malevolent people are today.

**“Let Him Go” (+)** starts real slowly, but gets better along the way. It stars Kevin Costner and Diane Lane as a couple living on a ranch in Montana during the early 1960s with their son, his wife, and their grandson. After their son falls off a horse and dies, his wife remarries into the evil Webo family. Lesley Manville shines as the family’s sinister matriarch Blanche Webo. Fearing for their grandchild’s safety in his new home, the couple mounts a suspenseful rescue attempt.

**“Little Women” (+)** is the seventh film adaptation of the 1868 novel by Louisa May Alcott. It is a semi-autobiographical story of four sisters starring Saoirse Ronan as Jo, Emma Watson as Meg, Florence Pugh as Amy, and Eliza Scanlen as Beth. It follows their passage from childhood to womanhood. Like Alcott, Jo is a writer and writes a novel (titled “Little Women,” of course) about how she and her sisters developed their own individual personalities and pursued their goals persistently despite challenges posed by social conventions. The story is about the strength that a close-knit family can provide children to help them flourish and succeed in life as happy young adults. In other words, it’s a classic American tale about the importance of the family as a base for healthy individualism, i.e., the freedom to pursue one’s own path in life.

**“Miss Sloane” (+)** is a 2016 thriller starring Jessica Chastain, who plays a take-no-prisoners lobbyist in Washington, DC. It’s another movie about how the game is played in the “swamp.” Lobbyists have got to be engaged in the world’s second most unethical profession, after politicians. I’ve often observed that the difference between entrepreneurial capitalism and crony capitalism is that the latter system is corrupted by lobbyists. Big Business hires them to deal with Big Government. The deal-making is a

win-win for both of them but a lose-lose for the rest of us.

**“On the Rocks” (+)** is a comedy film written and directed by Sofia Coppola about a father (played by Bill Murray) and his daughter (played by Rashida Jones), who suspects that her husband is having an affair. The two of them start tailing him. Along the way, the father explains why men are the way they are and women are the way they are, causing each other lots of grief. His daughter responds that he didn’t have to leave her mother and cause everyone in the family so much grief. The father admits his failings. Murray always plays his characters the same hilarious way, and does so again in this film. The influence of Woody Allen on Coppola’s script and directing is evident from the start.

**“Radioactive” (+)** is a biopic about Marie Curie. Together with her husband Pierre, she was awarded half of the Nobel Prize for Physics in 1903, for their study into the spontaneous radiation discovered by Henri Becquerel, who was awarded the other half of the Prize. In 1911, she received a second Nobel Prize, this time in Chemistry, in recognition of discovering two elements, polonium and radium. Despite her great professional accomplishments, the press hounded her about her personal life, mostly for partisan purposes. As the French saying goes, “plus les choses changent, plus elles restent les mêmes.”

**“Resistance” (+ +)** is about the WWII exploits of Marcel Marceau, the famous French actor and mime. As a youth, he lived in hiding and worked with the French Jewish resistance network in Vichy, France during most of the war. They rescued thousands of children and adults during the Holocaust in France, mostly from the murderous Klaus Barbie, an SS and Gestapo Nazi known as “the Butcher of Lyon.” Marceau gives his first major performance to 3,000 troops after the liberation of Paris in August 1944. The story is remarkable. The acting by Jesse Eisenberg in the lead role is not so remarkable. (See our movie reviews since 2005.)

**“Richard Jewell” (+ +)** is a compelling movie based on a true story about Richard Jewell, a security guard who saved lots of lives during the 1996 Summer Olympics in Atlanta when he detected a bomb planted in an abandoned backpack. Initially, he was celebrated as a hero by the press. However, the FBI agents on the case concluded that he fit the profile of a white, male, lone bomber seeking fame. Their investigation was leaked to the press, which had a field day denouncing him as a villain rather than a hero. The movie, directed by Clint Eastwood, concluded that Jewell was set up by the two most powerful organizations in America, i.e., the government and the media. It’s a cautionary tale, for sure, and highly relevant to the ongoing shenanigans of both organizations today.

**“Social Dilemma” (+ +)** is a disturbing documentary featuring several concerned American citizens who happen to have worked for the top social media companies in the country as top executives and employees. They all share a concern that the unregulated social media companies have inadvertently created a monster, which threatens democracy and social stability. They are doing so by their relentless need to increase their revenues by collecting and selling more and more data about each and every one of us. To get our attention, they are constantly doing their best to push our emotional buttons, especially fear and hate. As a result, they are exacerbating political partisanship by feeding us with news feeds and social media recommendations that are selected by their artificial intelligence algorithms to incite us. Some of the insiders suggest that the social media giants need to be regulated the same as the phone companies are regulated. A few simply observe that our smartphones create the dilemma of making us

simultaneously smarter and dumber.

**“Summerland” (+ +)** is a feel-good summertime movie about an Englishwoman, Alice Lamb (played by Gemma Arterton), who lives alone in a rural cottage with a spectacular view of the English Channel and the Cliffs of Dover. During World War II, young children were evacuated from London to the English countryside to live with families who volunteered to take them in for the duration of the war. Alice is surprised when a young lad shows up at her door. Initially, she responds to the apparent mistake by arranging to have him sent to another family. But she changes her mind, and the result is summertime magic.

**“The Crown” (+ + +)** is wonderful docudrama about Queen Elizabeth. It provides a sweeping view of her life and times. So far, her reign has coincided with the careers of 14 UK prime ministers. She has been through lots of good and bad times for her nation as well as for the royal family. My wife and I are still binge-watching the fourth season, which is about the sad lives of Prince Charles and Princess Diana, as well as the challenges faced by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher. The latest season also features the antics of two intruders. One was an unemployed fellow who entered Buckingham Palace without permission and managed to have a brief conversation with the Queen in her bedroom. The other was a mouse that raced across the floor of Windsor Castle during the third episode.

**“The Invisible Man” (+)** is a film about an invisible man who mercilessly harasses his ex-girlfriend. She can't get a restraining order because he is presumed to be dead, and he is invisible. The movie's plot is obviously contrived. However, Elizabeth Moss, who plays the girlfriend, does an admirable job of conveying the fear she feels when she is repeatedly tormented by her invisible ex. We can all empathize with her as an invisible virus spreads fear around the world.

**“The King of Staten Island” (+ +)** is a semi-biographical film starring Pete Davidson as a 24-year-old man-child who was traumatized by the death of his firefighter dad when he was younger. He certainly has lots of psychological issues. His mother throws him out of her house when he has a tantrum over her starting to date a firefighter. He certainly is a royal pain for her, his sister, and his mother's boyfriend. Nevertheless, family and love triumph over his dysfunctions. So it's sort of a heart-warming tale.

**“The Last Narc” (+ + +)** is a TV mini-series documentary about the kidnapping, torture, and murder of “Kiki” Camarena, an agent for the Drug Enforcement Agency. The blood-chilling story is told by Hector Berrellez, a DEA investigator assigned to determine who committed the crime in Mexico. Three of his informants, who were witnesses to the kidnapping, are interviewed. Drug money has a powerfully corrupting influence on everyone involved in the enterprise including not only the narcos but also the narcs, the police, and many politicians on both sides of the southern border of the US. Like Hamlet's epiphany about who killed his father, Hector uncovers the unbearable truth about what really happened to Kiki..

**“The Life Ahead” (-)** stars Sophia Loren in the Netflix movie directed by her son Edoardo Ponti about an elderly Italian woman who earns money by taking care of the children of working women (of ill repute). She plays an Italian Holocaust survivor known as Madame Rosa who takes in and eventually bonds with a Senegalese orphan, Momo. The movie is about tolerance and taking life one day at a time. It is slow paced without much drama. The dubbing in English is terrible. Watching it with subtitles might be a better experience.

**“The Morning Show” (+ + +)** is a fast-paced television series produced by Apple TV+ starring Jennifer Aniston and Reese Witherspoon as co-anchors on The Morning Show, a popular breakfast news program broadcast from Manhattan on the UBA network. The two are brought together after the co-host, played by Steve Carell, is fired as a result of a sexual misconduct scandal. It’s obviously reminiscent of the scandal that hit NBC’s Today show. The series has a very good cast, with lots of great acting and dialogue.

**“The Queen’s Gambit” (+ + +)** is a binge-able Netflix miniseries about a fictional young lady by the name of Beth Harmon who learns to play chess from a janitor in her orphanage at the age of nine. She becomes the world’s greatest chess player by the age of 22. Along the way, she struggles with emotional issues and drug and alcohol dependency. The cast is incredible, with Anya Taylor-Joy starring as Beth. Her intense obsession with winning the game is mesmerizing. This is a must-see. If we get locked up again, I’m going to work on my chess game for sure.

**“The Traitor” (+ + +)** is an Italian docudrama about a real-life Godfather, Tommaso Buscetta, who ratted on the Costa Nostra crime organization run out of Palermo, Sicily. “The Godfather” trilogy is about the fictionalized Corleone family’s exploits in the American mafia. In fact, Corleone is a village in the country region of Palermo, where an all-out war between Sicilian mafia bosses over the heroin trade broke out during the early 1980s. Buscetta’s sons and brother were murdered in the bloody melee. He decides to become an informant and violate his oath of allegiance to the Cosa Nostra because the blood-thirsty bosses butchered innocent family members of their no-longer-partners in crime. The movie’s portrayal of the courtroom scenes is both hilarious and bloodcurdling. The story told in this film is eerily similar to the one portrayed in Netflix’s outstanding “Narcos” series. The latest season (“Narcos: Mexico”) is phenomenal. Corruption is an evil human trait that is all too often exacerbated by illegal drugs.

**“The Undoing” (+)** is a limited-series thriller on HBO starring Nicole Kidman and Hugh Grant about a perfect couple that’s undone by the murder of the mother of a student in their son’s private school in Manhattan. She is a clinical psychologist. He is an oncologist. There are lots of suspects, but the police charge the most obvious one with the crime. The Undoing is a stylish who-done-it with a great cast. It’s entertaining for sure, though not perfect.

**“Washington” (+ + +)** is a three-part mini-series about America’s revolutionary military leader who led American forces to win the country’s independence from Great Britain. The entire venture could have easily collapsed but for Washington’s willingness to come out of retirement after the war to serve as the nation’s first president. He was truly the founding father of the American nation. The docudrama extols his achievements while recognizing that he had his flaws. He didn’t always tell the truth, contrary to what kids are taught in school. He had a temper. His checkered relationship to slavery is also fairly presented. King George III described Washington as “the greatest man in the world.” He certainly was back then and remains among the greatest military and political leaders in history.