

## **AMERICA AND THE MOVIES**

### **WHAT THE ACADEMY AWARD NOMINEES FOR BEST PICTURE TELL US ABOUT OURSELVES**

I am glad to be here, and honored. For twenty-two years, I was the Executive Director of the Center for Christian Study in Charlottesville, VA, adjacent to the University of Virginia, and now I am in the same position with the fledgling Consortium of Christian Study Centers, a nation-wide group of Study Centers with the mission of working to present a Christian voice at the secular universities of our land. There are some thirty to thirty-five such Study Centers in all different shapes and sizes. Not surprisingly, I suppose, I believe the work they are doing is some of the most important work being done at universities in America today, and that makes me glad and filled with anticipation to be here with Missy and the rest of you at the beginning of another study center. I have had the privilege of being part of this from the beginning though also from afar, and it is nice finally to see what is happening here. I look forward to seeing what the Lord does in the coming years. Thank you for inviting me to address you.

Now to the task at hand. This is the tenth year in a row I have, in one form or another, looked at the Academy Award nominees for best picture and opined on what they tell us about life in American society. However, this is the first of those ten years in which I have lectured on this topic before the nominees were even announced. I did another form of this talk in January in Oregon, guessing what movies would be nominated and lecturing on them. I felt I could do such a brash thing because of another first. For the first time since I've been doing this, but not for the first time in Academy history, there were ten nominees for best picture this year. Suffice it to say that in Oregon I chose six movies that I felt had a good chance of being nominated, and

lectured on those. It turned out I was right on five of them at least; five out of six is not a bad batting average.

But because there *were* ten nominees, we better get going. Rather than concentrate on the winner, I will briefly outline and discuss the ten in alphabetical order, basically just giving some facts about them, and one or two themes I think are of interest to us as those who are interested in film and American societal norms. I will then comment on any trends and/or commonalities I see in those ten films. Then let's have a discussion. You should know, too, that I will spend considerably more time on the first nominee for various reasons, which will become apparent. I just didn't want you to get antsy when we are 25 minutes into the talk, taking a break, and I've still perhaps only talked about one movie. My guess is that, though it was not the winner of the Best Picture Award, the first is also the one that needs the least introduction. If you haven't ever heard of *Avatar*, you are not sentient.

*Avatar* of course is the blockbuster brainchild of James Cameron, the director of such other megahits as *Terminator*, *The Abyss*, and his most successful effort before *Avatar*: *Titanic*. *Avatar* has become the box office champion of all time, both world-wide and recently in America also. Box Office "titles" are notoriously suspect for a number of reasons, not least of which is inflation and the rise in ticket prices. *Gone with the Wind*, for instance, in inflation adjusted dollars had a box office take of about double what *Avatar* will have, \$1.5B to \$750M. *Avatar*'s title will always be sullied by another factor: the much higher prices one pays to see this movie in 3-D and in Imax (and in both!), but nevertheless box office champ it is.

*Avatar*'s story is mediocre at best. As I put it on the information sheet: A paraplegic marine dispatched to the moon Pandora on a unique mission becomes torn between following his orders and protecting the world he grows to feel is his home. Re-

telling a familiar story (*Dances with Wolves*, anyone?) is not necessarily a bad thing. We are sometimes told by those who study them that there are only anywhere from 7-12 basic stories in the world of literature anyway and that every telling is only a variation on one of those. The question, then, is: "Is the story told well?" and most seem to feel *Avatar* is not. I am torn. The dialogue, the place and people names, many of the characterizations are simplistic, hackneyed, and to a large degree stereotyped, but in the end I did care what happened to the main characters and wanted to see exactly how the story would end.

Everyone agrees, however, that the special effects in this film are like nothing we have ever seen before; in fact it is an interesting question how much their superiority and innovation pushes the viewer to participate in the story and the characters. In any case, the first truly effective live-action 3-D movie has certainly broken new ground and created quite a discussion of whether or not the world of movies has been changed forever.

You may think the discussion of 3-D has nothing to do with the deeper and more philosophical questions you were expecting to discuss tonight, but I believe you would be wrong in at least two ways. 1) How much will exposure to 3-D have to do with deepening and refining the dominant epistemological framework of our age: experientialism? It is an important question to ask, especially if, as many believe it will, 3-D eventually becomes the normal context of movie-viewing. 2) How do we separate reality from fantasy, when fantasy becomes more "like" reality every day? 3-D is not virtual reality, but it moves us a long way along the line towards it. We must take 3-D and its impact on our psyche seriously in the coming years.

Quite apart from these questions, *Avatar* has raised some other very different, but no less interesting, controversies. The first, pointed out most fully in his *New York Times*

Op-Ed piece by Ross Douthat, is the thinly veiled eastern mysticism found at the core of the movie.

It's fitting that James Cameron's "Avatar" arrived in theaters at Christmastime. Like the holiday season itself, the science fiction epic is a crass embodiment of capitalistic excess wrapped around a deeply felt religious message. It's at once the blockbuster to end all blockbusters, and the Gospel According to James.

But not the Christian Gospel. Instead, "Avatar" is Cameron's long apology for pantheism — a faith that equates God with Nature, and calls humanity into religious communion with the natural world.

NYT, "Heaven and Nature", December 21, 2009

More about this discussion in a minute. Other questions have been raised about the tendency of one of its most attractive characters, a scientist played by Sigourney Weaver, to be a chain smoker and the impact that may have on the younger generation who are overwhelmingly the dominant audience of this film. There have been a number of criticisms of it as a parable of many different types: ecological catastrophe, military-industrial destruction, nation/state takeovers of indigenous peoples for economic gain. But one that bears special mention is the one raised by David Brooks in his essay, "The Messiah Complex" because it is a question that seems to have been wholly unintended by the filmmakers of *Avatar* and indeed probably appalls them. The essay is worth reading almost in its entirety. (Read highlighted parts)

January 8, 2010

### **The Messiah Complex**

By David Brooks, New York Times Op-Ed Columnist

*Readers intending to watch the movie "Avatar" should know that major events in the plot are revealed.*

Every age produces its own sort of fables, and our age seems to have produced The White Messiah fable.

This is the oft-repeated story about a manly young adventurer who goes into the wilderness in search of thrills and profit. But, once there, he meets the native people and finds that they are noble and spiritual and pure. And so he emerges as their Messiah, leading them on a righteous crusade against his own rotten civilization.

Avid moviegoers will remember "A Man Called Horse," which began to establish the pattern, and "At Play in the Fields of the Lord." More people will have seen "Dances With Wolves" or "The Last Samurai."

Kids have been given their own pure versions of the fable, like "Pocahontas" and "FernGully."

It's a pretty serviceable formula. Once a director selects the White

Messiah fable, he or she doesn't have to waste time explaining the plot because everybody knows roughly what's going to happen.

The formula also gives movies a little socially conscious allure. Audiences like it because it is so environmentally sensitive. Academy Award voters like it because it is so multiculturally aware. Critics like it because the formula inevitably involves the loincloth-clad good guys sticking it to the military-industrial complex.

Yet of all the directors who have used versions of the White Messiah formula over the years, no one has done so with as much exuberance as James Cameron in "Avatar."

"Avatar" is a racial fantasy par excellence. The hero is a white former Marine who is adrift in his civilization. He ends up working with a giant corporation and flies through space to help plunder the environment of a pristine planet and displace its peace-loving natives.

The peace-loving natives — compiled from a mélange of Native American, African, Vietnamese, Iraqi and other cultural fragments — are like the peace-loving natives you've seen in a hundred other movies. They're tall, muscular and admirably slender. They walk around nearly naked. They are phenomenal athletes and pretty good singers and dancers.

The white guy notices that the peace-loving natives are much cooler than the greedy corporate tools and the bloodthirsty U.S. military types he came over with. He goes to live with the natives, and, in short order, he's the most awesome member of their tribe. He has sex with their hottest babe. He learns to jump through the jungle and ride horses. It turns out that he's even got more guts and athletic prowess than they do. He flies the big red bird that no one in generations has been able to master.

Along the way, he has his consciousness raised. The peace-loving natives are at one with nature, and even have a fiber-optic cable sticking out of their bodies that they can plug into horses and trees, which is like Horse Whispering without the wireless technology. Because they are not corrupted by things like literacy, cellphones and blockbuster movies, they have deep and tranquil souls. The natives help the white guy discover that he, too, has a deep and tranquil soul.

The natives have hot bodies and perfect ecological sensibilities, but they are natural creatures, not history-making ones. When the military-industrial complex comes in to strip mine their homes, they need a White Messiah to lead and inspire the defense.

Our hero leaps in, with the help of a pack of dinosaurs summoned by Mother Earth. As he and his fellow freedom fighters kill wave after wave of Marines or former Marines or whatever they are, he achieves the ultimate prize: He is accepted by the natives and can spend the rest of his life in their excellent culture.

Cameron's handling of the White Messiah fable is not the reason "Avatar" is such a huge global hit. As John Podhoretz wrote in *The Weekly Standard*, "Cameron has simply used these familiar bromides as shorthand to give his special-effects spectacular some resonance." The plotline gives global audiences a chance to see American troops get killed. It offers useful hooks on which McDonald's and other corporations can hang their tie-in campaigns.

Still, would it be totally annoying to point out that the whole White Messiah fable, especially as Cameron applies it, is kind of offensive?

It rests on the stereotype that white people are rationalist and technocratic while colonial victims are spiritual and athletic. It rests on the assumption that nonwhites need the White Messiah to lead their crusades. It rests on the assumption that illiteracy is the path to grace. It also creates a sort of two-edged cultural imperialism. Natives can either have their history shaped by cruel imperialists or benevolent ones, but either way, they are going to be supporting actors in our journey to self-admiration.

It's just escapism, obviously, but benevolent romanticism can be just as

condescending as the malevolent kind — even when you surround it with pop-up ferns and floating mountains.

Brooks's critique speaks for itself. After I read it, I saw the movie again, and it is remarkable that every actor who plays one of the Na'vi—the tribe of natives who inhabit the moon Pandora and are the objects of the wrath of the big bad corporation in the movie—every one of these is an African-American. We will come back to the theme of inadvertent racism in our discussion of *Precious*, but it is worth raising now the question of what African-Americans or Native Americans thought of this picture, and it is difficult to argue that there is at least the potential of offense in it.

Brooks's charge is not without its counter-arguments. The change that Jake Sully goes through, and the similar, yet in some ways very different, change that Wikus VandeMere, the main character in *District 9*, also experiences, makes them more “human” than they were before argues A.O. Scott. I quote:

“In *Avatar* and *District 9* we are the bad guys, and while neither film contemplates or celebrates our disappearance from the universe, neither elicits much regret at the prospect of our defeat.

And those movies were the hits, hailed by critics and embraced by audiences for their novelty and sophistication. Is this a victory for anti-human cynicism? It would be except that in becoming alien Jake and Wikus realize what we can only call their humanity — their compassion and courage, their ability to love and sacrifice. That we experience this as a triumph rather than a betrayal suggests that a capacity for self-hatred is also part of the human condition. And also a desire to improve, to correct our errors, to atone. Answering that desire may be growing harder. In the movies we can see ourselves as weak and desperate, in need of rescue. Or, if we are strong, we are also greedy, base, corrupt and dishonest. To picture ourselves differently requires special glasses, or a change of skin.”

With all this—the eco-politics, the Nature worship, the Messiah complex, we must admit that Cameron's chosen theme has included the saving grace of Jake Sully's being willing to die for something worth dying for. As the tagline states, “All I ever wanted was a single thing worth fighting for”. It is a line Sully articulates near the beginning of the film. We also have to note that Sully appeals to the “god” of the film,

Eiwa, the life-giving Nature force, in what can only be called a Christian prayer. In Eastern pantheism, God is decidedly not “personal” and does not “hear” prayer, but in the movie, Sully clearly prays, audibly asking Eiwa to “help him out a little here.” It may not be much, but it at least is something. Nevertheless, the self-sacrificial tone and the prayer probably only show that, when you construct your own religion from parts of different ones, you will regularly end up with a contradictory mish mash, representing the “god” you wish were there, not one that makes sense, much less is true to reality.

*The Blind Side* was last year’s sleeper. A relatively true story of present day NFL starting tackle Michael Oher and his adoption by a white family in Memphis, Tennessee, it is easily the movie on the list, which Christians would generally cheer for most loudly. Crackling with good lines and full of sweet, sacrificial love without ever being maudlin, *The Blind Side* displays just enough Christianity to be clear without ever stepping over the line that so often makes unbelievers sickened by a movie’s religiosity (cf. *Fireproof*). Characters pray, go to Church and go to Christian school without ever appearing to be overly pious or other worldly, much less self-righteous.

Race, of course, is a huge issue in this movie, too, but not in the same way it is in *Avatar* or *District 9*. The “white Messiah” in *The Blind Side* is simply one family, particularly one mom, helping one boy escape a life of dead ends, not a white leader saving an entire race from extinction. *Blind Side* differs, too, from the other two films in that it can be cogently argued that Michael Oher, the kid who rises from the projects to become an NFL starting player, with a lot of help to be sure, actually saves himself in this film. He is the one who stands up to the NCAA investigator in the end and accuses her of treating him as if he didn’t have a mind of his own. He says, “With all those questions you asked me yesterday, you didn’t ask me the most important one.” “And

what was that?" "Why I chose to go to Ole Miss." Lastly, while the movie certainly changes a number of the details of the story, it is essentially a true story, not a fiction that was created. So, as one of my sons often says, "Like it or not, it is what it is." *Blind Side* cannot be fairly accused of "inventing" a myth, if the story it tells is true.

Analysts have tried to understand why the movie has been so popular, citing a variety of niche markets of people who were attracted to it (football fans by the appearance of many popular college football coaches, women by Ms. Bullock's performance, Christians through the efforts of Grace Hill Media, etc.), but the final answer should just be admitted: the movie touches a nerve rarely touched in American society and does so in a professional, highly competent manner. In a word, it's just a plain ol' good movie.

This is a movie that shows that America has a very deep and resilient religious heart, and that if the story is right and told well, that heart will show up at the box office. If *The Blind Side* had won Best Picture—a long shot at best in any year since the 60's (though remember that *Chariots of Fire* pulled off one of the biggest upsets in Oscar history over *Reds*, *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and *On Golden Pond* as recently as 1981)—it would have shown that Hollywood has a more religious heart than anyone thinks it does, but it would not have been a choice that would have embarrassed anyone. It had that long shot because the performance by Sandra Bullock, a popular actress in her own right both with the general public and in Hollywood, drew attention to the movie, as did its phenomenal box office success. A long shot, but a real shot nonetheless.

The next two films had no such chance to win, but they are wonderful representatives of their genres. As one critic put it, *District 9*, the personal project of Neill Blomkamp, a South African living now in Canada who wrote and directed it, inverts the normal question of alien invasion movies of "What are they going to do to

us?" and asks instead, "If they were dependent on us, what would we do to them?" As the same critic [A. O. Scott writing in the *New York Times* (Aug 14, 2009)] wrote: "The answer, derived from intimate knowledge of how we have treated one another for centuries, is not pretty. " *District 9* was made for a song (Budget: \$30M, very low for a science fiction film) and grossed over \$115M, a 385% profit. The documentary feel achieved in part because of its low budget contributed a reality that made the movie more engaging than the relatively hackneyed plot might have allowed. A story of self-revelation and sacrifice, *District 9* deals in a fresh and revealing way with the racism that continues to be a problem in South Africa, including shots at corporate greed, criminal exploitation, and simple bigotry along the way. I mentioned that the main character shares a likeness to the one in *Avatar* in that he is the savior of the aliens, having become like them in a unique way. Unlike the hero in *Avatar*, however, the hero here is simply a plain man—really something of a doofus—who, when push comes to shove responds in a way that reflects a courage and a selflessness that is admirable.

*An Education* could not be more in the opposite direction. Filled with self-indulgent characters, the movie takes its title from the story of a girl, who, pressed by her parents to do everything she can to get into Oxford, breaks under the pressure and runs away with a dashing, older man who extends to her the promises of wealth, art, travel and just plain fun in exchange for her favors. She finds her lover is not all he is cracked up to be, and her education, one no one can learn from books, is a painful step on the way to adulthood, reconciliation with her parents, and a life that one hopes (but is not promised) will be wiser and better.

The acting is superb. Carey Mulligan in the lead role of Jenny (no one in the film has a last name) was nominated for the Best Actress Oscar and Peter Sarsgaard, her lover, and Alfred Molina, her father, turn in Oscar worthy performances. Even Emma

Thompson in a tiny role is at her best as a pompous, seemingly jealous school marm who lays down the law to Jenny, when she must decide to play or study.

Set in 1960s suburban London, the film is certainly a social commentary on the “swinging sixties” and its newer form in the first decade of this century. In many ways it is a morality play; Jenny of course is the disciple, and her father is the law, her lover, unfaithfulness, his friends, greed and lust. While Jenny is not punished as she might have been, the lessons she learns are certainly painful, and the Christian can learn much from the film.

The winner of the Academy Award for Best Picture (many believed it to have been locked in a titanic struggle with *Avatar* for the Award) was of course *The Hurt Locker*. Shot from a brilliant, original screenplay by journalist/author Mark Boal, who spent time embedded with an Explosive Ordnance Disposal (EOD) squad observing them dismantling Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs), *Locker* is one of the best explorations of war, especially insurgent war, and what it does to men that has ever been made. Directed by Kathryn Bigelow, ex-wife of James Cameron, but an accomplished director in her own right (*Point Break*, *Strange Days*, *The Weight of Water*, *K-19: The Widow-Maker*), the movie displays the tension, the frayed nerves, the absurdity with which soldiers have to live, as they go day-in, day-out into harm’s way.

The extraordinary performances by Jeremy Renner, Anthony Mackie and Brian Geraghty, backed up by a supporting cast that was filled with more stars than I can ever remember acting in such small supporting roles (David Morse, Ralph Fiennes, Guy Pearce, Evangeline Lilly) combine with direction, editing, and particularly cinematography, which all deserved their nominations, to make one of the tightest, tensest films in many years. (One of the great tragedies to me of this year’s awards was

that Anthony Mackie, the supporting rock of the cast, did not get nominated as Best Supporting Actor).

This movie is one of the few nominees that was shot in relatively true “independent” conditions. Made in Jordan, with cats and goats mostly just wandering into the frame rather than being staged to do so, *The Hurt Locker* often shot in 100°+ conditions of real uncertainty and with crowds of onlookers providing a verisimilitude that was both distracting and enhancing.

Though a war movie, *The Hurt Locker* was the only film of the nominees that thematically seems simply to raise questions, not give answers. The questions that it raises, though not ultimate ones, are nevertheless very real ones. First and foremost it tells the story of a normal, plain man who happens to be extremely good at one thing: war. His ability to be cool under the most pressure-filled conditions, to make the right decisions (sometimes instantly, sometimes after hours of simply waiting), his leadership ability—all are at a level that goes beyond the norm in every way.

This would be great, if it were just a story about football or salesmanship. But it isn't, it's a story about war, and the fact that Sgt. James loves war, loves the challenge of it, loves the engagement of it, creates a tension in him and in the viewer that is at times unbearable. It is a brilliant story, a story of the dark side of what being a hero is.

What does *The Hurt Locker* tell us about ourselves? As Eliot once put it: “Humankind cannot bear very much reality.” We are saddened, shocked, repelled, and entranced by the character of SFC William James. We want to believe that he is a hero, but we wonder if he is not simply a sick addict of the adrenalin rush that he gets from war. It is a difficult story, a complex story, and it is the best story found in this year's films. It makes us debate once again the cost/benefit analysis of war.

So we have now looked at *Avatar*, *The Blind Side*, *District Nine*, *An Education* and *The Hurt Locker*. Five down and five to go. Actually, this evening is not an exercise in taking medicine; if we stopped right now, we would have looked at five superb films, all of which are remarkable in their own ways. The next five are, too.

*Inglourious Basterds* is a good example of the distinctive film that Quentin Tarantino contributes to the movie industry, and it is one of his best so far. The author of *Reservoir Dogs*, *Pulp Fiction* and *Kill Bill, Vols. 1 & 2*, has made another in his unique genre of what I call laughter/terror movies, and like the others it is almost entirely devoid of anything one could call morally uplifting. The story revolves around a fictional plot of the allied forces to drop "eight Jewish American soldiers" into Europe behind enemy lines to wreak havoc on the German army. They are to do this by committing terrorist acts against them, scalping their victims in the process to create terror among the Germans of the soon to be invading Allied forces. While there, the group becomes involved in a plot to assassinate Hitler and the fun really begins, if you think murder and mayhem are fun.

On a DVD interview with Brad Pitt, the star of the film, and Tarantino, Pitt describes making a movie with the director, using a set of Biblical images. I quote: "This is the way it is. The set is the church. The Script is the Bible. Quentin is God." Tarantino chuckled his delight at this description; enough said for the divine orientation of his movies.

The central moral question of *Inglourious Basterds* is the central one of all Tarantino's movies: what is the morality of a film that works so hard to have the audience laugh and cringe at the same time? It has been Tarantino's stated goal at least since *Pulp Fiction* to try to get three reactions from the audience at any one point in the film: he says he wants a third of them falling off their seats from laughter, a third of

them diving under their seats from terror, and a third of them doing both at the same time. Such a mind can only dwell in a completely amoral universe.

The largest discussion surrounding the film has taken two directions. First, in assassinating Hitler and all his high command in one fell swoop, he plays fast and loose with history; the question arises of the legitimacy of doing that. The second direction is that Tarantino has done what few have even tried to do; he has created what has been called a Jewish revenge movie. This has been called perfectly legitimate because Tarantino is a gentile, not a Jew. As Christians what should be our response?

Another question remains for discussion, again a question that is true of almost all Tarantino films. They are such rich combinations of fantasy and reality, where does the filmmaker's responsibility to his viewers stop and the viewer's begin? Yes, we have a rating system, but will the young men that see this movie, leave it realizing it is only a movie, or will a dangerous number come out of it thinking scalping is cool?

One of the hardest movies to watch from this year's group, *Precious: Based on the Novel "Push" by Sapphire* is an amazing story of perseverance and hope in the midst of the most hopeless of circumstances. One of the only certainties at the Academy Awards this year was that Mo'Nique would win the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her portrayal of the despicable Mary, mother to the title character and one of the most selfish, evil people you can hope never to meet.

Sexually abused by her father (she has had two children by him, one of them with down syndrome) and verbally abused by Mary, Precious seeks to get out of her dilemma through education, social services, and friendships, and, though these things help, they never enable her to break the cycle of illiteracy, poverty and alienation she has had built into her life by her circumstances. But *Precious* is not without hope because, as one commentator pointed out, she has at least broken the cycle of violence

and selfishness her own parents visited on her. At the end of the film, one does feel that Precious will love her children in ways she was not loved and that this will make a sliver of difference at least.

An interesting controversy has arisen concerning *Precious*. Ishmael Reed, an African-American author living in California has posited that *Precious* perpetuates some of the worst kinds of stereotypes of blacks, specifically the useless, selfish, oppressive male. Reed says he felt "under psychological assault for two hours" while watching the film. He does not seem to be supported by the majority of the respondents to his *New York Times* OpEd piece, but nevertheless the question is there: Is *Precious* to be faulted because it tells a difficult truth, even though those truths could be read as perpetuating stereotypes? It is a difficult question that relates back to our discussion of David Brooks's criticism of *Avatar*: how iconic are great movies by nature? Is it possible to make a movie and to make it well, and not to offend someone by their feeling they were portrayed badly in the film? Christians feel this all the time with the subtle portrayals of priests or church members as being pedophiles, or racists, or inhuman in some other way. Are we right in feeling that way?

There seems to be no question that no one making *Precious* meant it to be offensive to any group of African-Americans, male, female, obese, inner city. Every single principal participant in the film was black, from Tyler Perry and Oprah Winfrey, who were two of its producers to Lee Daniels, its director, to all of the major actors. I do not see *Precious* in this vein. The argument has been advanced that *Precious* would have been a completely different film, if it had been made by whites about whites, and that is just where I disagree. It would have felt exactly the same. *Precious* is about a person who perseveres and goes on in the face of insurmountable odds against her, and there is

nothing racial about that. Precious could have been green, and this film would have told the same story.

In *A Serious Man* the famous Coen brothers, Joel and Ethan, have been as autobiographical as they have ever been, and their autobiography apparently is based on a philosophy of Job-like events without the beginning and the end of the Biblical book—Job without a sovereign God. The story takes place in 1967 and revolves around Larry Gopnik, a Jewish professor of mathematics in the Midwest, whose wife is going to leave him, whose deadbeat brother is an albatross around his neck, whose kids are losers, petty thieves and thoroughly selfish, whose tenure is being threatened by the blackmail of a graduate student who has tried to bribe him to change a grade, and to top it all off who is guilty of lusting after his neighbor, whom he has seen from his roof top, David-style, sunbathing nude.

This “dramedy” mocks the Jewish religion at almost every turn. Larry tries to get an audience with the famous Rabbi Marshak, but is rebuffed and shuffled off to two “junior rabbis”, both of whom give him completely inane advice. When Rabbi Marshak does speak to Larry’s son, Danny, on the day of his Bar Mitzvah, he shows himself to be a blathering, old, incomprehensible idiot. I read from the screenplay (pp. 120-21):

A DOOR

*Creaking open. The cut has snapped off the robust Adon Olam, leaving sepulchral quiet.*

*Danny clutching his kiddush [sic] cup, hesitantly enters the dim study. Marshak’s elderly Eastern European gatekeeper closes the door behind him.*

*Marshak is an old man staring at him from behind a bare desktop. His look, eyes magnified by thick glasses, is impossible to read.*

*Danny creeps to the chair facing the desk. He gingerly sits on the squeaking leather upholstery, self-conscious under Marshak’s stare.*

*Marshak’s slow, regular, phlegmy mouth-breathing is the only sound in the room.*

*A long beat. The two stare at each other.*

*Marshak smacks his lips a couple of times, wetting surfaces in preparation for speech [sic].*

*Another beat.*

*Finally:*

MARSHAK

**When the truth is found. To be lies.**

*He pauses. He clears his throat.*

*At length:*

**... And all the hope. Within you dies.**

*Another beat. Danny waits. Marshak stares.*

*He smacks his lips again. He thinks.*

**... Then what?**

*Danny doesn't answer. It is unclear whether answer is expected.*

*Quiet.*

*Marshak clears his throat with a loud and thorough hawking.*

*The hawking abates. Marshak sniffs.*

**... Grace Slick. Marty Balin. Paul Kanta. Jorma ... somethin'. These are the membas of the Airplane.**

*He nods a couple of times.*

**... Interesting.**

*He reaches up and slowly opens his desk drawer. He withdraws something. He lays it on the bare desk and pushes it across.*

**... Here.**

*It is Danny's radio.*

**... Be a good boy.**

The scene builds on a number of things found out earlier in the film, chief among them that Danny was listening to his transistor radio—and listening to the Airplane song the rabbi quotes—in Hebrew class in the opening scene of the film. The contrast with the preceding scene is instructive. Immediately preceding Danny's descent into the sanctum sanctorum of the Rabbi's study, he has been at his thoroughly hilarious Bar

Mitzvah in a contemporary synagogue, replete with Torah bearers who swear by saying “Jesus Christ” under the weight of the scrolls and a marijuana high Danny trying to remember the Hebrew he must read from the Torah. The Coens build the humor of the scene around the incongruity between the seriousness of Danny’s parents (and presumably anyone in the audience who might think such a scene serious and reflecting an important spiritual reality) and the absurdity of the actual event.

And so Danny comes to the Rabbi, and we think he will get the words of truth that will give us the answers to all the difficulties he will face in life, and by extension those his father has faced throughout the film and we the viewers face in our own lives. And what do we get? “...the Airplane. Interesting. ...Be a good boy”.

To reinforce narratively their message about the irrationality of life, the Coens open the movie with a scene from centuries earlier, in which a woman stabs a man she thinks is a dybbuk inhabiting a dead man’s body, and they close it with everyone standing outside watching an impending tornado bearing down on Larry’s town. Not only is the tornado coming, but “Somebody to Love”, which has played throughout the soundtrack, suddenly blares after the cut to black: “your eyes, I say your eyes may look like his [yeah]/but in your head baby I’m afraid you don’t know where it is”. In the tradition of *Barton Fink*, *Fargo*, and *No Country for Old Men*, *A Serious Man* preaches the nihilism of an absurd universe without God. The Coen Brothers’ solution to this truth is to laugh, even if we can’t laugh too loudly due to our tears. What else can we do?

Next is the animated film *Up*, only the second animated film to be nominated for best picture in the history of the awards. Pixar does it again. The company is distinctive because of their knack for telling children’s stories in ways adults love to watch. *Up* is not their best cinematically. Its story drags in the middle, and it is thoroughly predictable. A second viewing does not pay off as well as other Pixar

movies do (cf. e.g. *The Incredibles*); BUT the montage at the beginning of the film is one of the great, moving set pieces of all-time. I weep every time I see it.

The story revolves around an old man, Carl Fredricksen, who in trying to fulfill a life-long dream of adventure in South America discovers he cannot do it alone. A lovely film about relationships, the thrill of adventure, but the importance of the recognition of adventure in the normal things of life, *Up* is a movie for everyone. Speaking of race, Pixar movies have been criticized for being too white, and *Up* is not an exception. Pixar often avoids this problem by having toys, bugs, animals, fish, robots or cars as main characters most of the time; this film has a hilarious sub-theme of dogs who can talk. The so-called racism of *Up* seems a minor point, however, and no one is complaining about it because Carl and Russell are characters anyone could inhabit.

I mentioned the theme of the importance of recognizing life as an adventure, not needing to create one, but *Up* emphasizes other wholesome values as well. The importance of family, of doing what is right, not just what you want or is most comfortable for you; looking hard to find the right adventure, not settling too easily on what is apparent—all these contribute to a film that by its success says a lot of good things about American culture at the present time.

The last film of the ten is another serious film with comedic elements, *Up in the Air*. Directed by Jason Reitman (*Thank You For Smoking*, *Juno*), *Up in the Air* has a theme we will discuss in a minute that seems to be Reitman's philosophy of life and fits with several of the other movies we've looked at. However, there are intriguing technical and background elements about this film, which need to be discussed first. George Clooney is the best he's ever been as an actor; once again he has shown how good he is as a comic actor and that, given the right direction, he can be a great dramatic actor, too.

Interestingly, every part in this screenplay was written for the actor that plays it; Reitman had them in mind, when he wrote it, asked them to do it, and they accepted.

The song at end of the credits was given to Reitman by a 50 year old man, when Reitman did a speech in St. Louis; the device of its being left on Reitman's answering machine by an aspiring song writer who was out of work is thus only partly true. Except for a few known actors, most single shot job losers portrayed in the movie are real people from Detroit and St. Louis who were told they were being shot for a documentary. That leads us to recounting the story briefly.

*Up in the Air* is about a man who has the job of being hired out by big corporations to conduct multiple staff firings. Every day he is in another city confronting another group of people with the bad news that they are no longer employed at their companies. He copes with the obvious stress of this job by being rootless and relationless himself; he only feels alive when he is on the move. He loves airplanes and airports and his single goal in life is to become the seventh person ever to get to 10M frequent flier miles on American Airlines. Circumstances cause him to meet two women along the way who help him see how empty his own life is, and his voyage of self-discovery forms the narrative arc of the movie.

One of the interesting questions raised by this film is how we can consider job loss comedic. Reitman began writing the script seven years ago and conceived of it as a comedy. However, he was unable to get the funding, and went on to other projects. He did *Thank You for Smoking* and *Juno*, and the success of those two made him able to turn back to this script and be able to work on it with more hope that it would be made. By the time he got to it again, though, the economy had changed so dramatically that he changed tone to make it a topical drama, not a comedy, and so we have this serious exploration of the humanness of job loss and the need for relationships. Though George

Clooney, a well-known political activist, is associated with the film, it demonstrates no real political controversy, just an active awareness of the social problem of job loss in America at the present time.

Perhaps the most important question in the film is raised in a scene, when Ryan Bingham, Clooney's character, attends his younger sister's wedding and has to talk his future brother-in-law into going through with the wedding when he gets cold feet on the wedding day. The conversation is not a standard one, and takes a deeply philosophical turn, when the young man tells Bingham that he began to go through the whole scenario of his future and ended up wondering, if we just die at the end, "What's the point?" Bingham has no answer to that question, but his response indicates where the film is coming from: "There is no point. But isn't life better with company?" One can almost hear "Somebody to love" playing in the background of this movie, too.

There are other, smaller ideas presented in the film. One thematic question that no one has mentioned revolves around the film's attitude toward the character of Alex, Bingham's love interest. What is the morality of portraying her as having it so together and yet so easily indulging herself in her relationship with Clooney? I don't want to ruin the movie completely for those who haven't seen it, but she is in the end one of the most problematic characters in the movie for us to like, though the viewer loves her for most of the film.

Other themes the movie addresses are the consumer motivation of our society (we must move to the next 10M mile goal!); the question of place and stability versus freedom and movement and their places in the human psyche; and the generation gap such as it exists today, wonderfully explored in the Natalie character who knows the truth about our need for relationships but is totally corrupted by an internet consumer, ad-driven model of perfection in her conceptions about relationship.

And so to summarize. There are so many themes to deal with in this year's movies, it is impossible to discuss them all, but two major thoughts emerge. As for the large theme of ultimate reality and meaning, the Academy Award nominees for 2009 continue a trend we saw last year away from the pure despair of what I called "the technically excellent, but frighteningly anarchic group of 2007 films", which included movies like *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will Be Blood*. Nevertheless, the same view of God persists: He is apparently not there, and, if He is, He is completely silent on the human condition. Only two films of the ten stand clearly against that viewpoint, and they give radically different answers to the question of who that God is. *Avatar* posits an Eastern pantheism, equating God with Nature. *The Blind Side*, though muted, offers the hope that Christianity teaches of the personal God Who reaches down to us in love, no matter what our condition. It could be said, too, that *Up* speaks of divine aid metaphorically, and this is not just wish-fulfillment. The number of high angle shots (the so-called "divine perspective"), the number of times the wind intrudes to effect change in the plot, preventing Carl from doing the wrong thing and aiding him in doing the right, and the very name of the movie may well be indicators of a benevolent, divine presence, but, if so, it is so muted one wouldn't be able to discern it without the clear statement of one of the filmmakers.

But more prevalent in the films is a notion that human beings are ultimately all we have to depend on, and we can't depend on them very much. The hopelessness of the "There is no point" scene in *Up in the Air*, the biting sarcasm of the religious non-answers found in *A Serious Man*, the depressing "education" of *An Education* involving no education about God, the ultra violent revenge of *Inglourious Basterds* (no reference here to "Vengeance is mine; I will repay, says the Lord"), the lack of any serious appeal to the church in *Precious*, even though that has always been, and is now, a source of

great strength in the African-American community, and the lack of any mention of, much less appeal to, God in the midst of the troubles in *District 9*—all these offer another, darker, and more prevalent side to where America may be philosophically at the present time on the question of God.

Secondly, though the smaller themes of the importance of relationship, of home and family being positive elements of life, of doing what is right, even if it is at great self-sacrifice, of the plasticity of consumer or corporation-dominated life, of the joy and benefit of art and adventure—all these are handled in relatively Christian ways in my opinion in many of the films this year. We can be grateful for the beauty and grace of an *Avatar*, even if it is in praise of the wrong God. *The Blind Side*, again, speaks for itself with its close-knit family, its “tough love” mother, and its characters being willing to risk the comfort of their home and family to include the person in need. *District 9* continues the theme of self-sacrifice, as do *Precious*, *Up* and in its own way, *The Hurt Locker*. The only films that seem almost completely out of the orbit of Christian truth are *A Serious Man*, *Inglourious Basterds*, and *Up In the Air*, and even *Up In the Air* has wonderful lessons of the importance of caring for others at their most vulnerable times in life, of the recognition of our responsibility as part of the human community.

The movies nominated for best picture in 2009 are an interesting mixture of American values, of Christian values, of pagan values, of secularist values. I hope this has given you some insight into our society and what those nominees say about it, and I look forward to discussing these things further with you. Thank you.

**TABLES OF INTEREST FOR MOVIE TALK, 2010**

Recent Nominees for AA for Best Picture (Winner given first and in bold print)

- 1995: **Braveheart**; Apollo 13; Babe; Il Postino; Sense and Sensibility
- 1996: **The English Patient**; Fargo; Jerry Maguire; Secrets & Lies; Shine
- 1997: **Titanic**; As Good As It Gets; The Full Monty; Good Will Hunting; L.A. Confidential
- 1998: **Shakespeare In Love**; Elizabeth; Life Is Beautiful; Saving Private Ryan; The Thin Red Line
- 1999: **American Beauty**; The Cider House Rules; The Green Mile; The Insider; The Sixth Sense
- 2000: **Gladiator**; Chocolat ; Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon; Erin Brockovich; Traffic
- 2001: **A Beautiful Mind**; Gosford Park; In the Bedroom; The Lord of the Rings: The Fellowship of the Ring; Moulin Rouge
- 2002: **Chicago**; The Hours; The Pianist; The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers; Gangs of New York
- 2003: **The Lord of the Rings: The Return of the King**; Lost in Translation; Master and Commander; Mystic River; Seabiscuit
- 2004: **Million Dollar Baby**; The Aviator; Finding Neverland; Ray; Sideways
- 2005: **Crash**; Brokeback Mountain; Capote; Good Night, and Good Luck; Munich
- 2006: **The Departed**; Babel; Letters from Iwo Jima; Little Miss Sunshine; The Queen
- 2007: **No Country for Old Men**; Atonement; Juno; Michael Clayton; There Will Be Blood
- 2008: **Slumdog Millionaire**; The Curious Case of Benjamin Button; Frost/Nixon; Milk; The Reader
- 2009: **The Hurt Locker**; Avatar; The Blind Side; District 9; An Education; Inglourious Basterds; Precious; A Serious Man; Up; Up in the Air

**2009 Nominees Domestic Box Office Stats per Box Office Mojo. Three are in the top 10; all are in the top 150.**

TITLE	GROSS	BUDGET	% PROFIT
<i>Avatar</i> (#1)	\$525,947,000	\$300,000,000	175%
<i>The Blind Side</i> (#8)	\$241,979,020	\$29,000,000	834%
<i>District 9</i> (#27)	\$115,646,235	\$30,000,000	385%
<i>An Education</i> (#141)	\$9,622,621	\$7,500,000	128%
<i>The Hurt Locker</i> (#130)	\$12,671,105	\$15,000,000	84%
<i>Inglourious Basterds</i> (#25)	\$120,540,719	\$70,000,000	172%
<i>Precious: Based on the Novel "Push" by Sapphire</i> (#65)	\$46,184,986	\$10,000,000	462%
<i>A Serious Man</i> (#144)	\$9,228,768	DNA	DNA
<i>Up</i> (#4)	\$293,004,164	\$175,000,000	167%
<i>Up in the Air</i> (#51)	\$65,343,179	\$25,000,000	261%

**2009 DOMESTIC BOX OFFICE FIGURES (ROUNDED UP OR DOWN. AS OF FEB 10, 2010).** Last year the top ten made \$2.5B. This year the top ten have already made \$3.1B. BO overall was way up (10%) with an all-time record \$10.6B, and ticket sales were up 7.5%, the highest total since 2004.

- | Rank | Gross  | Movie   |
|------|--------|---|
| 1.   | \$634M | <a href="#">Avatar</a>                                  |
| 2.   | \$402M | <a href="#">Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen</a>     |
| 3.   | \$302M | <a href="#">Harry Potter and the Half-Blood Prince</a>  |
| 4.   | \$294M | <a href="#">The Twilight Saga: New Moon</a>             |
| 5.   | \$293M | <a href="#">Up</a>                                      |
| 6.   | \$277M | <a href="#">The Hangover</a>                            |
| 7.   | \$258M | <a href="#">Star Trek</a>                               |
| 8.   | \$242M | <a href="#">The Blind Side</a>                          |
| 9.   | \$212M | <a href="#">Alvin and the Chipmunks: The Squeakquel</a> |
| 10.  | \$202M | <a href="#">Sherlock Holmes</a>                         |