

AMERICA AND THE MOVIES

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

I am glad to be here, and honored. I spent some time with Ben this summer in the exotic venues of Oxford and Cambridge, but it was on the bus ride between the two where we got to share our visions and see the similarities between the two. I am excited about what is happening here at Arizona State and look forward to seeing what comes of your efforts. I'm sure you realize the opportunity you have.

And it is an opportunity to study, as Karl Barth once put it, the two Bibles. One, and in many ways the most important one is the Holy Scripture, which tells us clearly of the great story of Creation, Fall, Redemption and Consummation, the story by which all stories are measured for their truth, goodness and beauty. But the second, the book of Nature, rounds out that story, and is important, too, in its own way. Nature in its broadest sense includes everything human and finite. Among so much else, it gives us the record of humanity's attempts to understand the reality in which God has placed us, whether that humanity understands the biblical story or not.

And that is why we study the great novels, short stories and films of humankind: to see how humanity understands itself and to compare that understanding to the reality we find proclaimed in the Bible. Without those stories, we would have to go through the experiences of fallen humanity to be able to sympathize with them, and we don't want to have to do that, unless we have a screw loose somewhere in our brain. Just one of the many reasons thinking about and discussing movies is an important part, I think, of being a Christian in late modern America.

And that is what I hope we will do today. This is the eleventh 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.

Because two years ago, the Academy changed the number of nominees from five to ten, we better get going. My expectation is that many of you will have seen most, if not all of the films; this is one of the reasons I enjoy doing this talk so many months after the awards are history. I will give only the briefest of introductions to the basic content of the films, though I will still discuss the ten in alphabetical order and give one or two themes I think are of interest to us as those who are interested in film and American societal norms. Even cutting out some of the material, I will say more about some films than I will about others. Please feel free to make up for my omissions by asking questions about the movies or ideas you'd like to discuss. After this runthrough, I will then summarize what I've said and then let's have a discussion. In fact, I think it might be fine, if we make this a discussion from the beginning, if you will allow me to call the question when I think we have been on one point long enough.

Our first nominee illustrates how difficult it is for Hollywood to name a picture; this is one of the worst names a nominee has had since I have been studying these things. (What is it with Danny Boyle and numbers? *28 Days Later*, *28 Weeks Later*, *Millions*, *Slumdog Millionaire*...). Anyway, **127 Hours** is the story of Aron Ralston, a 27 year old climber, who has an accident in a Utah canyon, falling into a crevice where his arm is pinned beneath a boulder. In the end he has to amputate the arm in order to free himself and save his life. Of course the title of the movie reflects how long he was held fast to the canyon wall, which, when you do the math, is five days and seven hours. Like a number of the films this year, the drama in the story does not flow from the question of whether Aron will survive; this is a relatively true story and most watching

the film will know he does. The drama comes from finding out what he experienced while secured and what motivated him to perform such a gruesome and painful act in order to survive.

Where *127 Hours* is important for us is in fact just where we want it to be: its values. Ralston, when the accident first happens, tries everything to free himself. He is an experienced climber (he works in an Outdoors store) and everything from tying off his arm with a tourniquet to drinking his own urine keeps him alive longer than many of us probably would have survived. But after five days of this, knowing no one knows where he is and having not even heard the slightest human noise, he begins to say his good-byes to the camcorder he used throughout the film to record his thoughts. He has visions of his family and friends sitting on a couch in front of him, and he poignantly talks to them, thanking them for this, apologizing for that. These acknowledgements are interspersed with flashbacks of memories of events in his life, each sad and moving in its own way. But Aron has given up and now he is going to die.

Suddenly, he has a vision of a small boy sitting alone on the couch. The boy has not appeared in the movie before, but he looks vaguely like Aron. One version of the screenplay makes it clear who the boy is. The scene is not in the final film, but Aron, after he gets out, visits his old girl friend and tells her about the boy. He says,

ARON

Rana, when I was in the canyon, before I did it, when I thought I was dead, I was hallucinating and I saw this child, a little blond boy –

RANA

Not Jesus please...

ARON

He looked like my cousin Charlie, actually, but way too young...not him. Somebody else.

Aron stands up injects some conviction, forces her to concentrate on him.

ARON (CONT'D)

I knew he was mine—my child—and that this was what lay in front of me. My future. Rana, this little boy, he, he saved me. Do you see?

In the film, the vision Aron has is of him—Aron—putting the boy on his shoulders (he's free!) and laughing with him. Suddenly, Aron has a burst of energy, breaks the bones in his arm, which he has not been able to saw through with the dull blade he had with him, cuts the rest of his flesh, tendons and nerves away, and he is free. It is important to say that Hollywood interjects its love for playing fast and loose with history at this point. In fact, the real Aron has the vision of the boy the evening before he suddenly realizes a strategy for getting free.

But that doesn't matter, not only because it is the film we are discussing and its ability to move us or not, but also because Aron does attribute an importance to the little boy in his book. A coda at the end of the film shows the real Aron Ralston on the same couch we have seen in the visions with his real wife, whom he met within a year after the accident, and their little baby son, who was born shortly before the film was made.

~~Last year's nominee *An Education* spoke to the importance of family in a poignant way, but this film highlights the deep, lasting impact strong family ties can have, when life gets desperate. Aron's father, played by Treat Williams, appears in a number of flashbacks as loving and caring for his son, in one of them teaching him some of the rudimentary aspects of camping. Aron's mother emerges as even more important to him and is portrayed in the early draft mentioned above as reading the Bible at his bedside, when he is recovering. Though this scene did not make the final cut, Aron several times in the movie apologizes to his mother for not returning her calls, and, clearly, his canyon experience—the premonition of his son—flows from his own happy family life and a desire to have a family of his own.~~

Family figures in several of the nominees this year. Most prominent is of course the discussion of the definition of what a family is, prompted by the events of *The Kids Are All Right*, but *Inception*, *The King's Speech*, *Black Swan*, *The Fighter*, *True Grit*, *Winter's Bone*, and even *Toy Story 3* in addition to *127 Hours* could all be said to have as a major subtext the importance of the family for human happiness or, alternatively, misery.

A key component of the tension in *Black Swan*, for instance, is the mother / daughter relationship between the main character, Nina, played by Natalie Portman, and her mother, Erica, a "glittering eyed loon" as Dana Stevens, reviewing the film in *Slate*, called her. The story revolves around a ballerina, who is a member of the New York City Lincoln Center ballet and achieves her life-long desire: the lead of the Swan Queen in Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*. Nina still lives at home and is subjected to a steady diet of subtle (and sometimes not so subtle!) psychological abuse by Erica. The idea of Nina as a perpetual child, even though she is in her mid-twenties in the film, is underscored by a bedroom fully done in frilly pink and filled to overflowing with stuffed animals.

But overprotection only gets at part of the problem. Erica regularly reminds her daughter—mostly through innuendo but clear enough to the viewer—that Nina is the reason her mother was denied a career in dance since the mother got pregnant with Nina and had her rather than continuing dancing.

Played by Barbara Hershey, Erica is not without her subtleties as a character. She does genuinely love her daughter as much as she is capable: she buys her a celebration cake, when she learns Nina has gotten the role of the Swan Queen; she is present at her opening night performance, applauding enthusiastically with everyone else at her triumph; and she is there for Nina regularly, when Nina's body abuse becomes dangerous. In an earlier script of the movie, Erica is portrayed far more one-sidedly in

her doting on her daughter, constantly giving her more stuffed animals, cooing at her with baby talk. Nevertheless, the overbearing side of Erica is conspicuous in the finished film, and Nina's dark descent into madness owes much to her dysfunctional family life.

If dysfunctional family life hovers over *Black Swan*, far more does the theme of the tension for an artist between the pursuit of perfection and the importance of letting go. The part of the Swan Queen is really two parts, the White Swan—pristine, lovely, chaste—and the Black Swan—evil, seductive, strong. Nina has no trouble convincing Thomas (Vincent Cassel), the company director that she can do the part of the White Swan, but he is downright sarcastic, when he talks to her about the role of the Black Swan. As he puts it, "I don't want a prim little school-girl pretending to be sexy. That would be distasteful, don't you think?" He pushes her and pushes her paradoxically to let go and feel the dark emotions she has beneath the surface, unaware of how chaotic and dangerous they actually are. Similarly, her doppelgänger, Lily, a member of the company who attempts to befriend Nina tries to help her "live a little" and only succeeds in pushing her toward a Black Swan that becomes for Nina not just a role but a maniacal fixation.

Nina becomes so obsessed with the part of the Black Swan that she begins to grow feathers and sprout wings in her demented imagination, and she murders and destroys, as she takes on the evil psychological make-up of the dark side. Nina reaches her goal of being perfect, of achieving the ideal performance of the two-sided persona, though at great cost. Nina never finds the second side of great art, the side where, after practicing and practicing and practicing, one lets go, where one stops striving, and simply acknowledges one's finitude before the magic of the performance.

So we have discovered two themes of this year's films so far: family and the pursuit of perfection. Both undergird the next film, too, but in a completely different way than in *Black Swan*. Far from a "psycho-sexual thriller", as *Black Swan's* marketing campaign describes it, *The Fighter* is the so-called "passion project" of Mark Wahlberg, the lead actor and producer of the movie. *The Fighter* deeply explores family and the way it can affect the road to success in life. Two of the movie's chief characters—Wahlberg's character Micky's half-brother Dicky, played by Academy Award winner Christian Bale, and Micky's mother Alice, also played in an Academy Award winning performance by Melissa Leo—subvert Micky even though they love him because they want him to win the title so badly. Micky's girl friend, Charlene, played remarkably by Amy Adams, helps him create space from them, but when the friction becomes too much, advises him to leave their care and trust her and his trainer for his fights. In a moving, climactic scene, Micky insists on keeping everyone on his team and begs them to work together. He tells them that he needs his "old" family and his "new" one to win, and his trust in all of them proves a valuable key to his success. The movie is a triumph of family love, dysfunctional as it might be, taking priority over success or anything else this world has to offer.

~~Micky's attitude toward his family is not the only illustration of the importance and complexity of family relationships in the movie. One of the most moving scenes in the film is when Alice goes looking for Dicky, who once again has fallen to the temptation of crack cocaine, a temptation that ruined his own career as a boxer. When she finds him, she is deeply angry with him, but she can't sustain that anger, when he begins singing the Beegees song "I Started a Joke", a lesser eighties tune that obviously was a favorite of theirs together when Dicky was a child. Suddenly, the harsh, despicably overbearing Alice becomes a tender, loving, struggling Mom and the slimy,~~

~~self-absorbed brother becomes the sad, happy-go-lucky son, and we get a window into how people can put up with anything with these two because of the love hidden deep inside them. It is an extraordinary scene in its economy and flawless acting, and it says something we all know about families. However dysfunctional they sometimes are, they are still your family.~~

I said *The Fighter* also is about striving for perfection, but that is not quite true. It is about striving to be somebody, striving to be a champion. Nothing could be more American. Much of the time I was watching the film, the famous dialogue was running through my head from *On the Waterfront* when Terry (Marlon Brando) says to his brother Charley (Rod Steiger)—“You shoulda looked out for me a little bit, Charley. ...I coulda had class. I coulda been a contender. I coulda been somebody, instead of a bum, which is what I am”. Micky’s desire and potential to go either way is the same, and, though the context is quite different since the characters in *The Fighter* don’t throw their fights, the idea of Micky’s brother and mother not watching out for him, forcing him not only to train and work on his body but manage his career, too, fits *On the Waterfront*’s theme exactly.

Hard work, striving for excellence, and winning the championship is part of the American dream, and this year’s films have no shortage of that theme. *127 Hours*, *Black Swan*, *The Fighter*, *The King’s Speech* and especially *The Social Network* are all filled with athletic themes and metaphors and winning in every imaginable sphere of life: sports, the arts, family, business. The interesting thing is the ambivalent attitude Hollywood seems to have toward the idea, sometimes praising it, sometimes showing obsession with it to be the problem, sometimes at least implying that the desire to win—to be first above all others—is itself an evil. In *The King’s Speech*, a grand story of personal triumph, King George VI conquers his disability, a severe stutter, and it makes for one

of the great stories of victory in Hollywood history. Similarly, *The Fighter* revolves around Micky's winning the championship, though both films are about far more than simple victory. As we have seen, *127 Hours* and *Black Swan* both show that, under certain circumstances personal success can be dangerous and counterproductive, *127 Hours* when one gets too cocky and careless of possible hazards, and *Black Swan*, when one gets too obsessed with perfect mastery. In *The Social Network*, the problem is the desire for pure exclusivity, of standing at the top above all others. More about that when we discuss the David Fincher film.

Let's turn first to *Inception*, the most complex and curious of the nominees. But *Inception* is not just a special effects extravaganza. The acting is superb, and one more stellar ensemble cast shows why this year was just an incredible year for going to the movies. Leonardo DiCaprio, Ellen Page (*Juno*), and Marion Cotillard are the big names in the cast, but everyone adds to the perfect atmosphere of the film from Pete Postlethwaite playing the bedridden, dying father in the last year of his own life to Cillian Murphy, Ken Watanabe and Tom Berenger playing the wealthy industrialists combating each other in their dreams. Complex, but effective editing, magnificent cinematography, and detailed multiple sets from ice fortresses to underwater scenes inside a sinking van to exotic middle eastern and Parisian outdoor sets contribute to a project that is just excellent in every way.

As for theme, *Inception* returns to a now familiar one: family and its influence on our behavior. *Inception* is part love story, part bildungsfilm. Cobb, played by DiCaprio, is the focus of the majority of the thematic attention in the film. His relationship with Mal, Cotillard's character and Cobb's wife, forms both the inspiration and the threat to the success of his venture; Mal appears in his dreams and attempts to destroy his plans as part of her way to force him to remain in the dream world she believes in reality.

Great chemistry between DiCaprio and Cotillard helps convince the viewer that a major motivation for Cobb is his love for Mal.

And his love seems to support a traditional notion of marriage. Cobb and Mal are portrayed as deeply in love throughout the movie. They descend into the dream world together and build a world of their own, in dream-time living there for many years. Eventually, Cobb plants a thought inside Mal's head that their dream world is the real world; it is his success at doing this that makes him sure he will be able to perform an inception on the victim in the film. Unfortunately, it is this inception that proves the undoing of their marriage because Mal kills herself in an attempt to show Cobb that the real world is actually a dream world, since when one dies in a dream world, one simply awakens in the real world.

Now that you are thoroughly confused, let me come back to the point: Cobb and Mal are so deeply in love they enjoyed a world in which they were the only two people. How many marriages today can say the same? Actually, I hope not too many because that kind of marriage is a selfish one indeed, but it does contain a grain of truth. Married love certainly contains the notion of duty, of loyalty to one's spouse, even when he or she is driving you up a wall. But married love in Scripture just as clearly requires desire for the other's company in addition to that duty, and when one of these aspects, duty or desire, is out of balance with the other is when a couple begins to depart from Biblical, Christian marriage. Suffice it to say that *Inception* does at least portray a lovely depth of desire for one another in the relationship between Cobb and Mal.

As great as Cobb's love for Mal is, though, even greater is his love for his children. Like Aron Ralston in *127 Hours*, Cobb goes to enormously dangerous lengths to reclaim his fatherhood; visions of his children playing outside in one of his own

memories are a regular spur to continue on, when all hope seems lost. The movie ends with Cobb holding his children again, oblivious to the spinning top on the table that will tell him whether or not he is in the real or the dream world. It has become irrelevant; he is reunited with his children. *Inception* proclaims a deeply encouraging view of the family as its main theme in both its parenting and its marriage aspects, and Christians should be more aware of this film than they seem to have been.

And so to the major “family” film of this year’s nominees, an indie called *The Kids Are All Right*. One of the darlings of last year’s Sundance Film Festival, *Kids* was written and directed by Lisa Cholodenko, who with her partner, musician Wendy Melvoin, used a sperm donor to have a family, as the two “Moms” do in *Kids*. The dramatic tension in *Kids* arises when the two now teen-aged kids in the family seek out and befriend their sperm donor father, played in an Academy nominated performance by Mark Ruffalo. Complicated relationships ensue—an affair, friendships, multiple kinds of parental advice—yet always at the center is the question, What is a family anyway?

The two “moms” in the film, Nic, a workaholic/almost alcoholic doctor, played by Annette Bening and Jules, the laid-back birth mother, played by Julianne Moore are both well written and well acted. Importantly, Nic comes across as the bread winning, hard nosed “Dad” in the relationship, while Jules, who, at Nic’s insistence, has given up her career to “raise” the kids comes across as the more female of the two.

Interestingly, Cholodenko doesn’t appear to have intended this distinction. In a short film, put out on the Focus Features website and describing the construction of Nic’s character, the movie’s costume designer, Marie Clare Hannan, says, “She [Cholodenko] didn’t want to make Jules too *femme*, and Nic masculine, she didn’t want to go there, she wanted it to just be two women, you know, working women mom and

a working woman and you know just make it [the clothing design] really simple..." The almost complete incoherence of this reference to Cholodenko's vision demonstrates how difficult it must have been on Cholodenko to make the family atmosphere accessible to the viewer and yet try to present two *femme* characters. And in fact she did not succeed in the latter because she can't get away from a simple fact: a family needs the balance that a female and a male bring to the family structure.

Kids does in the end advocate a definition of family that actually supports a more traditional family model, while arguing that two biological women [and presumably two biological men] can play the roles of Mom and Dad and raise healthy, normal children in the process. Apparently, the sociological research that has been done so far is a long way from proving anything in terms of how "healthy" and "normal" the children of gay parents actually are, and of course there is much more for a Christian to be said on this topic in terms of family structures as they are mandated in Scripture.

Be that as it may, *The Kids Are All Right* is remarkable in its ability to present the family life of the main characters as a normal family. The movie's dialogue contains the same arguments, the same tender statements, the same apologies that regular family life contains and in the climactic scene, when Ruffalo's Paul has the door slammed in his face with Nic's parting shot, "If you want a family so much, go out and make one of your own," the viewer can't help but agree with her. Paul has been an interloper, likable as he is, and he doesn't deserve to consider those children his, or this family his. Whatever one thinks of the social statement *The Kids Are All Right* is trying to make, it should be granted that the idea of the family presented in the film is realistic and, indeed, admirable.

We can talk more about this later, if you want, but let me just drop a small thought in your head. We as Christians need to realize that the question of individual

sexual preference is a different one from the question of family structure and what works in the social unit of the family. It seems to me that it is possible to be opposed personally to homosexual activity, thinking it an aberration of God's intention for humankind, while not thinking that families overseen by gay parents are necessarily destructive. There's a small question for you...

The next film in our list is the one that in fact won Best Picture honors. *The King's Speech* is of course the story of George VI's accession to the throne of England in the middle of the 20th century after his brother Edward abdicated to pursue marriage to an American divorcee named Wallace Simpson. Unfortunately, England is on the brink of war when Edward VIII abdicates, and George is asked not only to step in and fill the role of a figurehead, but also to lead his people and inspire them in what will surely be dark days ahead. As the film makes clear, this is now done via the radio, or the "wireless" as they called it then, and here surfaces the problem of the film: George has a severe stutter, surely death in any speech he might try, especially over the radio. *The King's Speech* gets its title from the fact that on Sept 3, 1939, George was able to give just such an inspiring speech, and the film shows how he got there.

So how does George VI move from being an embarrassing stammerer ~~of the opening scene in which he tries unsuccessfully to give the closing speech at the Empire Exhibition in Wembley Stadium, London~~ to being the inspiring leader of his nation? The answer can perhaps be boiled down to one word: friendship.

Some time in the late 20's or early 30's of the last century, the Duchess of York (soon to be Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother) finds a speech therapist named Lionel Logue in a dingy set of rooms in Harley Street, and convinces the then Duke of York to come for the first of his sessions with the therapist. The Duke has to submit to the rules Logue has set up because his method is based squarely on two things, as he tells the

then Duchess at their first meeting: "I can cure your husband. But for my method to work there must be trust and total equality in the safety of my consultation room. No exceptions."

"Trust" and "total equality" are both tested severely throughout the course of the movie. A revelation about Logue's credentials near the end of the movie provides the main illustration of the test of trust, but Logue's perseverance and unwavering dedication to seeing the King cured proves for the most part unassailable. Bertie, as Logue and George VI's family called him, tests Logue's trust as well, though not as deeply. Bertie's larger failure is his trust of himself, a trust that Lionel has from the start. Logue adamantly insists both that George can triumph over his disability and that George will have to forget his past and trust that he can be King, and a great one, to do so. Lionel's friendship, hard won but strong, helps George get there in the end, but the ultimate test is in front of the microphone, just the King and his speech. With all Logue's help mouthing words and waving his arms to keep the King moving forward, when George triumphs, he does so on his own.

The "total equality" rule is another matter altogether. The Duke of York balks strongly at the idea and in fact leaves their first session declaring it will be his last. During that first session, several times the Duke bristles at Logue's insistence that the royal prince consider him the prince's equal; Bertie's disdain for the idea is not even thinly concealed. He makes disparaging comments about Logue's methods, his economic status and his Australian heritage, but Logue allows all that to bounce off him, as a friend would. When the prince decides this relationship is "not for me" as he puts it, Logue nevertheless gives him a parting gift, a recording that he has made of Bertie reading Hamlet while distracted by loud classical music playing through

earphones Bertie is wearing. Later, Bertie listens to the recording and hears himself reading "To be, or not to be" flawlessly and returns for more instruction.

Nevertheless, the class and status differences remain in the relationship until very late in therapy, and they do so not so much because the therapy does not go well, or even because the duke would not like to be Logue's friend. They remain because he simply doesn't know what it means to have a friend, much less a commoner, who is equal to him. At one point, Logue actually does overstep his bounds and again, the relationship is on the rocks, but for the most part he does a magnificent job of simply teaching the future King what benefit having a friend, and trusting that friend, can be for living life, whether it be illustrated in overcoming a stammer or sharing one's deepest fears. At the end of the movie, when the King has delivered his speech in triumph, and after the banter necessary to relieve the tension of such an awesome occasion, he turns to Logue, extends his hand and says, "Thank you, my friend." Logue in reply steps back two steps, bows slightly and, for the first time in the film, says "Thank you, ...your majesty." Now that the trust and the task are complete, they can be both equal friends *and* king and subject.

This brief recounting does not begin to tell the depth and sophistication of this film's investigation into friendship and its healing qualities. "Trust" and "total equality" are important, but also a common task, a joviality and comfort with one another, each man's personal courage, their shared interests in everything from model airplanes to malt liquor, and most of all the opening to each other of their personal stories and meaningful events in their lives—all play a role in creating their friendship. Aristotle said, "What is a friend? A single soul dwelling in two bodies," and by the end of the film, that is what we see in these two men.

Not so in the next film we will examine. Surprisingly, the main theme of the next film is also friendship, and it is the only other film most believe had even a chance of picking up the Best Picture Oscar. The similarities between the two films are striking: they are both biopics, i.e. true stories of real people; they both feature an individual seeking to become someone great, though by very different means, and they both tell the story of the few years between when the main characters are relatively unknown until the time when they are world famous. But the exploration of friendship in the second film is portrayed entirely in a negative fashion. We learn exactly what not to do, if we seek friendship, from *The Social Network*.

This is of course the “Facebook movie”, David Fincher’s attempt to tell the story of the creation of the social network website, which now has a membership that extends to one in every fourteen people who live on the face of planet earth. Mark Zuckerberg, its central character and the driving force behind the creation of Facebook is, according to Forbes magazine, the world’s youngest ever self-made billionaire, and this is largely his story. It is important to note at this point that Aaron Sorkin, the masterful screenwriter, and Fincher, the director, have followed the story one-sidedly from the perspective of Eduardo Saverin, Facebook’s co-founder and former friend of Zuckerberg who was cut out of Facebook profits by Mark and had to sue for an undisclosed amount and the restoration of his name to the masthead of the company as co-founder. The *Time* magazine cover story on Z, who was their 2010 Person of the Year, paints a very different portrait of Z than that of the film, stating bluntly

The Social Network is a rich, dramatic portrait of a furious, socially handicapped genius who spits corrosive monologues in a monotone to hide his inner pain. This character bears almost no resemblance to the actual Mark Zuckerberg. The reality is much more complicated.

~~but that portrait is also told only from Z's perspective.~~ What Mark Zuckerberg is really like is of course important, but not for learning from and examining the movie so, when I refer to him, it will be as the character in the film, and what resemblance that character bears to the real person is someone else's problem.

The structure of the film revolves around moving back and forth between two depositions in present time and flashbacks chronicling what brought Zuckerberg, his co-founder Eduardo Saverin and the twins—or the “Winklevai” as Mark refers to them—to the state of animosity they are in. The movie explains this reason as Z's obsessive need for recognition, for exclusivity, and for a certain kind of power. Who gets hurt along the way is unimportant; friends are a function of brilliant programming and internet connectivity, not fairness, integrity or mutual love. Important, too, for our understanding of the movie's chief idea is the underlying assumption of what has been thinly called Z's “social awkwardness”, an understatement, if there ever was one.

One could spend an entire lecture on the brilliant opening scene of this film in which Jesse Eisenberg, who plays Z, and Rooney Mara, who plays Erica his girl friend, proceed to spar with each other to the point that Erica finally breaks up with Mark. The scene is unparalleled in its perfect delivery of rapid-fire dialogue, mostly spurred by Mark's stream of consciousness responses, not to his partner but only to his own analytical faculties. As Erica puts it, “sometimes you say two things at once and I'm not sure which one I'm supposed to be aiming at.”

The scene deftly works in the main themes of the movie. When Erica suggests that perhaps they should just be friends, Mark responds, “I don't want friends” and she retorts, “I was being polite; I have no intention of being friends with you.” Discussion of the need to get into a final club, Harvard's equivalent of a fraternity, highlights Mark's obsessions with recognition, exclusivity and power as they discuss Teddy Roosevelt's

membership in the Porcellian and the fact that girls ride into final club parties in buses just to party with a future Fed chairman. The scene ends with Erica completely devastating Mark with a final stinger that is as well-written a put-down as I have heard in a long, long time: "Mark, You are probably going to be a very successful computer person. But you're going to go through life thinking that girls don't like you because you're a nerd. And I want you to know, from the bottom of my heart, that that won't be true. It'll be because you're an asshole."

The movie proceeds to show Zuckerberg, certainly without a prayer from the beginning of getting into a final club, creating a website so successful that, as he says in one of the depositions, addressing a lawyer who is accusing him of being jealous of Eduardo for getting into the Phoenix club, "Ma'am, I know you've done your homework and so you know that money isn't a big part of my life, but at the moment I could buy Mount Auburn Street, take the Phoenix Club and turn it into my ping pong room." He is now recognized everywhere as the youngest self-made billionaire in history, as exclusive and powerful a position as can be imagined.

But the end of the film shows what Fincher and Sorkin think of the acquisition of fame and power, if it must be experienced alone. Again the scene burns indelibly in the memory of the careful viewer. When the depositions are over and the last lawyer has left, Zuckerberg sits alone in the conference room, working on his computer, reflecting for perhaps the only time in the film. Almost absent-mindedly he searches out Erica's Facebook page and sends her a friend request, hitting the refresh button every few seconds to see if she has responded. He sits there still, when the movie ends.

It is a moment both poignant and powerfully telling. One can almost hear the Scripture, "What will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world, and forfeits his soul?" Zuckerberg's shafting of his only friend, his demeaning of his only girl friend, his

single-minded pursuit of what he thinks will make him happy and successful—all these have resulted in a life devoid of anything but success and happiness as a person. Once again, perfection of a sort has been achieved but at a terrible cost.

Next is a film people love to love. The now familiar characters of Woody, Buzz Lightyear, Jesse and the others find themselves in a desperate situation. Their beloved Andy is about to go off to college, and decisions have to be made about his toys. Woody and the rest find themselves by mistake at a day care center run by an evil tyrant bear named Lotso, being subjected to violent play by kids too young to appreciate the toys' special qualities. The story revolves around how they break out of this prison, return to Andy and what happens from there.

Here there are many themes to investigate, but friendship seems to me to rise to the top of yet another movie's main ideas this year. Time is not our ally, so just a brief remark about the film's central character, Woody, the cowboy doll voiced by Tom Hanks. Woody is not only the paradigm for friendship to Andy but also to the other toys. At the end of the film, when Woody has been singled out to go with Andy alone to college, a great honor of course, he nevertheless engineers his circumstances so that he can go with the other toys wherever they will be taken. And he even arranges that: they are taken to the home of Bonnie, a little girl Woody has met, who will play with them and love them and give them the adventures they were meant to experience and help her experience. As Andy is explaining all the special characteristics of each toy to Bonnie, he comes to the end and surprisingly finds Woody in the bottom of the box. He says about Woody, "Now, Woody, he's been my pal for as long as I can remember. He's brave like a cowboy should be, kind and smart. But the thing that makes Woody special, is he'll never give up on you. Ever. He'll be there for you no matter what." There could not be a dry eye in the house.

Aristotle said, "What is a friend? A single soul dwelling in two bodies" and Woody plays that foil for Andy in the picture. When Woody is looking at the photograph of Andy as a boy playing with the toys, the similarity is striking between the two: Andy wears a felt cowboy hat with a leather string around its rim just like Woody's but what really stands out are the smiles and the eyes of the two. They are the mirror image of one another. In Woody, Andy sees his own boyhood, and of course Woody derives his own personality and values from Andy. When Woody looks at the photo again near the end of the picture, his eye strays down to the other toys; he must part from Andy, grow up himself if you will, and offer himself to be played with by Bonnie so he can be a true friend to those who are his real "second selves"—the other toys. There are few characters in all of art as selfless in their presentation of friendship.

The last two movies share a similarity that few have noticed: the empowerment of young women on the frontiers of hardship. *True Grit*, almost considered a cast-off piece by the Coen brothers after their Oscar winning magnum opus *No Country for Old Men* two years ago, and last year's highly personal, semi-autobiographical philosophical triumph, *A Serious Man*, has taken the box office by storm and surprised almost everyone.

This movie, too, has much to say about family, and even more about perseverance, but the story is a subtle one that includes thoughts about justice, revenge and honor that none of the other movies exploring those themes have this year. This is in part due to the deeper, more religious background that the Coens—secular Jews—treat with an unyielding respect in the film. The film begins with a quotation from Proverbs, quotes Scripture and Presbyterian doctrine throughout and ends with a full-throated rendition of the frontier hymn, "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms." Mattie is quite clear: "You must pay for everything in this world, one way and another. There is

nothing free except the grace of God.”

Interesting are the specifically Christian themes; they are so many and so sympathetically introduced that one marvels at “Christian” movie-making being done once again by non-Christians (cf. the great *Chariots of Fire*). Significantly, Matt Damon’s LaBoeuf prays before he shoots Ned Pepper; just a brief invocation—“Lord”—as he takes aim, knowing he has one shot at 400 yards or Rooster Cogburn is dead, but a reverent, humble prayer nonetheless. And it is answered positively; Ned Pepper falls before he can kill Rooster.

Peter Travers refers to the Presbyterian nature of Mattie Ross in his review in *Rolling Stone*, and her demeanor is certainly a strict Christian one. But it is just as much a legalist-with-a-heart demeanor, and it is hard to know what the Coen brothers intend in her character: a sympathetic portrait of a fundamentalist or a legal constructionist. At another point two criminals are holed up in a cabin and, when asked who they are, reply “a Methodist and a son of a bitch”. But later as the young Methodist, “Moon” (played by Dennis Hopper in the original), lies dying, he speaks of going to heaven, and Rooster and Mattie treat him tenderly, if straightforwardly, lamenting that they cannot properly bury him because of the cold.

Mattie is the center of the movie, really, not Cogburn as some would like to believe. It is her pursuit of Chaney and the humor that she brings in shaming men old enough to be her father, which make the picture alive. But is she just or only vengeful? I believe the answer lies in reference to a theme that we have seen shot through the films this year: family. It is Mattie’s desire to honor her father that makes her continue on, no matter what the cost, and it is her perseverance that causes that pursuit to triumph. She loved her father and insists that Tom Chaney be punished at Fort Smith rather than in Texas where LaBoeuf prefers because he gets the reward, if he takes Chaney to Texas,

and doesn't if Chaney is hanged in Arkansas. Mattie of course doesn't care about the money. But she reiterates time and again: "I do not want him to die in Texas for shooting the dog of a Senator. He must die in Arkansas because he shot my father."

In the same way, the central character of our last movie stands as a paradigm of bravery in pursuit of a seemingly unreachable goal for the sake of her family. *Winter's Bone*, perhaps the only truly independent film among this year's nominees, tells the story of Ree Dolly, a seventeen year old girl in the southern Missouri Ozarks, who has a mother who is basically catatonic and two siblings aged 12 and 6 for whom she has complete responsibility. Her father, in and out of trouble, has put their property up as a bond for his release from jail, and he has now disappeared. The film is an odyssey in which Ree, played by relative newcomer Jennifer Lawrence, goes looking for him, and, as the IMDb summary puts it, "hacks through dangerous social terrain" as she does so. Extraordinary performances, particularly by Lawrence but also by John Hawkes as Teardrop Dolly and Dale Dickey as Merab, make this movie deeply enthralling. The searing edginess of mountain poverty, the dangers of backwoods drug dealers, the general rawness of life all find in Ree a heroine to look up to.

Ree's tenacity for good, the depth of her willingness to risk her life derives from several sources, all of them challenging for the Christian. First, and clearly foremost, she recognizes the need her siblings have for her protection and provision of even the most basic things in life. They are allowed to live the life of children, happy with their trampoline, their walks in the woods, their dolls and dogs, but she makes them face their fears, and, slowly, with love, schools them in the way to live in a world that they already know is hard. She cooks for them, drills them on their spelling and oversees their homework. She teaches them how to shoot a gun and skin a squirrel. Poignantly, when her friend Gail asks her what she's doing with "all them guns," Ree matter-of-

factly replies she's "just teaching them a little bit of survival." When their own parents—Ree's parents, too—fail them, she steps in and does the best she can to help them not only survive but live.

Her final words, and the final words of the film, "I ain't goin' anywhere" are a promise to her two siblings not to leave them, not to join the Army. As she puts it "I'd be lost without the weight of you two on my back," but it's not just going away from them that would cause her to be lost. She'd be lost without the woods, bleak and leafless as they are in February and March in that part of the world. She'd be lost without the music, heard from the opening frames of the movie, roots music that can only be spawned in the hills of places like Missouri and Tennessee, symbolized by her father's banjo that her little sister plays at the end of the film, music that speaks of longing and of joy in ways that only old-time folk music can. She is a woman of the land; she knows her world, and longs for no other. Even her feeble attempt to get into the army is only for the purpose of obtaining the \$40,000 promised for joining.

We simply don't have the time to give this extraordinary film its due today; suffice it to say that *Winter's Bone* has not been exceeded in quality by any film this year. Hopeful without ever straying from depicting the grit and gristle of the "hard-knocks life" experienced by its characters, it is a movie not to be missed.

We have been here a long time and said much, so my summary will be brief. As opposed to just a few short years ago, when movies like *No Country for Old Men* and *There Will Be Blood* dominated the Academy's nominees and were filled with existential angst and hopelessness, this year's films contain a great deal more hope and explore themes that reflect American values, which are more positive and, I believe, shared by more of the American people. We have singled out three major ones—family, friendship and perseverance—the power of the first two to motivate, and the goodness

of the last in the pursuit of a dream as long as that perseverance doesn't become an obsession. We as Christians can be grateful for the full exposition in this year's films of these three ideas. They are treated with clarity, care and a great deal of Christian virtue it seems to me.

And yet. Only a single film this year, *True Grit*, has a relatively substantial breath of charitable expression toward the source of the whole human family, God Himself. *The Fighter* contains scenes of both Dickey and Micky praying, and Catholic crosses hang from the walls, but there is nothing in the way of positive affirmation in the film toward the church or even less its Lord. Similarly, *Winter's Bone* seems to acknowledge gently the presence of faith in the lives of the Dolly family; Ree tells the children to get into position to learn how to shoot a rifle, "like you were praying." But this, too, is small comfort.

On the other hand, we have praised *The King's Speech* to high heaven—sorry for the pun so late in the talk—but its view of the church symbolized by the huffy and despicable Archbishop Cosmo Lang is anything but kind. Lang was a controversial figure, and may have been too full of himself, but given that it is so hard to make God a character in any film, Christians must depend on the symbols of His grace and mercy to see where a filmmaker comes down on the question of God, and certainly Tom Hooper's film comes down on the side of human friendship, but human strictly so. Unless I am mistaken, none of the rest of the films even mention God, whether cinematically or in spoken word.

But should we care? In a world so devoid of public discussion of its Maker, is it a wiser strategy to bring Him, His name and His works to the forefront in our narratives or is it wiser to speak of Him subtly, carefully and positively, but minimally? As Christians, we need to realize that the society in which we live is complex. Neither

Christian nor anti-Christian, the cultural air we breathe is certainly not the air of the European middle-ages with its great chain of Being dominating and shaping every thought, but neither is it the air of ancient Rome with its appalling paganism and absence of the knowledge of God. We must learn to appreciate what is Christian in our world, whether intended or not, and grieve what is not in accord with Scripture, working to oppose it. How we do this is a constant question that has no easy answer, like I am sure the rest of the questions I will now entertain from you. Thank you.

TABLES OF INTEREST FOR MOVIE TALK, 2011

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
2010: 127 Hours; Black Swan; The Fighter; Inception; The Kids Are All Right; The King's Speech; The Social Network; Toy Story 3; True Grit; Winter's Bone

2010 Nominees Domestic Box Office Stats per Box Office Mojo as of Jan 25, 2011.
Two are in the top 10; all are in the top 150.

TITLE	GROSS	BUDGET	% PROFIT
<i>Toy Story 3</i> (#1)	\$415,004,880	\$200,000,000	208%
<i>Inception</i> (#5)	\$292,576,195	\$160,000,000	183%
<i>True Grit</i> (#15)	\$149,736,491	\$38,000,000	394%
<i>The Social Network</i> (#29)	\$ 96,120,026	\$40,000,000	240%
<i>Black Swan</i> (#34)	\$ 92,029,466	\$13,000,000	708%
<i>The Fighter</i> (#42)	\$79,234,535	\$25,000,000	317%
<i>The King's Speech</i> (#45)	\$ 74,871,973	\$15,000,000	499%
<i>The Kids Are All Right</i> (#114)	\$ 20,811,365	\$4,000,000	520%
<i>127 Hours</i> (#125)	\$ 14,128,862	\$18,000,000	22%
<i>Winter's Bone</i> (#146)	\$ 6,308,485	\$2,000,000	315%

2010 DOMESTIC BOX OFFICE FIGURES (ROUNDED UP OR DOWN. AS OF FEB 5, 2011). Two years ago the top ten made \$2.5B. Last year they had made \$3.1B by now. This year they have made only \$2.8B. BO overall was slightly down (.3%) with \$10.56B in receipts. Ticket sales were also down 5.2%, though seven more movies were released than last year.

Rank	Gross	Movie
1.	\$415M	Toy Story 3
2.	\$334M	Alice in Wonderland
3.	\$312M	Iron Man 2
4.	\$301M	The Twilight Saga: Eclipse
5.	\$293M	Inception
6.	\$292M	Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows, Part One
7.	\$252M	Despicable Me
8.	\$239M	Shrek Forever After
9.	\$218M	How To Train Your Dragon
10.	\$190M	Tangled