

AMERICA AND THE MOVIES

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

This is the thirteenth year I've been doing this lecture. For me that is a lucky number because I have never had such an interesting set of films to discuss. Even when only five nominees vied for the grand prize, there was always one, there were often two, and sometimes three clunkers that could easily have been left out of our discussion entirely. In 2007 for instance, I was so glad for *There Will Be Blood* and *No Country for Old Men* or I would not have had anything to say. Does anyone remember what the other three movies were that year? See what I mean? (*Juno*: probably could have said a lot, *Michael Clayton*: good thriller, but not much to say about it, *Atonement*: yecchhh)

It is true, too, that, particularly in recent years, the quality of film for the topic we try to expound in this talk, i.e. what these pictures tell us about our country at the present time, has been lacking significantly. Last year, out of nine films, I struggled to raise any questions of substance, and the same was true the year before. The winners illustrate my point: What do *The King's Speech* and *The Artist*, two period pieces, one English and the other silent and black & white, tell us about contemporary America anyway? Precious little. I do not mean these and the other nominees in both years were bad movies; far from it. The Academy always nominates superb movies, and in any given year, almost all the movies are real gems with flavorful stories and superlative production values. Lots of fun.

No, what I mean is this: for years now, I have scrambled to relate themes I found in these films to truly contemporary cultural debates. The movies were either what someone once called "frivolous entertainments" or they yielded discussion of ancient,

timeless questions, both things important in and of themselves but neither of them necessarily related to any particular idea, value or institution of the moment.

But this year, almost every nominated movie lends itself to a water-cooler conversation just enjoined or just about to happen. In a year in which two of the most contentious issues in a contentious election were race and privilege, we have *Lincoln*, *Django Unchained*, and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* exploring those subjects using vastly different approaches and resulting in vastly different outcomes. As a series of questions relating to violence in our society have once again risen to the fore, references to *Zero Dark Thirty* and again *Django Unchained* enter regularly into the discussion. Mental illness in the case of the Newtown shooter, or the “otherness” of homosexuals or other types of “misfits”? Look no further than the romantic comedy *Silver Linings Playbook* where both the principals fight poignantly to understand and be understood in their differentness as people suffering from bi-polar disorder. In an American society that each year is getting older and whose health care is a major topic of debate, the French film, *Amour*, about two forgotten octogenarians with heart-breaking health needs and few to help them, forces a chilling and despondent note into the public conversation. Even three movies as different as *Argo*, *Les Miserables* and *Life of Pi*—one an espionage thriller, one a major musical and one a special effects masterpiece—make their own contributions to our national discussions of patriotism, justice, and religious pluralism.

The Box Office data for last year provide another way these Academy Award nominees demonstrate their quality for discussion of what’s going on in America. Overall, more people went to the movies last year than they have in many years. Last year’s box office was a healthy \$10.83B, up 6.5% over last year after steady declines in the last few years. More importantly, the box office take of the Academy Award nominees was higher than in previous years, especially adjusted for blockbuster kid’s

movies. Of the nine movies nominated for last year, four of them were in the top 25 movies of last year at the box office, and all of them except the art house/indie entries *Amour* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* were in the top 50. You were out of touch with movie-going America, if you hadn't seen any of the Academy Award nominees last year.

So with so much to talk about last year's nominees, how can we handle this material and get out of here at a reasonable hour? I thought rather than talking about each film, I would look in some depth at three of the films, with a nod towards a fourth since I believe them to be the most politically charged and the subjects of more national conversation than the others. I am torn on doing the lecture this way because it severely slights some very fine movies, but I think, if we are actually focusing on what the movies tell us about who we are, then the proper object of our attention should be the national conversation. Frankly, I would love to do a talk this year on simply the race to win the Oscar itself since it was also the most fascinating and unpredictable race I have seen in many a year, if not ever. Throw in that Seth Macfarlane hosted the show, and the unpredictability factor goes sky high.

And let me remind you: we can talk about anything you want in the Q&A.

The four films I've chosen to talk about are *Zero Dark Thirty*, *Django Unchained*, *Lincoln*, and to a much lesser extent, *Argo*. I hope their order and relationship to one another will become clear as we look at them.

Kathryn Bigelow's *Zero Dark Thirty* is surely the most controversial movie of a year of controversial movies. In February, when the Oscar discussion was at its hottest, articles appeared in the *Atlantic Monthly* and the *New York Times* arguing both the pro and con case concerning the movie's portrayal of torture and its role in the capture of Osama Bin Laden. *Zero Dark Thirty* is of course the story of the CIA's search for and

killing of Osama Bin Laden, mastermind of the attacks of September 11, 2001 on the Pentagon and the World Trade Center in Washington and New York respectively. The film centers on a young CIA operative named Maya, who doggedly pursues Bin Laden and finally finds him in a compound in Abbottabad, Pakistan, less than a mile from one of the largest military training facilities in the country. The last thirty minutes or so of the movie deals with the actual operation to kill Bin Laden, carried out with Navy Seals by helicopter.

Bigelow has been quoted as saying she knew the film would be controversial, but had not expected what she called the “volume” of controversy, by which it is unclear whether she means the amount or the loudness of the outcry. Either way the film was certainly hotly disputed. As I mentioned, the debate centers around the film’s depiction of torture, particularly water boarding, at American “black sites” in the Middle East, and the strength of it can best be seen in that the film elicited a letter from senators Dianne Feinstein, Chairman of the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, Carl Levin, Chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and John McCain, Ranking Member of the Senate Armed Services Committee. The letter was written to Michael Lynne, the Chairman of Sony Pictures, accusing the movie of being “grossly inaccurate and misleading”. The letter claims: “Regardless of what message the filmmakers intended to convey, the movie clearly implies that the CIA’s coercive interrogation techniques were effective in eliciting important information related to a courier for Osama Bin Laden. We have reviewed CIA records and know that this is incorrect.”

The letter created quite a stir in the news media, one to which Sony has been criticized for being slow to respond. A TIME magazine cover story on Kathryn Bigelow, relates that Leon Panetta, the director of the CIA at the time of Osama Bin Laden’s assassination, wrote in a letter to John McCain: “Some of the detainees who provided

useful information about the facilitator/courier's role had been subjected to enhanced interrogation techniques [diplomatic speak for torture]. Whether those techniques were 'the only timely and effective way' to obtain such information is a matter of debate and cannot be established definitively." ("Art of Darkness", Jessica Winter, TIME, February 4, 2013, p. 30). Mark Bowman in his article "'Zero Dark Thirty' Is Not Pro-Torture" in *Atlantic Monthly* claims the criticism of the film in this regard is "willfully mistaken."

No one doubts, however, that the film describes a connection between waterboarding, food and sleep deprivation, beating and other forms of torture shown briefly in the film, and the gathering of the information that Maya uses in her research. The screenwriter of the film, Mark Boal, who won an Oscar for his work on *The Hurt Locker*, the Academy Award winner for Best Picture three years ago and a film also directed by Kathryn Bigelow, defends what he wrote, as does Bigelow. "Even simple factual questions [about the operation] are being debated at the highest levels of government, between, for example, the Senate and the CIA...I've spoken to two people in the CIA who worked with the same prisoner, who had two totally different views of what got him to talk and of the value of a particular piece of intelligence in the overall puzzle....If the general impression you get from this movie is that torture played a role in the hunt for Osama Bin Laden, that's because that's true" (TIME art, p. 30). It should be pointed out that prior to his writing screenplays, Boal worked as a freelance journalist who was imbedded with soldiers on the front lines of the war in Iraq.

All of the controversy surrounding the accuracy of the film, and, even more so of its ethical stance toward torture, has unfortunately detracted from discussion of *Zero Dark Thirty's* merits as a piece of filmmaking. Even though everyone in the house knows what will happen since it surveys a well-known event, the final sequence of Bin Laden's killing is as taut and exciting as any mystery or thriller. Particularly noteworthy

is the acting. While the supporting cast are superb, Jessica Chastain gives the best performance of the year in my opinion as the driven Maya, and the closing scene where she sits alone in the hold of a giant C-130 transport and simply begins to weep is one of the most affecting in recent memory. Boal's writing is equally taut, and no one seems to do the ambiguity of war better than Bigelow. While the audience feels the triumph of finally achieving the goal of disposing of one of America's most deeply despised enemies ever, the means to get there, and the price we had to pay, weigh heavily upon us.

And this is why I think the movie has been so unfairly treated by those who oppose it. In a fallen world, the brokenness and ambiguity of even our greatest triumphs should usually fill us with joy and melancholy at the same time. The filmmakers have regularly expressed their admiration for our service men and women who brought Bin Laden to justice and their desire to portray accurately the events that caused this to happen. They have just as regularly stated their loathing of war and of torture in particular and that they needed the license they are given as filmmakers to portray it in all its stark reality.

How can anyone look at the cross of Jesus, really understand it, and not feel the same? The world cannot rejoice in life without it, and millions express their gratitude and joy at His death's life-giving power every day. Yet oh! The price paid for that salvation and the horror of the means! Do we really feel the sorrow that we should that our gracious Creator had to suffer so deeply because of our foolish actions?

As Bigelow has put it in many of her interviews about the film, "Where there is clarity in the world, there is clarity in the film...Where there is ambiguity in the world, there is ambiguity in the film" (TIME Art, p. 29).

There is no ambiguity in the violence portrayed on the screen in Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained*. A typical Tarantino film, filled with references to grade B movies from cinematic history, Tarantino is famous for his films set in contemporary circumstances like *Pulp Fiction* and *Reservoir Dogs*. In his last film, *Inglourious Basterds*, he ventured into history, re-making it completely. In that movie, a secret mission, peopled by a small group of Jewish American soldiers, takes place behind enemy lines during the Second World War. The mission succeeds in killing Hitler and all his chief advisors in one bloody massacre—not surprisingly in a movie theater—thus ending the war much earlier than it ended in fact. The focus of that movie, though, was not on history, but on revenge, and the bloodier and more violently it could be portrayed, the better in Tarantino's opinion.

This time, Tarantino sets his vengeful sights on racial discrimination in this country. Setting his film in the 1850's, mostly on a plantation in Mississippi, the gadfly filmmaker has given us a story about a former slave turned bounty hunter, who with his friend and mentor, ingratiates himself to a wicked slave-owner in order to secure the escape of his wife. Django doesn't just rescue her, though. His rage will not be satiated until he has killed everyone who ever had anything to do with holding her and torturing her, and burning their plantation to the ground so that there is not a trace left of the wickedness they have perpetrated. The gleeful result, portrayed cartoonishly at the end of the film, is accomplished without any remorse at the violence and murder needed.

Of course the violence in *Django* is very different from that of *ZD30*. There, one was discussing war; here, personal revenge. There the moral objective was largely without question. In *Django*, parts of the intent are also without question, because no one except a few radical crazies would deny that slavery was a great evil and needed to

be abolished, but the “unchained” retribution visited upon almost everyone on the plantation is a different story.

And the motivation for Django’s revenge is even more questionable. He is obsessed with killing everyone and destroying everything, and he does so in a fashion that borders on torturing them as grotesquely as he and others have been tortured. Nowhere is there the principle of an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth more fully followed, though the Biblical principle, instituted to put a restraint on revenge (“You took my eye, I will take your head”), is actually violated by Tarantino. His revenge is completely unrestrained.

Even more importantly, Tarantino carries out his pogrom against slavery with glee. He has said that in all of his films, he consciously seeks to explore the murky waters between laughter and repugnance. He once said in an interview about *Pulp Fiction* that at any point in that film, he wanted to see one third of the audience falling off their chairs laughing, one third diving under their chairs from disgust and one third doing both at the same time. While there is much to discuss about the dynamics of what makes us laugh, there is no doubt that he wants us to have a permanent view of the absurdity of the world and of its complete moral anarchy. Hence we should be disgusted and delighted at the same time. It’s the only way to make it through life.

Django Unchained certainly accomplishes this laughter in the face of the abyss. Yet, it is just at this point that Tarantino shows the weakness of those who would deny a revealed, objective moral framework for the world. His inconsistency, and theirs, is this: they really believe some things are wrong and others are right, and absolutely so. Thus Hitler’s being evil in *Inglourious Basterds* provides the fixed point around which chaos and revenge can be indulged; similarly, slavery in *Django Unchained*. Apart from a divinely given moral law, this view cannot be easily sustained. And this is shown

because no one really walks away from Tarantino's films feeling morally triumphant. They walk away thinking movie violence is cool.

Here is the real conversation that Quentin Tarantino serves as a major focus of: what is the violence portrayed on our screens doing to us as a people? What is the portrayal of constant, and constantly increasing, explicitly graphic violence in our movies, on our television sets and in our video games doing to us? Is it helping us to understand violence and control it better, or is it making us more susceptible to it, and (especially the demented among us) more prone to exercising it? How do we balance the need to tell stories realistically against the power and effect of the images employed in the telling? How do we answer questions of freedom of speech and artistic license and questions of moral impact on, and development of, especially the young, but also ourselves at the same time?

All of these questions are more complex than Christians often make them. The Bible itself with its graphic retelling of spikes through peoples' heads and babies dashed upon rocks counters those stories with strong commands to turn the other cheek and to love even our enemies and those who spitefully use us. Christians have debated the justness of war and its methods down through the ages, no less the idea of vengeance and its proper place in God's hands rather than ours. These are complex issues, the responses to which often turn on the accuracy of understanding the details of a crime or a particular event, its motivations and its consequences, possible or actual.

And this takes us to our third and fourth movies, and to new questions of historical accuracy and moral justification of questionable means to serve good ends. The two films that most people thought vied for the Best Picture award at the Oscar presentations were *Lincoln* and *Argo*. The first is the Steven Spielberg production documenting the last months of our 16th president's life with a particular focus on the

political ins and outs of the passage of the 13th amendment to the Constitution, abolishing slavery. The second is *Argo*, the film that in fact did win the Oscar and was directed by Ben Affleck about the daring and successful “exfiltration” of six employees of the American consulate in Iran in 1979. They escaped during the consulate’s takeover by Islamic extremists in the midst of the revolution generated by yet another iconic American enemy, this time of the last century, the Ayatollah Khomeini.

Both movies were extraordinary films in an extraordinary year, and though two others, *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Silver Linings Playbook*, are, I believe, on a par with them in filmmaking quality and could have won the coveted prize, *Lincoln* and *Argo* clearly emerged as the frontrunners. *Argo* won more awards than any of the other movies, and by the time of the Oscars most people felt strongly that it would win, but the Academy presents a funny and thoroughly unpredictable relationship to other awards. Some years, it seems to value the gravitas of the content of a film and ignore its popularity and selects *American Beauty* or *A Beautiful Mind*. Some years, though, it seems to value the simpler, happier story and positive effect of a movie and selects *Shakespeare in Love* or *Titanic*. If it had gone with gravitas last year, *Lincoln* or *Zero Dark Thirty* would have won. But it went for uplifting story, so it was *Argo*.

Awards aside, *Lincoln* and *Argo* do share several things in common, perhaps the most important being their simultaneous attention to historical detail and accuracy and yet willingness to play somewhat loose with the facts in the interest of telling a story. This neither fish nor fowl approach provides what the filmmakers believe is a cinematic experience that takes the viewer more deeply into the reality of the history involved than the bald facts would have. All movies share this dilemma to some degree, even those not based on historical events. Every movie must make the audience *feel*

something; it simply will not be seen by enough people, and therefore make money, unless it does so.

To make the audience *feel*, a film must use its hour and a half to two hours and a half, wisely. Rarely does a movie portray events in what is known as “real” time, that is, the length of the time it takes for the story to unfold from beginning to end is the same as the length of the movie. Of course neither *Lincoln* nor *Argo* come close to attempting that since both movies cover some months in real time, though *Argo* in its closing sequence tries to approach it in order to heighten the tension of the moment. In any case, the attempt to portray months or even years in mere minutes, means movie makers must collapse multiple characters into a single person or conflate a variety of events into one event in the film, and both films do that.

Lincoln has made much of the historical accuracy of its detail. Based to some degree on *Team of Rivals*, a historical work of non-fiction by one of America’s pre-eminent historians, Harvard’s Doris Kearns Goodwin, the movie works very hard in its set design, chronology of events and the look and sound of its characters to present things as they really were. The portrayals of Abraham and Mary Todd Lincoln are noteworthy in this regard. Both Daniel Day-Lewis and Sally Field did prodigious research on their characters. No one is more obsessed with inhabiting his characters than Day-Lewis, and his research into Lincoln and his times is already legendary. Having worked and worked on an accent, for instance, that conveyed both the well-known high-pitched nature of Lincoln’s voice, which so irritated, and was mocked by, his detractors, and the depth and power of what Lincoln actually said time and again in both his speeches and his personal interactions, Day-Lewis, when he finally arrived at just the right sound, sent a recording of it to Spielberg that simply made him weep.

Field, too, though not as much written-about as Day-Lewis, almost perfectly captures the manic/depressive nature of the president's wife. Short of stature as Mary was, her fiery, funny, take-charge and meddlesome nature is almost perfectly represented by the two-time Oscar winner. Eleven years older than Day-Lewis, Field looks almost exactly the same age; oddly Mary Todd was nine years younger than her husband. No matter; Field seems perfectly suited to the role and was able to reproduce brilliantly both the mannerisms and quirks of character of the first lady.

Much more could be said about everything from set design to composition of the frame to the lighting of the scenes for Spielberg's obsession with accuracy, but it can all be summed up in the fact that he sent his sound designer to the Abraham Lincoln museum in Springfield, IL simply to be allowed to take Lincoln's actual pocket watch, wind it up and record its sounds for use in the background sound track of the film. Unbelievable. And we ask how a movie could actually take \$65M to make...

At the same time, *Lincoln* conflates much of the crucial debate in Congress. Of course, Congressman Joseph Courtney wrote a letter (another Congressional letter to a filmmaker!) to Steven Spielberg asking him to change the DVD account of the vote on the 13th Amendment because in the movie two of the three congressmen from Connecticut vote against the Amendment, when in reality all four of the actual congressmen voted for it! What do you think? Should our tax dollars go to re-shooting the movie so that Connecticut pride can be salvaged?! Speaking as a Virginian and a native Tennessean, I don't think so. "~~Argo...~~" [in the movie, the principals get a kick out of telling each other "~~Argo, f**k yourself.~~"]

But, much more than Connecticut pride is played with historically in *Lincoln*. Historical figures are merged into single characters, lines of dialogue are edited, given to characters other than the ones who actually spoke them, or created whole cloth. Even

arguments are advanced of which there is no record, especially in the scene where politicians from the south secretly meet with Lincoln's representatives to try to negotiate an end to the war. Some characters are almost entirely fictional—the three political operatives played so well by James Spader, Tim Blake Nelson and John Hawkes are the best examples. The screenwriter, playwright Tony Kushner, when asked about the dialogue, says he has lived with the material for so long, he is now unable to tell his own creations from direct quotations he culled from historical records.

This talk about historical accuracy in *Lincoln* may seem to have taken us far afield from the question of violence and its relationship to movies. I submit, though, that the questions we raised in discussing *Zero Dark Thirty* and *Django Unchained* are related to the historical accuracy of *Lincoln*, and though we have not said much about it, *Argo*. The argument can be framed like this: Most people—certainly most Christians—believe that violence in and of itself is not wrong. Of course Quakers and others challenge this assumption, but let's make it anyway, based on the fact that the vast majority of Americans would agree that violence in and of itself is not wrong. Therefore, if the cause is just, it may be necessary to use violence to bring about a just resolution to a problem like war or slavery. That is a large part of what the Civil War was about.

But here's the problem. To capture the rightness or wrongness of an event, a character, or an institution on film, it is necessary to interpret the facts of history. And film is much more emotional, and some would say powerful, than words, whether they be in history books or fiction. All three of these films—i.e. *ZD30*, *Django* and *Lincoln*—are dramas, not documentaries (Kushner likes to call *Lincoln* an "historical fiction"), which introduces a whole other category of "genre" into the discussion. True, *Lincoln* and *ZD30* are about historical events and *Django* is not, but it is critical to remember that *Django* seeks to build justification in its audience for its story's vengeful resolution

by portraying a slavery that is accurate to our nation's history. Without that, the movie's violence has little justification and can rightly be even more strongly condemned as evil by its critics. In fact it has been criticized—delicately no doubt since everyone despises slavery—for portraying a more 17th century Caribbean slavery than a 19th century American one.

The point is this: historical accuracy in a film, while not the only factor, nevertheless plays an important part in justifying or denying the film's moral content. If violence is not in and of itself wrong, then whether or not it is being portrayed as used against real evil as opposed to imaginary evil becomes an important question in the assessment of the validity of a film's use of it or not. In my opinion, *Lincoln* and much more ambiguously *ZD30*, are justified in their portrayals. *Django* is not, mostly because of the glee and comedy with which it portrays revenge period, but also to some degree because it has not been responsible in its creation of the focus of its violent revenge.

But there is another factor that is important to discuss here, and that is the simple impact of screen violence on audiences, whether the violence is justified in the story or not. Every filmmaker I have ever heard of decries real violence. Almost every one, too, however, justifies its use because screen violence is not "real". No one—except on the rarest of occasions like Tippi Hedren in the famous scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds*—is ever actually subjected involuntarily to violence in the moviemaking process. No one is ever actually raped, beaten or killed; these are all fictions. Stunt men and women certainly put themselves in jeopardy and are often injured and sometimes even killed, but, oddly, that almost never happens in scenes of portrayed violence, but in scenes of adventure.

Nevertheless, the vast majority of moviegoers do feel, when they leave the theater after watching a brutal movie that they have witnessed people getting raped,

beaten or killed, so what is the difference? And on top of that, given that the major audience of the movie-going public is 17-24 year old males, doesn't the cumulative effect of seeing acts of savagery week after week create in us a moral character that, even if balanced by goodness in other parts of our lives (and so often it is not nowadays), is angrier, more violent and ultimately more dangerous? How do we justify this, if it is creating such an evil spot in the national psyche?

The answer to these questions is simple for most Christians: we don't justify it. Christians mostly dwell somewhere along a line of responses to this issue from "I don't go to movies that portray violence and never will because I don't like what it does to me, but I respect the right of others to make their own choices of what films to make and what films to watch" to "I don't go to films that portray violence in any form and neither you, nor anyone else should either. They are a blight on our nation and irredeemable, and should be stopped as soon as possible."

Both these reactions share one thing in common: the propounders of both don't go to violent (or sexual, drug related, or expletive-filled) movies under any circumstances, if the violence affects them personally. That is for a noble reason: they don't like the portrayal of cruelty's effect on them.

But these two responses, and the responses of everyone who is on that line, beg several questions. First, what of the world that attenders, in fact enjoyers, of that sort of movie inhabit, especially if it is the world of our teenage sons (or daughters)? Aren't we to be "in" that world, though not "of" it, too, and able to respond to it as Christians? Yes, what would Jesus do: go into the movie theater and engage those who are eating and drinking damnation to themselves (as this view certainly thinks the viewers are) where they are, or avoid them and their world altogether? And the Lord Jesus aside,

aren't we supposed to follow Paul and strive to be "all things to all people" in order that we may save some (1 Cor 9:19-23)?

Secondly, and this question is related to the first, where did we get the idea that movie-going—indeed any aspect of our lives—is all about us? Why is the effect on ourselves the overwhelming value we bring to the fore when we discuss the impact of movies on us as a people? Doesn't the faith teach, and hasn't it always taught, that love for others comes before love for ourselves? [No fair to say that love for God comes before both because that is what we are discussing from both sides!] Of course this is what the argument is all about that we should ban violent movies altogether and not let anyone watch them, but what do we do with the appeals to the First Amendment then? If the answer is that not all forms of speech are guaranteed freedom in that amendment, which is true, what do we do with the fact that the relationship between screen violence and real violence is more felt intuitively than proved scientifically, at least so far as the studies have shown to this point?

I believe there is a third option. When asked about screen violence, sex, drugs and language, I have often said that I believe each person should know their own spiritual flashpoints, and should have a profound wariness towards films that feed those sins. I still believe that as strongly as ever. Secondly, we do have a responsibility toward some people who are unable to shield themselves from the savagery of certain movies, and children, emotionally and mentally needy people and others who may have a proven inability to resist committing acts of violence upon others or themselves may need to be legally or socially proscribed from attending films that could contribute to these flaws in their actions. Parents, especially: beware.

But what if we were able to mitigate the effect on our hearts of portrayals of savagery on screen, or even remove it altogether? I have for many years done a

weekend seminar, sometimes boiled down to just a lecture, entitled “Show and Tell: How to View a Movie Responsibly”. That seminar operates on the premise that the more one knows about the techniques, background and information concerning the reality of a piece of art, the less power that art has to change one against one’s will long-term. Knowledge is power, and knowledge of the use of the camera, music, sound effects, art design, script, direction, acting choices and all the other elements that go into the production of a film can dramatically help the viewer hold at bay the evil influences of this magnificent medium and increase their appreciation, and acceptance, of its good ones.

Make no mistake: I do not believe acquiring this knowledge diminishes our enjoyment of a movie. In fact I think it enhances it, just as a football coach sitting in the stands at a game enjoys a great, well-executed play more than the novice sitting beside them. That coach enjoys the play, and the rest of the game for that matter, with their mind as well as their heart, while the other mostly responds only with the latter.

Where are the movies and America? In the midst of perhaps a major turning point in our country and its relationship to violence, what with the shootings in Newtown and Aurora, CO and most recently in the Navy Yard in Southeast Washington, DC and the ban on torture in our military operations. And tonight’s talk just begins to touch on these questions without even raising important others I mentioned earlier such as the mentally ill and their place in our society, found in movies like *Silver Linings Playbook*, or poverty and environment, explored in movies like *Beasts of the Southern Wild* or growing old and its challenges displayed in a movie like *Amour*. All these are issues Christians need to be vitally involved in, and it is hard for me to see how we can be, if we are ignorant of, or, worse, totally ignore, the movies our

culture consumes and then so often relies on for its understanding of value and meaning, truth and goodness in life.

Significant movies, almost everyone agrees, are mostly about either starting or contributing to conversations about what is right or wrong, and, well, we've gotten to a place where we should end and start the conversation ourselves. Thank you for your attention.

Go down the list of movies: remind of plot, quotations, key elements.

Topics:

Race and Class:

Django Unchained

Lincoln

Beasts of the Southern Wild

Les Misérables

Torture and Violence

Zero Dark Thirty

Django Unchained

Mental Illness, "Otherness"

Silver Linings Playbook

Health Care, Aging

Amour

Religious Pluralism, Pantheistic Environmentalism

Life of Pi

Beasts of the Southern Wild ("The whole universe depends on everything fitting together just right. If one piece busts, even the smallest piece... the whole universe will get busted.")

Miscellaneous

Argo (patriotism)

Les Misérables (class, justice, law / grace)

Life of Pi, Beasts of the Southern Wild (religious pluralism, pantheistic environmentalism)

TABLES OF INTEREST FOR MOVIE TALK, 2013

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: **The King's Speech**; 127 Hours; Black Swan; The Fighter; Inception; The Kids Are All Right; The Social Network; Toy Story 3; True Grit; Winter's Bone
2011: **The Artist**; The Descendants; Extremely Loud & Incredibly Close; The Help; Hugo; Midnight in Paris; Moneyball; The Tree of Life; War Horse
2012: Amour; Argo; Beasts of the Southern Wild; Django Unchained; Les Misérables; Life of Pi; Lincoln; Silver Linings Playbook; Zero Dark Thirty

2012 Nominees Domestic Box Office Stats per Box Office Mojo as of Feb 7, 2013.
None are in the top 10 of all movies released in the last year; all except *Amour* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild* are in the top 50.

TITLE	DOM GROSS	FOR GROSS	TOTAL GROSS	BUDGET
<i>Amour</i> (#176)	\$2M	\$13M	\$15M	N/A
<i>Argo</i> (#25)	\$121M	\$75M	\$197M	\$44.5M
<i>Beasts of the Southern Wild</i> (#132)	\$12M	N/A	\$12M	N/A
<i>Django Unchained</i> (#17)	\$152M	\$158M	\$310M	\$100M
<i>Les Misérables</i> (#19)	\$142M	\$198M	\$340M	\$61M
<i>Life of Pi</i> (#28)	\$127M	\$442M	\$569M	\$120M
<i>Lincoln</i> (#14)	\$171M	\$32M	\$203M	\$65M
<i>Silver Linings Playbook</i> (#36)	\$82M	\$30M	\$112M	\$21M
<i>Zero Dark Thirty</i> (#39)	\$79M	\$13M	\$92M	\$40M

2012 DOMESTIC BOX OFFICE FIGURES (ROUNDED UP OR DOWN. AS OF FEB 7, 2013). Three years ago the top ten had made \$3.1B by now. Two years ago they had made only \$2.8B, and last year they had made only \$2.5B. The downward trend, at least domestically, reversed itself dramatically this year, when the top ten have made a robust \$3.3B. Overall domestic BO unexpectedly rose a whopping 6.5% with \$10.83B in receipts. Ticket sales were also up 6.4% to the highest number since 2009, 1,364,700. The only statistic that matters kept going up too: the average ticket price (2007=\$6.88; 2008=\$7.18; 2009=\$7.50; 2010=\$7.89; 2011=\$7.93; 2012=\$7.94)!

Rank	Gross	Movie
1.	\$623M	Marvel's The Avengers
2.	\$448M	The Dark Knight Rises
3.	\$408M	The Hunger Games
4.	\$303M	Skyfall
5.	\$297M	The Hobbit: An Unexpected Journey
6.	\$291M	The Twilight Saga: Breaking Dawn Part 2
7.	\$262M	The Amazing Spider-Man
8.	\$237M	Brave
9.	\$219M	Ted
10.	\$216M	Madagascar 3: Europe's Most Wanted