

AMERICA AND THE MOVIES

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

In his Golden Globe acceptance speech for Best Actor in a comedy this year, Leonardo DiCaprio said of Martin Scorsese, his long-time collaborator and director of this year's Best Picture nominee *The Wolf of Wall Street*, "You're not only an incredible visionary, but you put the very fabric of our culture up on screen." We may hope that DiCaprio is not actually correct. I, at least, dream our culture's "very fabric" is not a tapestry woven together by the violent, drug-infested, sexually obsessed, foul-mouthed people that inhabit Scorsese's movies (particularly *The Wolf of Wall Street*). It is nevertheless true, though, that Scorsese puts up on screen characters and stories that inhabit some of our people's dreams... and some of their nightmares. And, if Scorsese and DiCaprio are to be believed, the vision of life they put on screen in *The Wolf of Wall Street* is not one they would like to see others follow, either... but more about that presently.

I believe most successful movie-makers do put at least some part of our culture's "fabric" on screen, and that is why it is so important to listen to them. Without doubt most Hollywood directors, writers, producers and actors have visions of the world that they intend as the basis for their best work, whether the public approves of that vision or not. And that vision is intended to be heard, and in some form appropriated by the viewer. Movie-makers want to change their viewers lives. So how did they intend to do that this year? What were the ideas that came through most dramatically in the nine films we have before us today?

For perhaps obvious reasons, I'm going to begin by summarizing the stories of the nine films. Follow along with me, as I go down the list I have given you of information about the movies.

American Hustle is the third movie in the last four years by director David O. Russell to be nominated for Best Picture, though none of them has won. Significantly, too, he has not yet won a Best Director Oscar, though many feel it is just a matter of time. The movie is loosely based on the famous ABSCAM operation by the FBI into political corruption in New Jersey in the late 1970's and early 1980's.

Captain Phillips is another story based in fact. This one is about a tanker captain who is hi-jacked by Somali pirates off the coast of Africa, and the international incident that hi-jacking spawned. The film raises interesting questions of military action, poverty, essentially modern-day slavery and the desperate actions some people are driven to commit by their torturous circumstances.

Dallas Buyers Club is a third movie based in actual events (in fact six of the nine nominees are based on real events), this time the story of hard-drinking, hard-living cowboy electrician Ron Woodroof, who contracts AIDS heterosexually in the early 80's, is given thirty days to live, and eventually spends several years smuggling untested drugs into the US and selling them to AIDS patients. The movie develops the relationship between Woodroof and a composite character, a transvestite named Rayon, highlighting Woodroof's journey from homophobic, gay-basher to Rayon's close friend.

Next on the list is a movie that was probably a very close second for the award, Alfonso Cuarón's masterpiece *Gravity*. This movie is so much more than the most innovative special effects film since *Avatar*. It is a solid, if simple, hero story of Dr. Ryan Stone, a scientist played by Sandra Bullock, who is stranded in space and must find her way back to earth.

Her is my favorite among the nominees because of the interesting questions it raises, the brilliance of its script, and the overall quality of everything from its performances to its music. It is simply a superb piece of filmmaking. Spike Jonze's film is set in the not-too-distant future in LA and chronicles the life of Theodore Twombly, a lonely writer who begins a relationship with a new Operating System for his smart phone, which is driven by Artificial Intelligence. Theodore finds himself falling in love with her (the OS is named Samantha and is voiced brilliantly by Scarlett Johansson) as she grows in her understanding of human relationships and meets deep needs in him during a time in his life when he is going through a divorce. Again, a movie about relationships, *Her* is both fascinating and creepy in its ability to present the viewer with very recognizable ups and downs of real relationships we have all known, while making us question the very nature of what a human being, and love, actually are. I say a little more about *Her* here because I won't be spending any time with the movie in the rest of the talk. If you're interested, we can talk about *Her* in the Q&A or I can tell you where I've written about it online. For free...

The next two films can be summarized briefly together; they are what Hollywood likes to call "small" films. *Nebraska* by the popular director Alexander Payne and *Philomena*, helmed by Stephen Frears, both demonstrate values closer to what the typical Christian would affirm as much as any other movies in this year's Oscar race. *Nebraska* tells the story of an aging Midwesterner, who becomes convinced that he has won a million dollars in a sweepstakes and whose grown son humors him by driving him to Lincoln, Nebraska to claim his winnings. *Philomena*, starring the extraordinary Judi Dench, tells the story of an older woman in search of her grown son, taken away from her at his birth by nuns in a home for unwed mothers to which she has been consigned by her father. Both these films expound strong, heartwarming narratives,

centering around journeys of discovery by a pair of people, one old and one young. They are intelligent, brilliantly made movies, filled with unforgettable characters and fully deserving of their status as nominees, though everyone agrees they never had a chance to win.

12 Years a Slave is perhaps the most talked-about film, and of course won the Best Picture award. Directed by the black, British director, Steve McQueen, *Slave* is set in 1840's and 50's America and tells the true story of Solomon Northup, an African-American free man who lived in Saratoga, NY, and who, after going to Washington, DC under the promise of a job, was drugged, kidnapped and sold into slavery by his supposed employers. The movie highlights the plight of the slave in pre-Civil War Mississippi and casts a clear, if indiscriminate, light on the cruel practice of slavery. Northup is eventually set free and reunited with his family, but the indignities and the tortures he and his fellow slaves suffer are the content of this picture.

Lastly, Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street* chronicles the rise and fall of Jordan Belfort, a Wall Street stockbroker who makes a seemingly limitless fortune by duping unsuspecting middle-class Americans into buying what are called "penny" stocks. What Belfort did was thoroughly illegal, but he was able to hide his profits from the government until he had made, and blown, hundreds of millions of dollars. His story is one of endless drugs, sex and profligate consumerism, and Scorsese ignores no opportunity to display Belfort's excesses, as his life becomes unraveled, his two marriages dissolve, and he is sent to jail. Leonardo DiCaprio stars in and produces the film, and this story was shepherded by him for many years until finally coming to the screen this year.

So where do we begin? This year's group of movies has so many thematic threads to explore that it is difficult to know where to start, and, as I often do in this

lecture, I must begin by confessing we will not be able to investigate ably enough all the possible connections between these films and life in America today so we will not even try. Many of this year's nominees are worth a second and third viewing just because there is so much there to be uncovered and thought about.

Let's begin with a question almost everyone has every year: How do the Oscar nominated pictures treat religion, and especially Christianity, explicitly?

From what I can remember only three of the movies have any explicit reference to even spirituality of any type, much less Christianity. This has long been a problem in Hollywood in my estimation: characters, in fact whole sets of characters, are regularly created who have no religious element in their lives at all. They are rarely shown praying, reading the Bible, or worshipping together with other people. I believe this to be a problem because of what could be called the "reality" factor. Religion is part of the dominant experience of our population, since according to a 2007 Pew Forum poll, 83.1% of our people claim some religious affiliation (Pew survey: religions.pewforum.org/affiliations). Of these 56% say religion is *very* important in their lives and fully 82% say it is at least *somewhat* important. So I think filmmakers skew their depiction of reality in America pretty widely. More about that, when we discuss *12 Years a Slave*. In any case, the three movies that do have a substantial religious reference are *Gravity*, *Philomena*, and *12 Years a Slave*.

All three have problems where the Christian faith is concerned. *Gravity* may be the most sympathetic. Doctor Ryan Stone, played by Sandra Bullock, is a researcher who is not a professional astronaut but a scientist spending some time on a space station. When she is thrown into a crisis situation where she must attempt to get back to earth alone, Stone scrambles intensely and, when all appears lost, offers a plea for help. She doesn't actually pray herself; she asks someone she has raised on a CB radio on

earth to pray for her, confessing she doesn't know how to pray, no one ever told her. Her prayer is reminiscent of Jimmy Stewart's famous prayer in *It's a Wonderful Life*, "Dear Father in heaven, I'm not a praying man, but if you're up there and can hear me, show me the way," except that her prayer is fully one of despair, not hope. She has given up, and asks the Eskimo she has raised on the radio with whom she is speaking but not communicating, to pray for her soul. It is a reaching out of sorts, however. Stone humbly and honestly admits she doesn't pray, but she has been prompted by icons in two of the spaceships she has entered. One icon is of a Russian saint and one is a Chinese Buddha, and so she at least asks for help, when she has come to the end of her self.

Two things to point out here: 1) This is hardly Christian prayer to the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit. But we should be charitable since real honesty and humility are being portrayed before a higher power she thinks might be there, and the character is a non-religious person who is crying out. Christians believe a compassionate God answers the prayers of unbelievers (cf. the Biblical story of the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8). Nevertheless, the god being appealed to seems the most generic of gods, fashioned to suit the needs of the mishmash that is "god" in the typical American's consciousness, and unlike the Biblical story, no further revelation is given to lead Dr. Stone to an acknowledgement of Christian faith. Again, though, no time is given for such a journey, as we are in the middle of a ninety-minute action/adventure film!

2) The second caution I would bring to calling *Gravity's* portrayal of faith a truly Christian one, is the strong humanistic strain that seems to dominate the eventual salvation of the main character. I can't help but spoil here, but Stone does make it safely to earth, landing fortunately in water, swimming to the surface and making it to terra

firma. In a strong statement of praise of her and her courage, Cuarón shoots her in an extreme low-angle shot as she stands and walks to safety to end the picture. This choice clearly magnifies her stature as triumphant warrior in a humanistic way. If the director had wanted to emphasize Stone as grateful for her deliverance and the source of her salvation being God, he might have shot her from above, looking to heaven, as, for instance, Andy Dufresne is shot when he crawls out of the sewage tunnel, having escaped from prison in *The Shawshank Redemption*.

I don't want to be harsh or demanding here. *Gravity* at least brings Christianity into the picture, and in a relatively positive light. We find a much more confusing picture in *12 Years a Slave*.

In some parts of the film, its makers seem to loathe the faith. I think it is fair to say that the primary, memorable references to religion in the film are in scenes that take place on the plantations where Solomon Northup has been imprisoned. These are "worship services" or "Bible studies" where the Master teaches the Bible to his family and to the slaves. The passages taught are only used to dominate the slaves, appealing to the Bible as justification for the cruel, lecherous treatment of the slaves by their masters.

The most egregious example of this—and there are three or four such "worship services" portrayed in the film—is when we first see Edwin Epps, the most evil character in the movie, played by Michael Fassbinder. Epps reads Luke 12:47 - "And that servant, which knew his lord's will, and prepared not himself, neither did according to his will, shall be beaten with many stripes," repeating several of the phrases for emphasis. At the end, he lingers on the word "many" and says in a way reminiscent of some early Christian interpreters, "Now 'many' signifies 'a great many'." Epps interprets the entire passage in terms of the slaves in front of him and himself,

then shuts the Book forcefully, holding it aloft and declaring, "That's Scripture." The tone is one of demented hostility of the master toward his "property" and the effect is of a faith that is used horribly for wicked purposes. And this is the first time we see Epps. The sharpness of the point is immeasurable.

We could go on and on about the ways Epps bathes everything he does in Christian terms. He sees the lifting of a plague of boll weevils as due to "clean living and prayer." He sees the object of his lust, a slave named Patsey, played by Lupita N'yongo who won the Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress for her performance, as a gift from God to him as "the rewards of righteous living." And on, and on.

But the film is uncertain in its handling of the faith. The main character, Solomon Northup, seems to have a religious experience, which drives him to keep on just when he is at his lowest ebb. A slave has died in the fields, and at what appears to be a funeral service for him, the slaves sing "Roll, Jordan, Roll", the chorus of which is "My soul'll rise in heaven, Lord, for the year when Jordan roll". Northup does not sing at first because he is so despondent. But eventually he begins singing, gathering strength and, seemingly, faith, as he belts out this spiritual of hope and life. It is a turning point in the film, as shown by the song appearing again over the final credits.

But there are several mixed messages that make us wonder what the filmmakers intended as the source of Solomon's salvation. He smashes his fiddle, which had given him such pleasure. In a 1 min, 20 sec close-up shot of his face, just before he is indeed surprisingly rescued, he goes through a variety of expressions, showing despair, resolve, confusion, resignation—the whole gamut, as if he is saying "I give up, but I will not give up." Is his resolve the key? Is humanism again the philosophical statement being made here?

One of the most confusing aspects of the portrayal of the faith in the movie comes in the screenplay's relationship to the memoir the real Northup left. In that memoir on which the movie is based, Solomon Northup was in fact portrayed as a man of strong, real faith who even recognizes it in one of his masters, William Ford, played by Benedict Cumberbatch in the movie. Two examples of how Northup's faith is muted somewhat in the film will suffice. Of Ford, Northup wrote, "But I was sometime his slave and had an opportunity of learning well his character and disposition, and it is but simple justice to him when I say, in my humble opinion, there never was a more kind, noble, candid, Christian man than William Ford" [*12 Years a Slave*, p. 56]. In the movie nothing like that is even hinted at, other than that Ford is much kinder than Edwin Epps.

Also, when Solomon is rescued in the film, he simply hugs the man, in real life a distant cousin who bears his same name, who comes from his native Saratoga, NY, to take him back home. Let me read you the scene as Northup described it in his memoir. A sheriff has come, inquiring after the slave, and gestures in the direction of Solomon's cousin: "I looked in the direction indicated, and as my eyes rested on his countenance, a world of images thronged my brain... until at last the perfect memory of the man recurred to me, and throwing up my hands towards Heaven, I exclaimed, in a voice louder than I could utter in a less exciting moment—'Henry B. Northup! Thank God—thank God!'"

I don't know what to think about *12 Years a Slave*. The first two times I watched it, which were both in the theater, the overwhelming story was of the brutality and the horror of slavery and along with that the way in which Christian faith was used to support this evil. This statement was so strong in the violent beatings, sexual abuses and demeaning treatment of the slaves that it overwhelmed what the filmmakers might

have been trying to say in a counterbalancing way about the faith of the slaves.

It was only in recently watching the DVD and going through the film virtually frame by frame that I saw what may well be a very positive view of the faith.

To be fair, the third nominated film clearly plays off a portrayal of the evil of institutionalized Christianity with the real power of an individual faith practiced by Philomena Lee in the film *Philomena*. Judi Dench's character, again based on a real woman, movingly forgives the nuns who have contemptibly sold her baby into adoption and then completely hidden information about him, baldly lying to her when she tries to find him late in life. The portrayal of Christianity as an institution is as horrible as one could want since the nuns' convent is the only institution representing the faith in the picture. Not one of the nuns is helpful or sympathetic in any way. According to TIME magazine, "the movie follows the story closely, except that some of the movie nuns are slightly more sinister than they were in Lee's life" ("Hollywood's Moment of Truth", by Lily Rothman & Isaac Guzmán, *TIME*, March 3, 2014).

Philomena on the other hand is a faithful, praying woman and her forgiveness of the head nun at the end of the movie is dramatic and impactful enough to cause her atheistic companion, played by Steve Coogan, to purchase a little plastic statue of Jesus for Philomena to place on her son's grave, when she does finally find him. While this powerful denouement to the film ought not to be minimized, it is true that the depiction of formal Christianity is so starkly loathsome, it is hard to think anyone will be rushing out to investigate the Christian faith in their local church after viewing the picture. At best the viewer who actually is influenced by this movie will likely simply try harder to be a good person, like Philomena is.

So, to summarize, at least two of the films do speak somewhat positively of private faith, while the two that depict institutional Christianity, do so in strongly

negative terms. This is not a complaint or particularly surprising; much has been written this year about the role of Christianity in the Hollywood community that there is not time for in this lecture. But in the Q&A, if you want, we could discuss the Academy's controversial decision to take away the nomination for best song that was garnered by the tiny Christian film *Alone Yet Not Alone* or the chances for box office or Oscar success the films *Noah*, *Son of God*, *Heaven Is For Real*, *God's Not Dead* and, later in the year, *Moses*, might have. A recent *New York Times* article entitled "Can God Make It In Hollywood?" (*NY Times*, Feb 22, 2014) by Michael Cieply discusses this newest attempt by the moguls of the dream factory to make money out of the Bible.

Let me now move on to a second important theme from this year's films: that of the hero who either confronts a crisis and triumphs in the midst of it or simply perseveres and succeeds in the face of overwhelming odds, usually where some one else has failed. Surprisingly, the theme of this year's Oscar show was the hero in film, though it wasn't strongly emphasized in Ellen Degeneres's more folksy, pizza-eating style of hosting. In fact I only really saw it surface in a couple of strange montage clips throwing together all sorts of movies. But no time for that now.

The concept of hero is one we have discussed before in this lecture, and that is not surprising given the character of American literature and film. We love our heroes. In any case when we discussed the 2009 films including *The Hurt Locker*, *Avatar*, *The Blind Side*, *District 9*, and *Up*, we found the theme one that was being handled in a variety of ways. This year, there is a similar diversity. I see three types of hero: the anti-hero hero, the true-blue classic hero, and what I call the "hobbit" hero.

First, there is the anti-hero hero. And this year we seem to have a penchant for a particular kind of anti-hero: the con man. When the concept of the anti-hero really came to the fore in the 1960's in movies like *Bonnie and Clyde*, *Cool Hand Luke*, and *Midnight*

Cowboy, the characters were at least strong, or brave or straightforward in their criminality and thus their attractiveness, and often, as in the case of Paul Newman's Luke for instance, the "criminal" side of the character was not really terribly criminal at all. Luke was sent to a work farm for cutting the heads off public parking meters, for goodness sake.

Now, even Luke's public vandalism I do not consider as excusing criminality, and anti-heroes like Clyde and Bonnie Barrow had a complete lack of merit as role models, but there was at least the sense that here was sin, which is simply a perversion of something good, or an excess where the underlying value was a positive one gone awry.

But this year's anti-hero, the con-man, has no real redemptive qualities. Their foundational principle is one of selfishness. All people exist to meet the con's desires, and no action, which results in the con's success will be deemed off limits to them. They are despicable, hard in every way and thoroughly undeserving of sympathy or forgiveness unless truly repentant and proven to be morally reconstructed.

Yet this year, not one, but **two** major films are dedicated directly to those who practice the con game, and in both films the cons are presented as worthy of our admiration. (One could also include Ron Woodroof in *Dallas Buyers Club*, but his is not really a con so much as it is a straightforward crime.) In one, *American Hustle* (note the adjective and pick your clichéd phrase: Only in America! As American as Apple Pie!), the conning is done in the context of a relationship that is in some respects admirable: the cons are a couple who are a team, and they have a devotion to one another and an ability for teamwork that presents them to the viewer as sympathetic characters. Christian Bale's lovable Irving, and Amy Adams's even more endearing Sydney (or if you've seen the film, Lady Edith Greensley!) are interesting people and people one

would not fear. In fact it is Bradley Cooper's FBI agent, Richie DiMaso, who is arrogant, aggressive, and generally distasteful. In the end, (spoiler alert!) he gets the short end of the stick, and the viewer is glad. Perhaps even more important, Irving and Sydney get off the hook entirely. In the film's defense: the cons go straight at the end of the movie, and Irving particularly tries to make amends for some of the wrongs he has done people. Nevertheless, *American Hustle* still seems to be an American story to be embraced by right-thinking Americans, and that is in my estimation at least an American tragedy.

That the film is viewed that way by the film industry is shown by the fact that *American Hustle* was entered in the Golden Globes competition this year as a comedy, not a drama (an award that it won by the way). In genre studies, of course one of the distinguishing factors of the comedy from the tragedy is the resolution of the action in such a way that the main characters end well in a comedy and badly in a tragedy. In this vein, even more distressing was one of its fellow "comic" nominees, Martin Scorsese's *The Wolf of Wall Street*. *Wall Street* has been one of the more controversial of the films of the year because of its graphic and plentiful sex and drugs scenes. I have never seen an R-rated film more deserving of an NC-17 rating, and I am still surprised that there has not been more discussion of that fact. Even more problematic for me is that the film's creators—essentially Scorsese and DiCaprio, who courted Scorsese for years to get him to direct—insist that they intended Jordan Belfort to be a contemptible character, filled with moral flaws and exhibiting an attitude, a professional calling and a lifestyle that is to be considered obscene and disgusting from start to finish.

If that was their intent, they did not achieve it, especially with those whose definition of success includes making money in order to enjoy "the good life" made up of enjoying highs in any way you can: sex, drugs and consumerism. This also usually

involves legally getting away with as much as you can to do so. Wall Street has too often shown in real life how distressingly many such people there are in the world, and the several business and political scandals of the last few decades instruct us that such people are not limited to the financial district of New York City. Belfort is shown eventually going to jail, though significantly the only shot of him actually inside prison is of him playing tennis, so the point about retribution or punishment is not exactly driven home visually. Tellingly, he is only imprisoned for two years, and is shown at the end of the movie conducting a seminar in Australia, teaching the techniques as legitimate, which he used to teach his fellow scam artists at Stratton Oakmont. One feels, "Well, this is not so bad. He gets all that sex and drugs and money and cars, does a little time in a plush prison, and starts all over again when he gets out. What's not to like?" In fact, if anyone has followed the story closely, they will recognize the real Jordan Belfort in the last scene introducing DiCaprio as he speaks at the seminar. All that sex, drugs, money and cars and a spot in a Martin Scorsese movie, too! Wow!

Seriously, if you are appalled by the kind of lifestyle portrayed on the screen in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, you will be just as appalled when you leave the theater, but if you are attracted to it, you might be even more so, and, worst of all, if you are neutral (and remember that the main target demographic of the film industry is 17 to 24 year old males) you may well be enticed by it. There is nothing in the movie of the lives Belfort ruined, not a single subplot of the destruction his evil caused. As I mentioned, his jail time is soft-pedaled, and the real Belfort is even rewarded at the end of the movie with a spot in the film. The only thing telling you in the film that this lifestyle is evil is your own already-formed moral structure. And this is not just me. Tony Scott, the lead movie critic for the *New York Times*, says of the movie's portrayal of Belfort, "intentionally or not, [*The Wolf of Wall Street*] makes a fetish of [Jordan Belfort's] selfish

bad-boy lifestyle.”

Fortunately, the anti-hero conman is not the only type of hero portrayed in the nominees this year. There are two types of admirable heroes found in our movies, the classic true-blue hero and the “hobbit” hero. The true-blue hero controls the action in *Gravity* and *Captain Phillips*.

Alfonso Cuarón has publicly stated there would be no *Gravity*, if it were not for Sandra Bullock. Cuarón is being too self-deprecating because his direction won him the Academy Award for that movie, and it is stunning. But Bullock *is* superb. Handling stock crises—like being the novice who has to flip through the manual to see how to fly a spaceship—with such total commitment, Bullock convinces the viewer that they’re seeing the situation for real and for the first time. The extraordinary scene in which she finally safely gets inside the shuttle, wraps up into the fetal position, and slowly rotates, weightless, framed against the circular window looking out onto space, drives the viewer to quiet awe.

In the narrative arc, when she reaches the nadir of her situation, Bullock prays, as we mentioned above, and George Clooney shows up! Seriously, the scene makes a lovely statement that no one can succeed in life, in crisis or in calmer times, alone, but her renewed determination, her perseverance are truly heroic and are the primary value described in the film. Though she gets to the point of giving up, she ultimately does not give up. The rhythms and pacing of the film capture this almost perfectly. She begins the film sick to her stomach from just being in space, and the physical demands that soon beset her are conveniently divided into ninety-minute portions, as the debris that causes the danger to the astronauts goes around the earth in just those portions. With each crisis, just when she is about to be defeated, she sucks it up and finds the strength to keep going.

Captain Richie Phillips, played by Tom Hanks in the movie *Captain Phillips*, and surprisingly ignored by the Academy, is a hero of another type. His planning from the onset of the trouble—shown in the form of Somali pirates boarding and taking over his ship—focuses on saving his men and not himself. He even selflessly tries to save the pirates in the end, when things go wrong for them. Whether or not this portrayal is true to the events is an open question. I understand that there is a law suit pending by some of the crew members against Phillips for sailing in out-of-bounds waters in order to save time and cost, and, secondly, that there is no mention in Captain Phillips' memoir of any compassion for the pirates at all. In any case the movie certainly chose to focus on the idea of the hero in a classic, true-blue way. As the newspaper editor says in *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valence*, "When the legend becomes fact, print the legend."

The true-blue hero is of course the myth that Gary Wills outlined in his masterful book about the myth that was John Wayne. He wrote, "[Wayne] embodied a politics; or his screen image did. It was a politics of large meanings, not of little policies—a politics of gender (masculine), ideology (patriotism), character (self-reliance), and responsibility." (*John Wayne's America*, Location 379 of 8521, Kindle Version).

In *Gravity* and *Captain Phillips*, these four elements—gender, ideology, character and responsibility—are each there in dramatic fashion. Most heroes in American literature have been male, and it is striking that the surviving hero of *Gravity* is a woman. Interestingly, Stone and Kowalski (Clooney's character) have a final conversation that is in part about her name, Ryan. Kowalski says, "What kind of name is Ryan for a girl?" She replies, "Dad wanted a boy." Stone's triumph is all the more impressive in that she is not only a member of the so-called "weaker" sex but that she is an intellectual; as Wills points out, the American hero is usually, like Wayne, the man of action, not the wimpy bookworm.

Hanks's Phillips is the more traditional archetype of the manly hero. Of course, he is male, but he is even large and athletic. Most of all, he is the resourceful captain, barking orders, assessing the situation, commanding his circumstances. At point after point, his crew, scrambling to remember what to do because they had never been faced with this kind of emergency, are instructed by Phillips, who seems to know exactly what to do. One is reminded of Chesley Sullenberger, who landed his US Airways jetliner in the Hudson River several years ago, saving everyone on board, but treating it as if it was all in a day's work, when interviewed later about it. Captain Phillips, like Sully, is The Man.

Wills's second category, ideology, or patriotism, does not play a major role since neither of these are war pictures, but in *Gravity*, the American flag is everywhere apparent, and the fact that Stone wanders through abandoned Russian and Chinese space stations, the only "man" left standing, is not lost on the mindful viewer. It must be admitted that American patriotism is muted by Stone's need to use the Russian and Chinese modules to save herself, but she is after all from the beginning an American.

In *Captain Phillips* of course it is the U.S. Navy who rescues the Captain, and though their means are somewhat suspect in how they lie to the pirates in order to capture them, the power and authority of the U.S. military is generally viewed positively in the picture. Even more, American "know how" is portrayed as a treasure of limitless value.

The third element of the American hero, character, or resilience, is perhaps the most prominent one in the two films. While both main characters grow in this quality as the films go on, they are clearly from the start creative people, fashioning life-saving rescues out of impossible situations (*Gravity's* opening placard about life in space ends with the statement, "Life in space is impossible."). This characteristic is so much a part

of the characters' make-ups, it hardly needs to be illustrated.

Fourthly, both characters take responsibility for their actions, demonstrating that they sense their own responsibility to act in a way that goes beyond honorable to downright obsessive. Ryan needs to let go of the idea that she is somehow responsible for her child's death through negligence, and that life can go forward in spite of her death. Kowalski, when he surprisingly shows up late in the mission, tells her she could just turn off all the systems and die up there. "I get it. It's nice up here. No one to hurt you. It's safe. But still it's a matter of what you do now. You've got to plant both feet on the ground and start living life... It's time to go home." Her coming to understand that she was responsible to live is the final motivation for her persistence that results in her triumph.

Captain Phillips is different. Again, his is the more traditional "I was born for this" kind of responsibility. He never doubts, never looks back or questions what he is doing or how he is doing it. His is not an arrogant self-reliance, just a confident one, and there is everything to admire in it. From the first scene, when his wife is driving him to the airport to fly to the harbor, and they discuss the difficult world their children will grow up in, one hears the voice of the assured captain, optimistically telling his wife everything will be all right. That responsibility to do everything necessary to live never leaves the Richie Phillips of the movie.

This does not mean that his heroism is easy. The final scene of the film depicts Phillips in the trauma unit of the naval vessel carrying him home. He is unable to speak clearly; he is weeping and disoriented. The nurse's questions only seem to confuse him, and all the fear that he has kept bottled up in order to survive is now released, reducing him to a confused, helpless mass. It is important, though, that this only happens when he is past the danger. It is the relaxation of the victor, not the helplessness of the

coward. And the movie does not actually end here. There is a placard, which tells us of the depth of Phillips's heroism: "On April 17, 2009, Captain Phillips was reunited with his family. On July 25, 2010, Captain Phillips went back to sea."

I will only speak briefly of the last kind of hero. It is what I call the "hobbit" hero: the small, unobtrusive person thrown into circumstances much larger than themselves, who comes through in the end in grand style. There is something of that again in *Gravity*, since the seasoned, male astronauts die, and the novice, female astronaut survives, but the two strongest examples of this kind of hero are also in movies mentioned above because of their portrayal of religion: *12 Years a Slave* and *Philomena*. The main characters in these movies are not heroes in that they save anyone else; in fact one of the most ambiguous scenes in all of last year's movies is when Solomon Northup rides off to his own deliverance, leaving Patsey behind, pleading with him to help her.

But Northup and *Philomena* do persist and use their limited means to accomplish their seemingly impossible goals. The two characters are very different. Northup is intelligent and regularly solves dilemmas by using his mind to survive, whereas *Philomena* is portrayed as ditsy and pretty much unaware of the world in her beautiful innocence. But both share a strength of will and a fearless, unstoppable desire to succeed in their quests, and this is what makes them laudable role models for the viewer to appreciate. Americans have always appreciated such individual strength of will in the face of enormous obstacles, and there is no lack of that in this year's movies.

There are other aspects of American life that are interesting to think about in this year's films, but we will only mention them. Perhaps foremost is the idea that we must see the dignity in everyone. Several of the films raise this point: *Dallas Buyers Club* with Matthew McConaughey's remarkable portrayal of the journey experienced by Ron Woodroof (again whether true or not!) from angry homophobe to caring friend,

Philomena in the Steve Coogan character and his growing appreciation of Philomena's nobility, *Captain Phillips* in the captain's increasing sympathy for the pirates and their desperate plight, and perhaps especially the remarkable *Nebraska*, when the son played by Will Forte comes to understand his father as so much more than a drunken loser. This may even be a subtle sub-theme of *American Hustle* and part of the reason for such a sympathetic portrayal of Irving Rosenfeld and Sydney Prosser.

Various social ills are brought to the fore in the slavery and racism of *12 Years a Slave* and *Captain Phillips* and the homophobia of *Dallas Buyers Club*, and even the conspicuous consumption that plagues our nation as it is portrayed in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, if you buy into its creators' notion of what that film is supposed to be about. A remarkable theme found in this year's nominee *Her*, which I have written about extensively in another place, and so avoided here, is what the fundamental nature of the human being is, especially in comparison to the remarkable advances in Artificial Intelligence and their likely practical applications in the future. Add to that the movie's investigation of love and its true essence, and one finds a topic worthy of a whole other talk.

And so Leonardo DiCaprio may be right in a broader way than even he imagines: not only Martin Scorsese but all the directors, writers, producers, actors and all the other people who make films in our society, and whose films were nominated for Best Picture this year, really do "put the very fabric of our culture up on screen." If we care about that culture—and we should since our culture is only our people and their institutions writ large—then we would do well to watch, hear, mark, learn and inwardly digest the Academy Award nominees for Best Picture this year. For those of us who are Christians, we should take a further step and analyze their stories in the light of where we have found reality to be most clearly defined—a Biblically-informed,

robust Christian faith—so that we might understand our world and ourselves more profoundly. Thank you.

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: **Argo**; Amour; Beasts of the Southern Wild; Django Unchained; Les Misérables; Life of Pi; Lincoln; Silver Linings Playbook; Zero Dark Thirty
 2013: **12 Years a Slave**; American Hustle; Captain Phillips; Dallas Buyers Club; Gravity; Her; Nebraska; Philomena; The Wolf of Wall Street

2013 Nominees Domestic Box Office Stats per Box Office Mojo as of Feb 19, 2014. One (*Gravity*) is in the top 10 of all movies released in the last year; only four (*Gravity*, *American Hustle*, *Captain Phillips*, *The Wolf of Wall Street*) of the nine are in the top 50.

TITLE	DOM GROSS	FOR GROSS	TOTAL GROSS	BUDGET
<i>American Hustle</i> (#18) R	\$142M	\$72M	\$214M	\$40M
<i>Captain Phillips</i> (#32) PG-13	\$107M	\$111M	\$218M	\$55M
<i>Dallas Buyers Club</i> (#101) R	\$24M	\$6M	\$30M	N/A
<i>Gravity</i> (#7) PG-13	\$268M	\$433M	\$701M	\$100M
<i>Her</i> (#102) R	\$23M	\$4M	\$27M	N/A
<i>Nebraska</i> (#123) R	\$16M	\$0	\$16M	\$12M
<i>Philomena</i> (#90) PG-13	\$31M	\$47M	\$78M	N/A
<i>12 Years a Slave</i> (#70) R	\$48M	\$61M	\$109M	N/A
<i>The Wolf of Wall Street</i> (#30) R	\$111M	\$197M	\$308M	\$100M

2013 DOMESTIC BOX OFFICE FIGURES (ROUNDED UP OR DOWN. AS OF FEB 19, 2014). Four years ago the top ten had made \$3.1B by now. Three years ago they had made only \$2.8B. Two years ago only \$2.5B. The downward trend, at least domestically, reversed itself dramatically last year, when the top ten made a robust \$3.3B. Last year they had made \$2.9B, less than the year before but only by the factor of the phenomenon that was *The Avengers*. Overall domestic BO only rose .8% with \$10.93B in receipts. Ticket sales were distressingly down 1.3% after the five year high of last year. The average ticket price continued its steady climb: 2007=\$6.88; 2008=\$7.18; 2009=\$7.50; 2010=\$7.89; 2011=\$7.93; 2012=\$7.94; 2013=\$8.13.

Rank	Gross	Movie
1.	\$423M	The Hunger Games: Catching Fire (PG-13)
2.	\$409M	Iron Man 3 (PG-13)
3.	\$378M	Frozen (PG)
4.	\$368M	Despicable Me 2 (PG)
5.	\$291M	Man of Steel (PG-13)
6.	\$268M	Monsters University (G)
7.	\$268M	Gravity (PG-13)
8.	\$256M	The Hobbit: The Desolation of Smaug (PG-13)
9.	\$239M	Fast and Furious 6 (PG-13)
10.	\$235M	Oz the Great and Powerful (PG)